

# Youth Movements and their Role in Strengthening Democracy and Governance in Nigeria

By

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## **Abstract**

Youth movements are crucial in shaping democratic processes and governance structures in Nigeria. These community-driven initiatives are essential for advocating social justice, influencing policy reforms, and enhancing civic engagement. Despite their significance, there is a need for a deeper understanding of their roles and impacts within Nigeria's democratic framework. This study addresses this problem by examining youth movements' participation in democratic activities, their impact on local governance, and their role in promoting political awareness and civic engagement. The theoretical framework of Participatory Democracy Theory underpins this study, emphasising the importance of active citizen involvement in decision-making processes for strengthening democracy. The research employs a descriptive methodology, drawing on secondary sources such as academic journals, news articles, and policy documents. Findings reveal that youth movements, such as the End SARS Movements, have significantly influenced public discourse and governmental action. These movements have mobilised community support and driven political reform, despite facing challenges like political repression and fragmentation.

**Keywords:** Grassroots movement, democracy, governance, citizen engagement.

## **Introduction**

Youth movements have increasingly become pivotal in shaping democratic processes and governance structures worldwide, and Nigeria is no exception. These movements, emerging from local communities, are critical in advocating for social justice, influencing policy reforms, and enhancing civic engagement. In Nigeria, grassroots organisations

have significantly impacted the political landscape (Serra & Pierce, 2021). This evidence demonstrates the power of community-driven initiatives for driving change and fostering democratic values. These movements often champion youth values like equality, transparency, and accountability. By harnessing social media and grassroots mobilisation, the Nigerian youth have successfully raised awareness about pressing issues, garnered support, and prompted a government response to their demands. This shift in engagement highlights the potential for young people to shape policy and influence decision-making processes. As they continue to organise and advocate for their rights, the momentum generated by their efforts could lead to lasting reforms that benefit not only youth but also society as a whole.

One notable example is the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) Movement, which emerged in response to the kidnapping of over 200 schoolgirls by the terrorist group Boko Haram in 2014 (Habila, 2024). The movement gained global attention and mobilised significant public support, pressuring the Nigerian government to intensify its efforts to rescue the kidnapped girls. BBOG's advocacy highlighted issues of security and governance, influencing public discourse and prompting governmental action, illustrating the power of grassroots mobilisation in addressing critical national issues. The movement not only raised awareness about the plight of the kidnapped girls but also shed light on broader societal challenges, such as education access and women's rights in Nigeria. By fostering a sense of community and resilience, BBOG inspired other movements around the world, demonstrating how collective action can drive change and hold governments accountable.

Another significant instance is the End SARS Movement, which gained momentum in 2020 to protest against police brutality and the abuses committed by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Young Nigerians, largely driving the movement through social media, succeeded in drawing widespread national and international attention to police misconduct. Its impact led to widespread protests, government promises of reform, and eventually the disbandment of SARS. This movement underscored the role of grassroots activism in challenging systemic issues and influencing political reforms (Uwazuruike, 2021).

These real-world instances underscore the significant role of grassroots movements in influencing Nigeria's governance and the country's wider political landscape. By mobilising community support and addressing pressing issues, these movements have not only

contributed to democratic processes but have also highlighted the potential for grassroots activism to drive political change and reform.

The recognition of grassroots movements as essential to democratic engagement in Nigeria and globally is growing. Despite extensive research, a more profound understanding of their specific roles and impacts within Nigeria's democratic framework is still necessary. This study aims to enhance existing knowledge by exploring key aspects of grassroots participation in democratic processes.

Understanding grassroots movements' participation in democratic activities is crucial for assessing their effectiveness in shaping democratic practices. Evaluating their impact on local governance, including decision-making and policy implementation, helps determine their contribution to accountable governance. Additionally, examining how these movements foster political awareness and civic engagement reveals their role in enhancing public participation. Identifying challenges, such as political repression and fragmentation, and opportunities, such as coalition-building, will provide a comprehensive view of their overall impact on democracy and governance.

Political repression significantly hampers grassroots movements in Nigeria (Ogbondah, 2000). Activists often face harassment, intimidation, and arrest, undermining their efforts. For example, during the End SARS Movement, protesters faced arbitrary arrests and excessive force (Ayandele, 2021), while the #Bring Back Our Girls campaign encountered threats and harassment (Atela, 2021). Fragmentation and lack of coordination also weaken movements' effectiveness. Nigerian student protests in the 2010s struggled with disunity (Oluwole & Ige, 2021), and the #End Bad Governance In Nigeria protests in August 2024 faltered due to non-commitment and repression (Peterside, 2024). These examples highlight the complex challenges faced by grassroots movements in driving democratic and governance reforms.

The main goals of this study are to find out how involved grassroots movements are in democratic activities in Nigeria, how they affect local government, and what role youth movements play in getting people in the area more politically aware and involved in their communities.

### **Conceptual clarification**

**Youth movements** are social movements that originate from the local level, driven by ordinary citizens rather than established institutions or political elites (Yenerall, 2017). Essentially, youth movements are community-driven initiatives that arise from the local level, often in response to social, political, or economic issues. Ordinary citizens—not political elites or established institutions—typically organise and lead these movements. Youth movements focus on addressing the specific needs and concerns of local communities, using collective action to bring about change.

In Nigeria, youth movements have become increasingly important in advocating for democratic governance, social justice, and human rights. They play a critical role in mobilising citizens, raising awareness about key issues, and demanding accountability from government officials. These movements often work to bridge the gap between the government and the people, ensuring that the voices of ordinary citizens are heard in the political process (Adamaagashi, 2023).

Youth movements in Nigeria have been instrumental in pushing for reforms and holding leaders accountable (Itodo & O'Rega, 2018), particularly in areas such as electoral transparency, environmental justice, and community development. By engaging directly with communities and addressing local concerns, these movements strengthen the democratic fabric of the country and contribute to more inclusive and responsive governance.

**Democracy:** Democracy is a form of government where the people hold the power. It is characterised by free and fair elections, where citizens have the right to choose their leaders and influence decisions that affect their lives. In a democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the protection of individual freedoms are fundamental principles (Frankoom & Dahl, 2024).

Nigeria's democracy is a relatively recent development, with the country transitioning from military rule to a democratic system in 1999 (Okoroafor, 2010). Since then, Nigeria has held regular elections, allowing citizens to participate in the selection of their leaders. However, the practice of democracy in Nigeria faces several challenges, including electoral malpractices, corruption, and a lack of accountability.

Despite these challenges, democracy remains a vital framework for governance in Nigeria. It provides a platform for citizens to voice their opinions, hold leaders accountable, and push for policies that reflect the

will of the people. Grassroots movements in Nigeria play a crucial role in strengthening democracy by mobilising communities, advocating good governance, and ensuring that the voices of ordinary citizens are heard in the political process (Okafor, 2023).

**Governance:** Governance refers to the processes, systems, and institutions that manage a society and make decisions. It encompasses the structures of authority, accountability, and control that guide the management of public resources, the delivery of services, and the enforcement of laws and policies. Good governance is often associated with transparency, efficiency, responsiveness, and the rule of law, ensuring that the needs of the population are met in an equitable and just manner (Bevir, 2012).

Governance is a complex and multifaceted challenge in Nigeria. The country operates a federal system, with powers shared between the central government and various state and local governments. However, issues such as corruption, weak institutions, and a lack of accountability have marred Nigeria's governance. These challenges have often led to inefficiencies in public service delivery, poor infrastructure, and a disconnect between the government and the people (Federalism in Nigeria, 2023; Okoi & Iwara, 2021).

Despite these difficulties, there are ongoing efforts to improve governance in Nigeria. Grassroots movements play a critical role in these efforts by advocating for transparency, pushing for reforms, and holding government officials accountable. Through their actions, these movements contribute to the strengthening of democratic governance in Nigeria, ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the people are more effectively represented and addressed.

**Citizen Engagement:** Citizen engagement can be defined as the active participation of individuals and communities in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. It involves citizens participating in public discussions, voting, volunteering, and holding leaders accountable. Engaged citizens actively shape policies, influence governance, and make their voices heard in the democratic process (Fillet, 2023).

Typically, in Nigeria, citizen engagement is crucial for the development and sustainability of democracy. Effective engagement, however, can be hampered by several obstacles, including political indifference, illiteracy, and mistrust of the political system. Despite these challenges, there are growing efforts to encourage and increase citizen participation at all levels of government in the country (Okafor, 2023; Dahl et al., 2017; Holum, 2022).

Grassroots movements play a significant role in fostering citizen engagement in Nigeria. They mobilise communities, provide platforms for discussion, and educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities. By doing so, these movements empower individuals to take an active role in governance, thereby strengthening democracy and ensuring that government actions reflect the will and needs of the people.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study adopts the Participatory Democracy Theory. This theory suggests that grassroots movements can empower citizens to actively participate in decision-making processes, thereby strengthening democracy and governance (Participatory Democracy, 2024). Various scholars and activists have adopted the theory of participatory democracy over the years. Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century and later promoted by John Stuart Mill and G. D. H. Cole, who argued that political participation is indispensable for a just society (Wolfe, 1985). One prominent figure associated with participatory democracy theory is political theorist Carol Pateman. She published her influential book “Participation and Democratic Theory” in 1970, which laid out key ideas regarding citizen participation in decision-making processes and the importance of grassroots involvement in governance. Pateman's work has been instrumental in shaping the discourse around participatory democracy and its role in strengthening democratic practices (Mead, 1974).

### **Basic Tenets of the Participatory Democracy Theory**

Pateman (2012) explored the key tenets of participatory democracy in her revisited book on the theory; the basic tenets are:

- i. **Direct Participation:** Citizens are actively involved in making decisions, often through mechanisms like referendums, town hall meetings, or citizen assemblies.
- ii. **Deliberation:** We encourage public discussion and debate to include diverse voices in the decision-making process.
- iii. **Equality:** Participatory democracy strives to ensure that all individuals have an equal opportunity to participate, regardless of their social, economic, or political status.
- iv. **Collective decision-making:** Participants collaborate to reach a consensus or majority agreement.
- v. **Empowerment:** Citizens gain the ability to shape decisions that impact their lives, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability in governance.

Participatory democracy tries to make the political system more open and responsive by letting people directly participate in the decision-making

### **Strengths of the Participatory Democracy Theory**

The participatory democracy theory offers several strengths, particularly in fostering civic engagement and accountability. By involving citizens directly in decision-making, it ensures policies reflect the true needs of the population, building trust between the government and the people. Pateman (2012) highlights the theory's emphasis on equality and inclusivity, encouraging involvement from all societal members, leading to more equitable outcomes by considering diverse perspectives. The theory also promotes transparency and accountability, reducing corruption by ensuring decisions are made openly with citizen involvement. Additionally, it enhances community empowerment and social cohesion through collective decision-making, leading to more sustainable, locally appropriate solutions.

### **Weaknesses of the Participatory Democracy Theory**

The participatory democracy theory has several weaknesses. Decision-making processes can become overly complex and time-consuming, especially when engaging all citizens, which may be impractical for urgent or complex issues. Another challenge is unequal participation, as not all citizens may have the same interest, knowledge, or ability to participate effectively, leading to dominance by more vocal or resourceful groups (Dacombe & Parvin, 2021).

### **Application of the Theory to the Study**

Applying the Participatory Democracy Theory to the study on "Youth Movements and Their Role in Strengthening Democracy and Governance in Nigeria" underscores several key aspects. Youth movements embody participatory democracy by involving local communities in the democratic process through advocacy, public forums, and community organising, which enables a greater citizen impact on decision-making. They also promote equality by giving marginalised groups a platform and ensuring diverse voices are included in the democratic process, which is crucial given Nigeria's uneven political landscape. Additionally, youth activism enhances transparency and accountability by demanding openness and monitoring government actions—fostering a culture of accountability. Lastly, these movements support collective decision-making and empowerment, encouraging community collaboration and leading to more sustainable, locally relevant solutions, thereby strengthening Nigeria's democratic fabric.

### **Examining the Role of Youth Movements in Strengthening Democracy and Governance In Nigeria**

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the role of youth movements in strengthening democracy and governance in Nigeria.

First, a look at how involved youth movements are in democratic activities shows that these groups are actively working to get more people involved in politics at the local level in Nigeria (Inokoba & Kalagbor, 2021). Movements such as "End SARS" and "Bring Back Our Girls" have demonstrated significant influence by mobilising citizens and advocating policy changes. These movements have effectively channelled public discontent into organised activism, thereby increasing citizens' participation in democratic processes. Processes, in turn, have led to greater awareness of issues such as police brutality and education rights, fostering a more politically engaged populace. As these youth movements continue to grow, their ability to shape policy and influence governance will likely play a crucial role in Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape.

Secondly, the impact of youth movements on local governance structures has been substantial (Tobi & Oikhala, 2021). These movements have succeeded in holding local government officials accountable and influencing decision-making processes. As a result, citizens are becoming more empowered to voice their concerns and demand transparency. This shift enhances civic engagement and strengthens the foundations of democracy by ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the populace are being addressed effectively. This empowerment fosters a more participatory political environment, where individuals feel their opinions matter. Consequently, it leads to a more responsive government that prioritises the community's interests. The findings suggest that youth movements contribute to more responsive and accountable governance by directly addressing the concerns of the local population and ensuring that their voices are heard in the policy-making process.

Thirdly, youth movements have been instrumental in promoting political awareness and civic engagement among local populations (Terriquez, 2015). Through educational campaigns, public forums, and community organisations, these movements have increased political consciousness and encouraged active participation in the democratic process. The End SARS Movement is a prime example, as it protested police brutality and educated the public on their rights and the importance of civic engagement. Additionally, the Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA/FoEN) has raised awareness about environmental justice and the rights of communities affected by environmental degradation, further contributing to civic engagement. These efforts have led to a more informed and engaged citizenry, which is essential for the functioning of a healthy democracy.

Lastly, the study identifies both challenges and opportunities faced by youth movements in their efforts to strengthen democracy and governance in Nigeria. Challenges such as political repression, fragmentation, and resource constraints have hindered the effectiveness of these movements. For instance, the government's repressive actions during the End SARS protests illustrate the difficulties youth movements face in pushing for reform. Similarly, movements like the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) have encountered significant resistance from the government and multinational corporations, which has limited their ability to advocate for environmental and human rights. On the other hand, opportunities for coalition building and community mobilisation offer potential paths to overcoming these challenges. By uniting different groups and leveraging local resources, youth movements can enhance their impact and contribute more effectively to democratic governance (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2022; Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, 2024).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study highlights the crucial role of youth movements in strengthening democracy and governance in Nigeria. Movements such as End SARS and Bring Back Our Girls, and a host of others, have actively fostered political participation, influenced local governance, and promoted civic engagement. These movements have mobilised citizens, held government officials accountable, and raised awareness about key issues. Despite challenges like political repression and fragmentation, youth movements offer significant opportunities to advance democratic governance through coalitions and community mobilisation. Their efforts continue to shape Nigeria's democratic landscape. The study's findings suggest the following recommendations:

**Enhance Collaboration Among Youth Movements:** Fragmentation is a significant challenge for youth movements in Nigeria. To maximise their impact, these movements should prioritise collaboration and coalition building. By forming alliances and coordinating efforts, they can pool resources, share strategies, and present a united front, making it easier to advocate for comprehensive reforms and influence policy decisions.

**Strengthen Capacity for Civic Education and Awareness:** Youth movements should focus on expanding civic education to empower citizens with the knowledge and tools needed for effective participation in democratic processes. Community workshops, public forums, and partnerships with educational institutions can achieve this. Increased awareness will lead to a more informed electorate, which is essential for sustaining democratic governance.

Leverage Digital Platforms for Mobilisation and Advocacy: The use of digital platforms can significantly enhance the reach and effectiveness of youth movements. Using social media, online petitions, and other digital tools, this movement can engage a wider audience, facilitate real-time communication, and mobilise support quickly. Digital platforms also offer an alternative to traditional media, which government interests may control or influence.

Advocate for Legal and Institutional Reforms: Youth movements should push for legal and institutional reforms that protect the rights of activists and ensure a more enabling environment for civic engagement. This includes advocating for laws that safeguard the freedom of assembly, expression, and association, as well as reforms aimed at reducing political repression and corruption. Strengthening legal frameworks will provide a more secure foundation for youth activism and democratic participation.

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