



# HARNESSING YOUTH VOICES IN TACKLING UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE OF GOVERNMENTS IN AFRICA

## (AU ECOSOCC YOUTH SUBMISSION)

*Strategies on how young people can be key stakeholders in implementing the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The recent wave of coups d'état in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger – coming at a time of unprecedented poverty and threats of famine, have reinforced the global perspective of Africa's unstable democratic and governance systems. The reality of Unconstitutional changes of government has led to the creation of systemic problems such as poverty and corruption, which have trickled down to stunted social, economic and political development in Africa. Unfortunately, the largest constituent affected by the scourge of unconstitutional change of governments in Africa has been African Youth. With over half a billion youths on the continent of Africa, making it the youngest continent on the globe, youths are the largest negatively affected constituent on the African continent. It is for this reason that this paper will focus on how the voice of African youths can be harnessed youths in tackling unconstitutional change of governments among African states.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION

### Constitutionalism

Constitutionalism can be defined as the principle that oversees the validity of government action, and it implies something far more important than the idea of legality that requires official conduct to be in accordance with pre-fixed legal rules.<sup>1</sup> In other words, constitutionalism checks whether the act of a government is legitimate and whether officials conduct their public duties in accordance with laws pre-fixed/ pre-determined in advance.

### Democracy

In the words of the former President of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln, democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people' (Abraham Lincoln)? To put it another way we can say that a government comes from the people; it is exercised by the people, and for the purpose of the people's own interests. Democracy is by no means a panacea to societal transformation, but is a sure way to ensure holistic participation of every citizen of a given state.

## AFRICAN YOUTH STATISTICS IN RELATION TO UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE OF GOVERNMENTS IN AFRICA (UCGs)

With a median age of 19.7 in 2020, Africa's population is already the youngest in the world. This is a significant age gap when compared to 31.0 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 32.0 in Asia, 33.4 in Oceania, 38.6 in Northern America and 42.5 in Europe, the oldest continent. Currently, around 60% of Africa's population is younger than 25 years, and more than a third are between 15-34 years old.

By 2100, Africa should still have the youngest population worldwide with a median age of 35. In 2020, Africa's population under 35 represents almost a billion people (540.8 million 0-14-year-olds and 454.5 million 15-34-year-olds), amounting to 22.7% of the world's total youth population, the second largest after Asia's (58.0%). Between now and 2100, Africa's youth is expected to grow by 181.4%, while Europe's will shrink by -21.4% and Asia's by -27.7%. By 2100, Africa's youth will be equivalent to twice Europe's entire population and almost one-half of the world's youth will be from Africa.

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These statistics are an indication that for any progress to be made on the African Continent in regards to ending the unconstitutional changing of governments, there is a need for youth mainstreaming in the legislative leadership structures of African states. According to article 4 of the African Charter on democracy, elections and governance, state Parties shall commit themselves to promote democracy, the principle of the rule of law and human rights.

State Parties shall recognize popular participation through universal suffrage as the inalienable right of the people. In order to actualize the governance of the people, by the people and for the people to be a reality in Africa, the majority of the people (the youth), need representation in Africa's political and governance structures.

The reality of youths being the majority constituent of the African continent means that they are the largest affected population by civil wars and unconstitutional change of governments, either as victims of conflict or recruited militants in perpetuating criminal militant acts. There is need for political will from the African Union and member states to incorporate youths in the efforts to curb UCGs.

## **UNDERLINING CAUSES OF UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT IN AFRICA ON A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE**

To solve any problem, there must always be a clear understanding to know what causes it to exist. The same can be said for UCGs in Africa. The following are some of the causes of UCGs in Africa:

### **1. Weak democratic institutions in African states that have faced UCGs**

Weak institutions have been a burden to the continent, particularly because it has resulted in the lack of political will by governments to address and provide the governance essentials to its people like availability of water for all, housing, economic opportunities, and healthcare. There has also been a lack of accountability by the people who are at the receiving end of bad governance. The end result of it is disenfranchised citizens for rebel groups overthrowing sitting governments unconstitutionally.

### **2. Inept Leadership**

Poor political leadership is the main recipe of bad governance and eventual UCGs. The dishonesty and ineptness of political leaders on the African continent perpetuates tension among African states and in turn erodes public trust in the leaders themselves and eventually leads to UCGs.

### **3. Poverty**

Poverty occurs when human beings live in a state of deprivation due to meagre income or lack of access to basic human needs which include food, safe water, sanitation, health, shelter, education, and information. So, when citizens are faced with High rates of unemployment and inequality, combined with low levels of education and development, are thought to soften the ground for recruitment and provide motives a national uprising.

### **4. Corruption**

Corruption, conflict and instability are profoundly tangled. Corruption is frequently one of its root causes of conflict by diminishing the effectiveness of national institutions and by generating popular grievances. These contribute to undermining the legitimacy of the state, and in conflict this can empower armed groups who present themselves as the only viable alternative to corrupt governments.

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## **5. Ethnic and Religious differences**

There are two types of religious and ethnic causes of conflict and UCGs in Africa. The first one is communal, that is, violence that occurs between different communities who identify themselves based on religion, tribes, language, sect, race and others. The other type is extremism. This type is the propagation by a particular group of people who want to violently impose a radical ideological thought process. They engage in violent activity in order to accomplish it, such as imposing a set of behavioural norms with punishments for disobedience.

## **6. The Imbalanced representation in Africa's governance systems.**

Another cause of conflict and UCGs in Africa is the systemic seclusion of different young people. As young people are the major constituents of every country on the African continent, their continuous seclusion creates a needs gap in different societies. Without youth representation, duty bearers have a lack of youth perspectives and needs in service delivery, which makes them vulnerable to messages of UCGs.

## **STRATEGIES ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE RATIFICATION OF ACDEG, AND TACKLING UCGs IN AFRICA**

Putting into perspective the causes of UCGs in Africa, African youth are the major affected and participants in UCGs and conflict. It is therefore important for the youths to be the pioneers of peace and conflict resolution in Africa. This however cannot happen unless there are strategic plans and programs that young people can engage in to cause the end of UCGs and conflict in Africa. The following are some of the strategies in how youth voices can be enhanced in tackling the challenge of UCGs in Africa.

1. Establish a youth Advocacy campaign for the ratification of ACDEG among member states through African youth advocacy groups, AU organs, African Civil Society and member state governments.
  2. Advocate for the ratification of the African youth charter with an emphasis on article 11 of ensuring the inclusion of youths in member states of their governance structures according to the context of their laws and policies.
  3. Establish a school of governance advocacy for young people to understand Agenda 2063, the African Youth Charter and ACDEG, in order to positively contribute to Africa's democratic, governance and electoral systems with an intergenerational partnership.
  4. Establish African private sector partnerships with youth advocacy groups to ensure the financing of youth leadership programs.
  5. Provide a youth-led research platform for the causes of continental UCGs, poverty, corruption and weak democratic institutions among African states.
  6. Collaborate with young people groups and organizations in the development of practical implementation plans and efforts to enhance the monitoring of state compliance to UCG polices including the ACDEG.
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7. Promote, amplify and champion the establishment of youth-led councils in member states that do not have them, that promote the meaningful participation of young people in governance and policymaking, to ultimately begin to set the agenda on policy at national, regional and continental level and improve political participation of young people.

8. Encourage member states to remove economic barriers to youth inclusion, and adopt an intergenerational co-leadership approach across governance structures.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the youth of Africa are the enlightened and dynamic force upon which the future and destiny of this continent lie. It is from this paradigm that Africa needs to realize the need to take up the paradigm shift of youth mainstreaming in democracy, elections and governance in order to actualize a peaceful and united Africa. The doom of Africa can only be averted by a storm of glowing passion, African youth are that passion.

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