

# 9 CONTESTING FOR POWER

*'There is one issue that threatens us: bad governance. No matter how you look at it, everything comes back to that. We don't have leaders that are accountable, we don't have leaders that are competent, we don't have leaders that are motivated or have the political will to change things. We don't have people for whom there is a future. We have old people who only care about how much of the common wealth they are able to steal while we suffer.'* S. I., 25

*'Who are the people making decisions for young people? Can they even relate to us? Are they up to date with tech or are they stuck in the analogue age? There are people in our government who can't handle a smartphone but think they can implement policies that young people need. They say young people have no experience, but we know better than they what we need. We need more young people in positions of policy making or influencing the policy makers. We need to either be one of the decision makers or we need to be one of the people influencing the decision makers. If they won't give us a seat at the table, we will create our own seats to be there.'* Rinu, 23

*'Nigerian youths are clearly saying enough is enough. We want to have the power. I'm a very fresh politician. I was appointed in February 2021. I happen to be one of the youngest members of the National Working Committee of my party, the ADC. This is one of the top positions in the party. The committee is about 30 people but 90 per cent are men and women in their 60s and 70s; there are only the three of us who are young. And when we are presenting an idea, they are not in*

*the same realm as we are. There is a clash of understanding. Nigerian politics is about money. Older politicians are always thinking about how they are going to pay people, and they cripple the implementation of ideas.’ Ifènlá, 33*

*‘Our church wanted to build a better road, but the government said no because they didn’t benefit from it financially. And a local NGO wanted to build a school, but the elders said they had to be paid money first. That is the problem of our country – it is all about give me my share. They don’t care about development; they are more concerned if they are making money out of it. I think it’s only 50/50 if younger people will be different. A lot of our generation want to get in there and share the national cake and the truth is that most average people are not exposed enough to demand more. We need politicians who are there to serve not to be served. And for the youth revolution to come we need to come together beyond our different ideology.’ Uzor, 28*

*‘Recently I’ve started having conversations across the political divide. The challenge in front of us is not which party someone belongs to. For now, I’m not looking at a young person in the opposition party as a problem – we are colleagues in the fight to take over our country. For young people who have shown capacity, who are ready to deliver results, let’s take over. And how do we take over our country? By being sure that we are speaking one language across all parties.’ Tonye, 34*

*‘We definitely need better leaders. We need people who are aware that what they are supposed to be doing is in service to the people, and historically we haven’t had a lot of that. We can only hope that as we move forward, we are able to get better leaders, people that are there to serve, make the economy stronger and deliver on the hope that Nigerians have been holding since independence. I hope younger people step up to take their own place and I hope they do it for the right reason.’ Odunayo, 28*

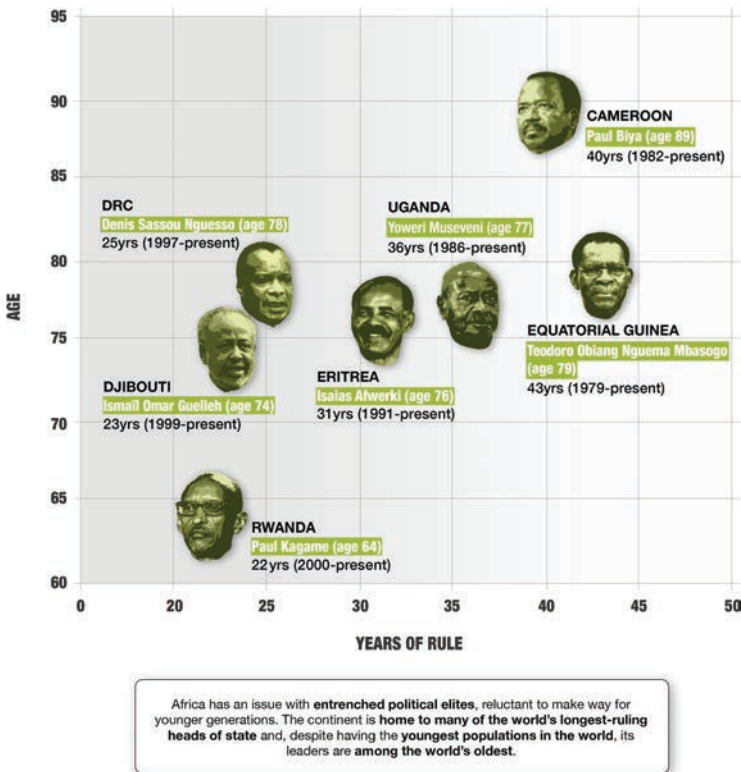
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After the frenetic energy of Lagos, Abuja is an oasis of calm. Surrounded by forest-covered hills and defined by a series of prominent squat monoliths, Nigeria's capital is a planned city, built in the 1980s to a master plan designed by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange. The wide streets and avenues of the city centre are lined with government offices, the gold-domed Nigeria National Mosque and the postmodern neo-Gothic National Christian Centre. Five-star hotels, banks and shopping malls sit beside large mansions that house ministers and notables.

At the heart of the city is Circular Road. It surrounds the officially named Three Arms Zone, so-named because it houses the three arms of government – the Supreme Court, the National Assembly and the Presidential villa – locals simply call the whole zone the Villa. The area is imposing, forbidding even. CCTV cameras proliferate on the high fence that surrounds the compound. Every 10 yards along the pavement, signs are stencilled in red paint: no stopping, no parking, no waiting. Concrete bollards and armed guards line the entry road. The effect is of a walled-off elite, a government protecting itself from the people it is supposed to represent.

Africa may be home to the youngest population on earth, but its leaders are among the oldest. Many are in their 80s; President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe was 93 when he was ousted in 2017. In 2015, the median age across sub-Saharan Africa was 19, while the median age of executive office holders was 64, a gap of 45 years.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, in the member states of the OECD there is a gap of only 12 years between leaders and the electorate. There is a long history of protest and activism by young Africans: Steve Biko and Patrice Lumumba were not old men. In Nigeria, Nnandi Azikiwe was still in his 30s when he founded the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons in 1944. Others, including Obafemi Awolowo and Samuel Akintola rose to prominence during the struggle

for independence in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>2</sup> But after that, youth involvement in nation building slowed and, across much of Africa, ruling elites have remained entrenched for decades. At the end of 2018, 15 African executive office holders had been in power for more than 10 years, with an average of 24 years in office.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, three sitting African heads of state had been in power for more than three decades each.



**Figure 38** African presidents who have been in power for over 20 years  
Created by Russell Henry Design

Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, 78, who was elected in 2015, is in this mould. An ex-military officer – he was previously head of state in the 1980s, when he took power in a military coup d'état – Buhari has been in and around the top echelons of power for more than 40 years. A 'big man' in the African style, his fealty is to tradition and the ongoing support of a vast network of cohorts. Many Nigerians are angry that they see so little benefit from the country's billions of petrodollars, much of which has been squandered or stolen,<sup>4</sup> and Buhari was elected on his reputation for fighting corruption. But he has had little effect on the rampant misuse of government positions and funds and has been accused of cronyism and politicking in those cases that have been pursued.<sup>5</sup> Buhari also seems woefully out of touch with his young electorate. In 2016 he accused young Nigerians of criminality and in 2018 of being lazy and uneducated.<sup>6</sup>

But, as the West Africa Centre for Democracy and Development notes, far from being frivolous and lazy, young Nigerians have simply lost hope in institutions that do not serve their interests.<sup>7</sup> The majority of Africans, and especially young Africans, think their governments are doing a very bad or a fairly bad job at addressing the needs of



**Figure 39** Nigeria's president, Muhammadu Buhari  
Source: Pool/Getty Images

the youth.<sup>8</sup> In five out of seven African countries surveyed in 2017 (Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa) at least 75 per cent of young people said their governments did not care about their needs.<sup>9</sup> This has led to disenfranchisement. According to Afrobarometer, the percentage of respondents who voted in their country's last election is 14 percentage points lower for young Africans (aged 18–35) than for those over 35. And almost one in 10 young Africans say they deliberately decided not to vote.<sup>10</sup>

'Some young people are galvanised', says Rinu Oduala, 23. 'For the upcoming 2023 election, 80 per cent of newly registered voters are young people. But many others are still marginalised. There's an apathy in the country, people don't feel they need to vote. They don't see any result from their votes. The government doesn't seem to do anything; it's a government for the elite not the masses so people don't see a need to participate.'

Counter-intuitively, it may be this disillusionment that represents the best opportunity to reshape political participation. In the months after the president's derogatory comments, the hashtag #LazyNigeriaYouth went viral – a backlash that, according to market research specialist Canvas8, shows a growing political engagement among young Nigerians.<sup>11</sup> An August 2020 report by the group says: 'So wide is the disconnect between those in government and the public, that change seems almost inevitable.'<sup>12</sup>

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While the centre of Abuja, with its walled-off and architecturally imposing buildings, emits the aura of a sealed-off elite, the city's suburbs feel much more egalitarian and energetic. On a weekday lunchtime, the thriving middle-class neighbourhood of Gwarimpa is busy. Streets buzz with traffic: kekes and buses, cars and scooters. Markets are filled with shoppers and the roadside *Mama-puts*, small

outdoor restaurants run by redoubtable older women, are bustling with lunchtime trade. Cafés and bars are busy, too. In one, on a colourful, plant-filled open balcony that overlooks a neighbourhood of pleasant suburban streets and a high, forested hill, a group of young community organisers are eating beef and rice dotted with spicy red and green chillies and discussing politics.

Jude Feranmi, 29, is the convener of the Raising New Voices Initiative, a volunteer-led non-profit committed to raising new leaders for Nigeria. He was also formerly the National Youth Caucus Leader of the KOWA party. 'I became actively involved in politics after the 2015 election', he says. 'For young people, it is a justice conversation, a prosperity conversation. It is about wanting Nigeria to be better and wanting to get involved in whatever makes it better. But it is strictly a political power conversation when it comes to older politicians. They know what they want, they will do anything to get power and they have the resources to deploy to get it. And those two positions are in conflict.'

Tonye Isokariari, 34, has been involved in Nigerian politics for more than a decade. 'The Breath of Fresh Air campaign for Goodluck Jonathan, that was me', he says. 'Some people still call me Fresh Air in political circles.' He echoes Feranmi's point. 'The process of change needs to be driven from the youth up. The older guys don't give a rat's arse. It's about personal interest for them. They are not talking about Nigeria as a country. They are talking about their personal interest and how it affects them.'

'The whole system is programmed to keep us where we are. It is an intentional effort', says Kingsley Atang, 37, programme lead at the Youth Alive Foundation, a not-for-profit focused on redefining the role and contributions of the Nigerian youth in governance. 'The political class benefits from the consequences of hunger, in that it keeps

people dependent on them. People in Nigeria don't understand what a social contract is. They don't understand that the primary responsibility of the government is the welfare and security of the people.'

Feranmi agrees. The biggest problem, he says, is that Nigerian politics is seen as largely transactional. There is very limited focus on policy. 'With political power today, you can obviously see that there is a transaction going on: you give me political power and I give you money or I give you patronage. The transaction ends at the point of voting. The political dynamics do not evolve into a social contract. But I'm an idealist. I don't believe that we have to embrace what is happening right now. In politics, it is always difficult to cut away the ladder that gets you there. Not mirroring the status quo, that is the way our generation will make things different.'

Student leader Olumide Areo, 26, is slim and dapper in a suit and tie. He believes it's a question of education. 'The electorate is not aware that it is their right to ask questions or be given information', he says. 'Most people don't understand the nexus between politics, policy and quality of life. They do not see that they are voting for a person who makes policies that affect them. We need people to understand that they need to vote for someone who is pushing for laws that work for them.'

He gives an example: 'There were a lot of corrupt practices in my school, in 2018, with large sums of money being syphoned away by student leaders. But this one guy stood up and said he wanted to do something different. He wanted to prove that student presidents were not always the same. He decided to do a town hall meeting with all the students, and to ensure all the budgets for capital and expenditure were open to everyone. And he did it. I could see students begin to become aware that it is our right to understand what is going on. I could see students asking



the questions and taking up the challenge, they began to own the process and challenge leaders.’

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Areo, Atang, Feranmi and Isokariari are part of a thriving civic society based in Abuja. The city is home to a host of non-profit groups, staffed by optimistic young people – idealists and realists, side by side – facilitating everything from promoting good governance and increased transparency to increasing young voter registration and mentoring the leaders of tomorrow. And at the heart of this group is YIAGA Africa. Its offices, a two-storey building in Gwarimpa, exude purposefulness. Young activists debate issues, write reports, run information campaigns, lobby for change and work tirelessly to increase youth participation across the country. One highlight of the group’s advocacy is the Not Too Young To Run bill, which was passed by the country’s National Assembly in 2018. The bill saw the Nigerian constitution amended to reduce the age for presidential candidates from 40 to 35 and for House of Representatives candidates from 30 to 25 years.

‘Before this, we did not have young people in elected office, no representatives in Parliament and our issues were treated with levity’, says the YIAGA Africa senior programme officer, Yetunde Bakare, 33. ‘When Not Too Young To Run was first proposed 10 years ago it wasn’t taken seriously. We were told to sit down, it’s not the time, we were not serious enough. But we built a movement and reduced the age for participation in the State Assembly and House of Representatives. Now we can participate, not only as voters but in the electoral process.’

Bakare believes its ageing Parliament is the country’s biggest challenge to good governance. ‘I like to refer to our Senate as a retirement home for governors’, she says. ‘Look at the number of past governors who are now in the

Senate – they stay there for eight years and then retire. They are not contributing to national discourse, because for them it's just a pre-retirement, wealth-generating thing. That impacts on the quality of the legislation that comes out of Parliament. I would like to see the elimination of all past politicians. If you've ever run for office before, it's over. The governors that are being recycled as senators, no! We want new faces. Our civil service also needs an overhaul. It is the engine room of any government; they remain once the executive tenure expires. But we have directors who have been in place for more than 25 years who are resistant to change and don't want to see change because the current system is benefiting them. We need to bring in new people, people who genuinely want to do the work.'

As a result of the Not Too Young To Run bill, youth candidacy was at 34 per cent in the 2019 elections<sup>13</sup> with 151 young candidates standing for election and five winning seats. 'One is now the speaker of a state assembly, others are whips and deputy whips and majority leaders', says Bakare. But despite this success, overall youth participation in government remains very low, with some estimates suggesting only 1 per cent of lawmakers are aged under 30.<sup>14</sup> In part the issue is cultural.

Chinemerem Onuorah is 25. 'There is a problem, in that people by default believe that young people are not ready to rule', she says. 'People think you are not qualified for something just because of your age and they forget the fact that the president we have today was very young when he first ruled Nigeria. So why do they think young people cannot carry on with democracy now? I feel like there are a lot of young people who have the competence and capacity to rule Nigeria and we should not disqualify them just because our cultural mentality says young people aren't ready.'

A second YIAGA Africa campaign, Ready To Run, has been launched to address this issue. 'Ready To Run was

born because of the imbedded narrative that young people are not ready for public office', says Bakare. 'It responds to the need of young people who want to contest and win elections and aims to help young people perform excellently in office. It's not that we want everyone to run – we want to find young people of character, with the competence and the capacity to run. We help them mobilise issue-based campaigns and improve their chances of election.'

Alongside cultural norms, there are systemic barriers that make it difficult for young people to be elected. It is not possible to run as an independent candidate in Nigeria, and to be nominated by a party requires paying large fees and getting the support of the party's power cabal, a group often hidden from public view. Even when political



**Figure 40** Some of the YIAGA Africa team (L-R): Ibrahim Faruk, 35, Yetunde Bakare, 33, and Sanusi Olaniyan, 33  
Credit: Fati Abubakar

parties hold primaries to secure candidates for election, the result is often overruled if a preferred candidate is not chosen.

YIAGA programme manager Ibrahim Faruk, 35, says one of the biggest problems is that political parties themselves are undemocratic and opaque. 'There is no Nigerian party that can claim it is people owned', he says. 'In other countries, parties make efforts to attract members and the members pay dues and have a stake in the party. They contribute to decision making and in selecting candidates. We don't have that in Nigeria. Nigerian parties are owned by a few big men and what they dictate is what the party does. They shape the party. There is campaigning going on behind doors, within conclaves, within small circles of big men. They decide who will run and everyone falls behind whatever the leaders decide.'

Monetisation is a further barrier. In a blogpost for the LSE, Dr Angela Ajodo-Adebanjoko, an associate professor at the Federal University of Lafia, cites leadership deficits, poor internal democracy among political parties and the absence of a strategic political agenda as ongoing barriers for young people.<sup>15</sup> But, in particular, she says, there are large financial obstacles to running for office in Nigeria.

In the run-up to the 2019 general election, the cost of nomination forms for office ranged from 45 million naira (US\$125,000) for presidential aspirants to 3.8 million (US\$10,500) for the House of Representatives candidates.<sup>16</sup> Because few young Nigerians are able to afford these sums and donors usually prefer older candidates whom they believe have a higher chance of success, young people remain disenfranchised, says Dr Ajodo-Adebanjoko. 'While in theory they are Not Too Young To Run, in practice, the youth find themselves Too-Poor-To-Run', she writes.<sup>17</sup>

Sanusi Olaniyan, 33, is a programme assistant at YIAGA Africa and he agrees with Ajodo-Adebanjoko. 'The biggest

challenge for young candidates is financial inequality', he says. 'Nigerian politics is very monetised. If you don't have a large pool of resources to draw from it is very hard to contest an election, and almost impossible to contest in an established political party.'

Michael Odoh, 30, wants to run for office. 'I was a party member for 10 years and I paid my dues to the party, in all the ways you could think of. But when I went to the party chairman and said I wanted to contest an election, he told me to wait. He said that I'm still too young and I should wait another five years. Then when he saw I was making moves, he told me I was disqualified. I left the party and joined another party but was short of the cost of registering as a candidate. You begin to understand how disenfranchised young people are.'

Garnering nomination is only the first financial barrier in the electioneering process. Vote buying is also endemic – once candidates are on the ticket, there is an expectation that they will pay key voting blocks for support. 'People who run for office have to visit traditional and religious rulers', explains Faruk. 'And they are not just going to visit empty handed. They go with a gift or with cash and they hand out salt or rice or noodles. To them that is campaigning, and it does influence whether some people vote for them. The deeper problem is that many communities do not feel a government presence. They don't have electricity, there's no water in the pipes, the roads are run down, the healthcare centres are horrible. They feel this is the only time they will see a politician and are able to benefit, so they will take what they can get.'

'You definitely find people voting for whoever can give them the most money', agrees Bakare. 'Vote selling is illegal but it's not enforced and, due to poverty, it remains part of the electoral process. If you are offered money to vote, you sell your vote to the highest bidder.'

The legislation that bans vote selling and which also sets campaign-funding limits – at one billion naira for a presidential candidate – is not well enforced. ‘Campaign financing is very opaque’, says Faruk. ‘Political parties are supposed to report how much they spend, but in the 2019 elections, only three parties out of 91 did that. What makes it worse is that the current review of the act seeks to increase the amount for presidential campaigning to five billion naira. The election basically goes to the highest bidder.’

‘How many people can afford to spend five billion naira to contest for the highest office in the land?’ asks Bakare. ‘It is a real challenge. Especially now that vote buying and selling is done in the open, without any fear of prosecution or arrest, because no one is monitoring electoral spending or punishing those who are in infringement of the law. People who are genuinely interested in governing, who can make a change for the country but do not have access to the funding, cannot contest for office. That’s a threat to democracy.’

Nigeria is currently experiencing its longest period of civilian government since achieving independence from British colonial rule in 1960. From the 1960s to 1999, military juntas of varying openness and brutality dominated the country’s politics. In 1999, the 4th Nigerian Republic was born, with the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) elected as the governing party. Both the 2003 and 2007 presidential elections were marred by irregularities and violence, but national and state elections in 2011 and 2015 were generally regarded as credible. The 2015 election was heralded for the fact that the then opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), defeated the PDP, which had governed since 1999. When current president Buhari assumed the role in 2015, it marked the country’s first peaceful transfer of power from one party to another. Elections held in early 2019 secured Buhari his second term and were deemed broadly free and fair. The next election

cycle, in 2023, will see two new contenders for the presidency as the Nigerian constitution mandates a two-term presidential limit.

The 2023 elections are likely to be a key moment for young people in Nigeria. This is the moment when it will become visible if the impetus of movements such as #endSARS can be maintained and translated into an electoral force. Some activists are focused on finding young people to stand for leadership positions.

‘Sometimes it only takes a few people to change the destiny of a country’, says Areo. ‘It is the quality of those on the ballot paper where we have a big problem and I feel a few good leaders is what we need to get things done. Student leaders vie for these political spaces in the future. They are what we breed for political spaces. If we can at a grassroots level begin to develop leaders that in ten or seven or five years will sit at the table, we will have a path, a channel, a structure that can change things. It doesn’t matter which party they are. If the quality is high, once they get into power, things will change.’

‘Since the #endSARS movement the political class are listening, too’, says Atang. ‘They are thinking about youth participation and youth inclusion, there is a consciousness that they need more youth voices. #endSARS has created more space and more young people want to get involved. We are available, we can do this.’

A key focus for YIAGA Africa is mobilising young voters. ‘We have this large cohort of young people between 18 and 25 and the question is how we can help them understand that by voting they are contributing to governance’, says Olaniyan. ‘It’s not just about running for office. Although voting is far away from governance itself, it contributes to good governance.’

Mark Amaza, 33, is senior communications officer at YIAGA Africa. ‘If we can somehow get the youth population of Nigeria to participate in politics, I think we can

break the system', he says. 'The old are not there in numbers compared to the youth.'

There is hope among activists that 2023 could signal a moment of change. 'I think 2023 is a make-or-break year for us on many levels', says Faruk. 'The president will have run his tenure, so it is an opportunity for a fresh face. And if we can mobilise a mass of young people to come out and vote on election day, I think it's a watershed moment in our history. What we do and the outcomes of 2023 will have a huge impact for the long term.'

The belief that young people can herald a change in how the country is governed is echoed by young people outside Abuja. Nigerian entrepreneur Iyinoluwa Aboyeji, 31, is one of the most successful men of his generation. In conversation he comes across as intelligent, proud, restless, maybe a little impatient. A member of the tech world's global elite – he calls Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, 'Zuck' – Aboyeji has presided over several Nigerian companies, including the phenomenally successful online payment system Flutterwave, which he co-founded when he was just 25 and which has a valuation of over US\$1 billion.

Aboyeji has now turned his keen mind to shaping the future of his country. 'When I was CEO of Flutterwave, I was starting to see the upper limits of what industry here can achieve because of poor governance so I decided to go and run Madame Oby Ezekwesili's 2019 presidential campaign', he says. 'We made quite a bit of headway, we won the primaries, but ultimately the party that she represented was pushed to endorse another candidate.'

The setback hasn't dented Aboyeji's hopes. 'Nigeria has a very, very young population. There are 26 million people in Nigeria who over the next 10 years are going to turn 18. The largest ever winning presidential election margin in Nigeria was 13 million votes. So even if you only get half of those 18-year-olds to vote for a candidate, that candidate has won.'





**Figure 41** Iyinoluwa Aboyeji, 31, is a technology entrepreneur  
Credit: Fati Abubakar

And he has a clear vision for his country. ‘Nigeria as the world’s greatest Black nation: that’s the prize. The dream of building a global Black power has been passed down to us from the very first fathers of liberation until now. And that remains the dream. We want to create a powerful Black nation that can contend with the rest of the world as equals. We can build a great country and stamp our name in the sands of time by creating a Black superpower. That’s why we are doing this: so that we can be great, in a great country.’