Africa: When the Continent Ignores the Youth, Its Warlords Celebrate

Dr. Peter Kagwanja,

Guns may have gone silent in many war-torn parts of Africa, but the continent is still in the thick of the bitter winter of youth rebellion.

The recent flare-up of lawlessness and violence involving the shadowy Mungiki youth movement in Kenya has thrust into the international spotlight the fragility of Africa's emerging democracies.

Sadly, the Kenya government's iron-clad response to the Mungiki extremists-estimated at between 1.5 and 2 million and mainly youths between 18 and 40 years, with 400,000 of them as women-reveals an unsettling lack of appreciation in official circles of the depth and complexity of Africa's youth crisis.

Worse still, the June 18, 2007 minor explosion that left one person dead and scores injured in Nairobi has thrown the spectre of terrorism into this dangerous mix.

Boosting up youth participation in public governance and decision-making processes and substantially investing in better education, healthcare and skills training for Africa's marginalised and vulnerable young people are central to reducing the risk of tension and violence, and pulling the continent back from economic brink.

Faced with the violence of the Mungiki type, theorists like Uganda's Mahmoud Mamdani contrasted this "non-revolutionary" and "senseless" violence with the activities of nationalist youth icons like the Veranda Boys who ushered Ghana to independence in 1957 or South Africa's Umkonto we Sizwe (the spear of the nation).

Mungiki typifies a global surge of "uncivil nationalism" representing a claim for power based on insular identities like Croat, Hindu, Serb or Tutsi, which has underpinned armed conflicts in post-Cold War Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.

Invariably, Africa's young people have served as fodder to the cannons of warlords who recruited them into armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defence units, or militias.

For instance, Liberia's warlord, Charles Taylor -now being tried at the Hague for crimes against humanity- recruited a cadre of Liberian and Sierra Leonean child soldiers into his National Patriotic Front, organising them into the notorious Small Boys Unit (SBU).

The World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation, the World Bank's flagship publication, estimates that some 300,000 young people under the age of 18 in developing countries have recently been involved in armed conflict, and another 500,000 have been recruited into military or paramilitary forces.

With thousands of children and young adults trapped in civil wars in Angola, Burundi, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia in the last two decades, Africa is reeling under the insidious legacy of "stolen childhood'-the lost chance for social and skills development.

Marginalized and disillusioned by the forces of economic globalisation, many youth movements joined the fray of anti-globalisation, also feeding on an amalgam of radical ideas from Karl Marx to Malcom X and Che Guevara.

Others draw inspiration from such religio-political movements like Dini ya Kibangu in Congo or Dini ya Msambwa and Legio Maria in Kenya. More recently, African youths have adopted the tactics and images of globalised violence, taking on names like Baghdad Boys or Talibans with Mungiki taking up the tactic of abducting and beheading its enemies a la Iraq.

Even within Africa's military establishments, young soldiers contributed to the 80 successful coups, 181 failed ones and an unknown number of take-over attempts that rocked the continent's security between 1961 and 2006.

Overtime, young soldiers like Mobutu Sese Seko (Congo), Mengistu Haile Mariam (Ethiopia) and Samuel Doe (Liberia) would hurtle their countries down to anarchy and chaos.

The dynamics of democratisation transformed the African youth into pawns in the intra-elite power game. For instance, during the turbulent 1992 to 2002 decade, the various factions and fractions of Kenya's elite stridently sponsored militias of sorts or "Majeshi" (informal armies in this context) turning the landscape into a cesspool of all genres of communal violence. Majeshi as a political strategy reflected the pervasive phenomenon of "informal repression" adopted by the ruling elite to covertly derail political opposition, counter multiparty democracy and recapture political initiative.

In the 1980s, the apartheid regime had sponsored Unita in Angola, Renamo in Mozambique, the Kolvoet (crowbar) in Namibia, the Inkatha and Ama Afrika within South Africa to fight its opponents.

During the 1994 elections in Malawi, the Nyau traditional dancers were recruited to wreak havoc on Kamuzu Banda's opponents. In Cameroon, the Lamibe traditional chiefs were turned into dangerous marionettes used to beat, detain and intimidate the critics of president Paul Biya. In 1994, the state-sponsored Interahamwe largely youth militias would hack down nearly a million Tutsis in Africa's worst case of genocide.

The renowned Sudanese scholar, Mohamed Salih, alerted the world of the dangerous ploy by Sudan's new Islamic government to use "tribal" militias to fight its enemies. The use of Janjaweed militias in the country's Western region of Darfur has claimed some 200,000 lives and displaced nearly two million Darfurians.

In the September 11, 2001 aftermath, "terrorism" has rapidly become the main nomenclature framing the thinking and policy responses to youth militancy. Although Africa's Muslim youths have been increasingly recruited as agents of international

terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, the reasons for this are more complex than Samuel Huntington's Clash of

Civilizations thesis that portrays cultures as rocked in deadly combats.

Nor is the dividing line between cultures and faiths that neat. For instance, the top leadership of the neo-traditional extremist Mungiki were converted to Islam in October 2000, arguably to win the financial and political support of Islamic jihadists. In a similar vein, after 1989 Uganda's Lord's Resistant Army (LRA), an extremist Christian group, joined forces with Sudan's Islamic militants who bankrolled its bush war against the Government of Yoweri Museveni.

The debate on how to deal with Africa's youth crisis has thrown up several scenarios. One scenario calls on governments to engage the youth in dialogue. The second one is the 'smoke-them-out' response largely inspired by hard-nosed strategies on the 'global war on terror' by the world's major powers.

A third scenario calls on the governments to scrupulously adhere to the rule of law in dealing with lawless youths.

The fourth suggestion, the doomsday scenario, calls on developing countries to invest in their young people or face economic down-turn, violence and chaos. A more blissful scenario projects the youth stratum as an asset, urging African countries to invest in better education, healthcare, and skills training for their young people to experience a surge in economic growth, poverty alleviation, job creation and reduced risk of social tensions and instability.

Africa has the lion's share of the world's 1.5 billion people aged 12 to 24 - the largest-ever youth group in history - with nearly 90 per cent (1.3 billion) residing in developing countries.

The continent is the only part of the world expected to experience a youth bulge by 2020, offering a vital window of opportunity for demographic and socioeconomic development.

However, African governments have been slow to tap into this asset.

Sadly, Africa's 'lost generation' forms the bulk of some 130 million of the world's population without basic skills or literacy. Owing to population pressure, the number of young people looking for work is expected to increase by 28 per cent in the next two or so decades.

With nearly half of Africa's population under the age of 18 as compared to Canada's 18.95 per cent or Sweden's 18 per cent, African governments have an uphill task of developing innovative strategies to rehabilitate "lost generation"-the continent's potential care-givers and taxpayers. As François Bourguignon, the World Bank's Chief Economist and Senior Vice President for Development Economics, warns: "Such large numbers of young people present great opportunities, but also risks". Fail to address the youth's socio-economic marginalisation and powerlessness and the continent's future looks bleak.

The net must be cast wider to capture thousands of African youth in detention. According to the Statistics SA report, of the approximately 171,000 people counted in prisons, correctional institutions and police cells by 2007, as many as 122,000 were between the ages of 14 and 34 years (71.4 per cent). An overwhelming 96.2 per cent of youth in detention were males, introducing a critical gender nuance to rehabilitation projects.

Youth crime and violence have their roots in poverty and squalour. Thus, a successfully handling of the social economic situation is central to avoiding tensions and crime linked to the young people.

While decisively dealing with youth lawlessness through the law, Africa must also tap on the creative potential of its youth. For instance, the Mungiki in Kenya has not always been vandals.

Some of its members have adopted lawful ways of making a living by engaging in subsistence farming where they grow maize, potatoes and keep livestock, while others have reportedly taken to commercial poultry farming in Kitengela near Nairobi.

And there is no shortage of support. The international community, African institutions and countries have worked to deal with the African youth crisis. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has invited the partners to reaffirm their support to advance the well-being of youth.

With few African countries currently on the path to meeting the MDGs by the 2015 cut-off date, Africa's young men and women are still not out of the woods. At the continent, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999) has provided an ideal framework for asserting the rights of African youth.

On July 2, 2006, the African Union adopted the 'Youth Charter', which recognizes the youth as Africa's greatest resource. More fundamentally, the Charter acknowledges the myriad problems facing the African youth: It is marginalised from mainstream society through inequalities in income, wealth and power, unemployment and underemployment, infected and affected by the HIV and Aids pandemic.

The African youth also lives in situations of poverty and hunger, experiencing illiteracy and poor quality educational systems, restricted access to health services and to information, exposure to violence including gender violence, engaging in armed conflicts and experiencing various forms of discrimination.

The AU Youth Charter therefore calls on African states to develop a comprehensive and coherent national youth policy frameworks. These instruments must be based on extensive consultation with young people and should provide for their participation in decision-making at all levels of governance and development. Accordingly, Kenya adopted a National Youth Policy (2002), but the policy has not been fully implemented.

Similarly, in 2004, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) promulgated its Strategic Framework for Youth Programme aimed at advancing youth empowerment and development.

In view of these national, regional and international frameworks, governments must take urgent action in support of African youth at three interrelated levels.

First, they should create opportunities for better education and healthcare to enable the youth acquire skills and to safely navigate the risky adolescence and to secure jobs in the job market.

Second, the promotion of youth participation and involvement in political processes and social organizations is a must. This is essential in fostering young people's civic life in their own communities and also for good governance. It also has the potential of defusing frustrations, preventing them from boiling over into economic and social tensions.

Third, is the creation of second chances to young people who might have fallen behind due to prolonged involvement in wars and other difficult circumstances such as drug addiction and protracted unemployment.

African youth emerging from war or from the difficult situations imposed by the violence of the one-party state and democratization need demobilization and rehabilitation into communities.

An ideal framework of assisting Africa's lost generation to reconstruct their lives and to acquire useful skills is to expand and improve upon existing National Youth Service facilities. These facilities, existing in many African countries, can not only deal with youth delinquency and vigilantism, but also provide the young with employable skills, discipline and sense of social responsibility.

Finally, governments should put the Youth at the centre of government economic recovery blueprints like the Accelerated and Shared Growth in South Africa or Kenya's 'Vision 2030'.

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Africa Insight is an initiative of the Nation Media Group's Africa Media Network Project.