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# There is always an alternative: Reflections from Kenya's Youth Led-Protest

## Guest Column



By **Rahym R Augustin-Joseph**

A few weeks ago, young people in Kenya reaffirmed what global politics has reported, much to people's disbelief. That young people continue to be disengaged and underrepresented from formal institutional politics, which include voting in elections, supporting and contesting in political parties, among other democratic engagement.

The Late Dr Henry Charles, one of the Caribbean's foremost minds on youth development was therefore correct when he noted that the underlying reason for this rests with the failure of governments and political parties to address issues of relevance to young people and there is a sense that the political process has not delivered the goods and ambivalent to reform.

However, young people are more inclined to the conventional methods of politics, where they engage in youth led protests, demonstrations, social media petitions, single issue communications in order to register their discontent with governments.

The unfortunate reality is that there are many who view politics only through the formal institutional lens. Even within the formal exists so many barriers like age, financial dependence, lack of party support, and cultural barriers where politics is seen for older and 'mature' individuals. And, as opposed to rectifying it, adulthood has crept in, where attempts are made to prescribe the methods of engagement, while being tokenistic in formal politics. This is being done as opposed to meeting young people's

needs from the conventional methods of engagement.

The probing question is what occurs beyond the Kenyan protests, and the government has reversed their policy? What occurs to the necessary wider youth-led transformation? Do the results from the protests render the movement periodic, or do the main characters believe they can effect greater change from within the formal structure, and possibly become part of the problem?

It is no secret that young people across the world, have engaged in climate change marches, Occupy Wall Street, Arab Springs, Black Lives Matter and other global movements which all indicate that they are inclined to respond to the formal structure through radical protests and petitions. Young people are therefore not just sitting idly by!

In this case, young people in Kenya rejected the neo-liberal and IMF poison pill causing the 2024 finance bill to be withdrawn. It attempted to remove the social subsidies which is customary to IMF austerity measures and propose additional tax on financial and forex transactions, an eco-levy tax on imports and digital products, motor vehicle tax, and tax on healthcare. These additional taxes would have been at the expense of ordinary Kenyans particularly women and youth, to pay off rich country lenders, which would cause more money to be spent on servicing debts than on critical public service.

However, young people stood on the right side of history calling for a Kenyan solution to the economic woes, which can be assisted by a reformed IMF, but not controlled by them.

As a matter of priority there must be an audit of public debt to remove unjust debt. Rather than imposing steep austerity measures, the IMF should prioritise social and economic justice that promotes well-being. Or better yet, there should be an unconditional public external debt cancellation including interests

and commissions, which is appropriate in light of the effects of colonialism.

There must now be a youth-led movement which advocates for this and supported by global youth movements especially within the Caribbean. This must be done, as albeit the finance bill was withdrawn, it does not automatically mean that the social democratic norms required for development will be reinstated. This must be fought for, through a sustained and wider transformation youth led movement that transcends protests and petitions. This must be done because young people by virtue of their age and population size will inherit the future and they must articulate and actualise their development aspirations.

The Kenyan reality is very close to home for the Caribbean, as we saw in Jamaica, Barbados and other countries, which removed social democratic gains in education, health care, social protection in favour of IMF austerity, thereby leaving the poor vulnerable to economic policies.

With the plethora of issues facing the Caribbean, one has to wonder why the global movements have not created the material circumstances for activism in the Caribbean, particularly recognising our history of radical political activism and our student movements where young people have always contributed towards destroying global imperialist regimes such as apartheid.

But, Dr Terri-Ann Gilbert Roberts is appropriate when she suggested that even while the young person in the Caribbean is situated within a history of rebellion, they are still consumed by a political culture which is tended towards peaceful, structured and traditional. It means that engagement with the formal is highly desirable. Young people in the Caribbean are still asking politely for a seat at the table, as opposed to creating their own tables in the streets.

It would explain our continued likeability

with the Youth Councils, National Youth Parliaments and aspiring for change from 'within.'

And even when there is this organic movement, there is sometimes a hijacking and institutionalisation by the elite intellectual class, which young people must guard against, as opposed to CLR James's 'free creative activity.'

With the plethora of issues facing the Caribbean, such as climate change, crime and violence, debt, economic woes, one has to wonder when the material conditions will cause us to engage in conventional methods of political participation in order to answer some of the questions young people have on the agenda, as opposed to the continuous tinkering of the edges and peace mill reform projects which have been justified by adult centric notions that 'development is a complex arduous process' which does not do well with radicalism? We may need to take inspiration from the conventional methods of political engagement if we are to see the changes we want to see in the Caribbean. But always follow it up with a sustained youth movement.

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