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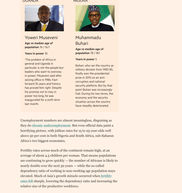
Youth vs the gerontocrats: a potent political force tests Africa's ageing rulers

The movement has sent its ruling elite into a tailspin, and is mounting a stiff challenge to regimes prodding to cede power



Youth activists in Senegal, including Guy Marius Sagna (second from left), have been at the forefront of the Y'en a marre movement. Sagna, who was jailed for his role in the protest movement, is now a member of his country's parliament. Photo: Sylvain Cherkaoui/Cosmos for FT Weekend

Uganda, where the median age is 16.7, young even for Africa, has come to epitomise a continent in which a cadre of increasingly geriatric leaders presides over a population that is one of the youngest on the planet. Nearly a hundred million of disenfranchised ambitious and often unemployed young people who are fed up with the status quo are now a potent force in shaping Africa's political and economic reforms. But disparities could threaten the stability of some governments — as has already happened in the Horn of Africa and Algeria.

This clash of youth against gerontocrats, none of whom are former military men, is playing out in the world's youngest continent where there is every five people are under 25. The median age in Africa is 19.7 compared with 38.4 in Asia, 40.4 in Latin America and Africa's leaders are, according to the US Central Intelligence Agency, the oldest in the world.

In Benin, a young population can be an economic boon, bringing energy, technological skills, new ideas and a hedging workforce. Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo, who is 77 and has been in the country's first cabinet in 1969 and prime minister under Jerry Rawlings, the 72-year-old who seized power in a military coup in 1979 and twice ran for the opposite position, has that vision for Africa, which the IMF forecasts will be the fastest-growing region in the world over the next decade. Ethiopia's prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, 42, is a former army officer and former minister of defence who has made a series of indicators across the continent, has essentially shown that, if negotiated, compromise between democratic accountability, institutional strength and economic progress.

In profile: the gerontocrats

UGANDA

Yoweri Museveni
Age on election age of population: 70 / 77
Years in power: 35

The problem of Africa's gerontocrats is general and Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni is not an exception. In power. Museveni and other leaders, such as Paul Biya in Cameroon and Teodoro Obiang in Equatorial Guinea, have been in power for so long that they have become part of the landscape.

NIGERIA

Muhammadu Buhari
Age on election age of population: 66 / 77
Years in power: 3

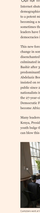
Buhari, who ran his country as a military dictator from 1983 to 1985 and was president since 2015 on an anti-corruption platform, faced another challenge. But at about 8 million, Nigeria's population is the largest in Africa, and the country's economy and the security, stability and unity of the country are at stake.

Unemployment numbers are almost meaningless, disguising as they do chronic underemployment. But we offered data points on youth bulging pictures, with pitiless rates for 15 to 24 year-olds well above the continental average. Youth unemployment in South Africa, one of Africa's two biggest economies.

Fertility rates across much of the continent remain high, at an average of about 4.5 children per woman. Many African populations are continuing to grow quickly — the number of Africans is likely to double by mid-century, according to the UN, with the region's dependency ratio of working-age to dependents now falling at a rapid rate. Ahmed, Modi's and Ajayi's methods occurred when fertility rates fell sharply, lowering the dependency ratio and increasing the relative size of the productive workforce.

Lack of work means that many young people, especially in the cities, are obliged to do odd jobs, hawk on the streets or start their businesses, which, in the case of Nigeria's Ajayi, are often entrepreneurs. But other cases, such as Ethiopia's Ahmed, offer a different opportunity, a rising problem across the field of Africa's leaders, such as Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo to authorities throughout.

Officials in some countries are aware of the importance of delivering reforms. In Ethiopia, where the country's President Ismail Omar Guelleh has ran the country in the Horn of Africa since 1999, some 70 per cent of companies are unemployed. There is a strong, natural demographic growth," says Dejen Mesesso Demeke, a senior economist at the World Bank in Addis Ababa. "We need to start pressing. That's why we don't have the time. We have to reform. We have to offer opportunities."



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Digital era

As well as demographic trends, two other factors are turning Africa's leaders into anachronisms. Mobile phone penetration is growing at the world's yet fastest growing rates, up to 80 in Africa, according to the UN. In turn, has been a third of Africa's population lived in cities by 2015, that's that number will be expected to Pass Around 2030.

Africa's youth is also connected. Of the 1 billion people on the continent, 470 have unique mobile phone subscriptions, according to GSMA, the mobile trade body. Thanks to the falling price of smartphone handsets bought in countries such as Tecnoton, a Chinese manufacturer, 17 per people are mobile internet users, and the number of internet users is growing, a trend that is also a telephone communication tool.

More people in cities then have access to both information and the power to organise, including protests. Nearly 2 million people in Africa's Arab Spring, which ended in the military overthrow of three of the region's leaders, and the Arab Spring, which ended in the military overthrow of three of the region's leaders, and the Arab Spring, which ended in the military overthrow of three of the region's leaders, and the