

THE YOUTH

The Youth of any nation signify the strength and the growth potential of such a nation. Persons between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five are generally categorized as Youths. They are over sixty percent of Nigeria's estimated one hundred and fifty million Nigerians figuratively holding the potentials of our country in their hands. The question therefore arises; WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH AND FOR OUR YOUTHS?

This question must be asked and addressed because the ability of the nation to empower its youth basically rests in the hands of the government and its policies. A cursory and peripheral view of the government we have had and still have today reveals very little youth representative. It is therefore not supposing that there exists such a sharp divide between the policies of government on the one hand and the aspirations of our youths on the other. A dire need thus exists for this lacuna or gulf to be bridged.

Youth empowerment as a principle is therefore aimed at bringing our leaders and policy makers to a point of recognition of the serious need for investment targeted particularly at this segment of our population. A nation that looks the other way while its pool of strength and promise off tomorrow is traumatized and bastardized can be assured of one thing; Anarchy.

Nigeria as an entity has to start to pay attention to issues like mass illiteracy especially among the youth. It is on record that over sixty percent of our population are illiterates. This is a serious indictment on Nigeria after forty five years of independence.

Countries like Uganda with less resources and manpower have been able to tackle the problem of illiteracy remarkably well in the last decade. This is evidenced by the ratings international humanitarian agencies like UNICEF and

UNESCO have released. Education is probably the most useful tool available for youth empowerment in the light of nation integration.

This is because it enlightens and broadens the mind of the individual human such that he starts to perceive the world around him from a more populist perspective than from selfish parochial standpoint. The problem with Nigeria is that our rulers and policy makers are yet to see education in this light. As such, we keep paying lip service to issues of education but refuse to actually inject life into the sector.

The various United Nations bodies in the realm of education have suggested a policy whereby third world countries are advised to dedicate at least twenty percent of their annual budget to education. Nigeria which is classed as one of the third world countries has continually refused to heed this call. Our education budget has consistently fallen below ten percent.

Quite paradoxically, even that which is budgeted for the education sector ends up mostly in the private pockets of government bureaucrats and administrators. Recent revelations strengthen this belief.

Youth empowerment for national integration cannot become a reality also, when the youth are grossly unemployed. One must also note that government is continually singing the song of technical education for our youth for the purposes of self employment. The lethal blow has however been dealt on any such venture by the lack of infrastructure bedevilling our nation.

A rather disturbing and worrisome trend that our youth are exposed to is the sponsoring of religious violence and intolerance basically by the political class and traditional rulers. Political and border disputes between opposing camps and localities are now turned more increasingly into crises which are executed by sponsored youth.

In the light of this, one would have expected the government to sit the youth down with the aim of reassuring them of their stake and importance in the Nigerian project. Rather what has been observed is the unleashing of extreme force to quash these uprisings. Our government and leaders must make a

conscious resolve to revisit and redress the lack of involvement of our youth in national issues, particularly those concerning them.

Since the local government is the closest arm of government to the people, it becomes a veritable tool to reach out to the youth. Hence, the need for people who understand and appreciate what is at stake to wield political power at this level.

I encourage our youth not to wait in complacency for government to empower them. The youth must draw on their inherent strength to initiate the process of change of the status quo. Finally, I want to reiterate that the future of this great nation lies squarely on the shoulders of the youth. Let us put our hands on deck, our cards on the table and steer this ship of youth empowerment to the promised land. Thank you