

Nigeria go better: The Criticality of the 2023 General Elections.

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Image source: LEAP Africa

If you were born before the year 2000, you are most likely familiar with the phrase “Nigeria go better”, which means Nigeria will get better. Nigeria transitioned from military rule to a democratic government in 1999, and this was met with high hopes and aspirations from Nigerians. For many, it was another shot at redeeming the country and setting it on a path to fulfilling its potential. They simply wanted a better country.

Twenty-four years since that return to democratic rule, Nigerians once again long for a better Nigeria. Interestingly, many of the problems Nigerians complained about pre-1999 are the same problems bedeviling the country today: corruption, dwindling economy, poor infrastructure, lack of quality healthcare, epileptic power supply, bad roads, etc. Some new additions to that list will include kidnappings, banditry, and farmers-herders crises. So then, has Nigeria gotten any better? While the question seems rhetoric or direct, the response is directly screaming and clearly evident.

While this article is not comparing the systems of government, it is important to note that one of the benefits of democracy is the right of eligible citizens to participate in elections and decide who governs the nation. Unfortunately, it is bewildering that the nation's problems find their root in the kind of leadership elected in the last twenty-four years. Since 1999, Nigeria has had five elections and produced leaders who the citizens believed could salvage the country. However, with the country's state and the rhetoric in our faces, One wonders if our choices have been in our best interest.

In a few days, Nigeria will have another general election and citizens will go to the Polls. It will also mark the end of President Muhammadu Buhari's eight years in office. Analysts have said that this will be a consequential election.

Can the youth change the narrative?

Young people form a massive voting bloc in the 2023 general elections. This is the time for them to take control of the electoral process because it is crucial to actualising a better Nigeria.

According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), there is an 11.33% increase in registered voters, growing from **84,004,084** in **2019** to **93,522,272** for the 2023 elections. Of the newly registered 9.5 million voters, 7.28 million are young people between 18 and 34.

The narrative that young people are unwilling to participate in the electoral process has taken a different dimension since the EndSARS protests. Many young people have shown keen interest in the electoral process, having realised the important roles they need to play in the realization of the desired change to happen in Nigeria.

In recent times, young people have single-handedly championed awareness and advocacy campaigns encouraging people to register for and collect their Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs). This they have achieved by providing adequate information and logistics to ensure that more people register and are not disenfranchised come Election 2023. Also, since INEC announced the collection of PVCs, many young voters have collected their PVCs despite the difficulties experienced in some parts of the country.

Citizen Participation

Citizens are the lifeblood of democracies because they have the power to elect who leads the country's affairs. However, one of the downsides in the case of Nigeria is voter apathy – citizens' unwillingness to participate in regular elections. This has been attributed to many factors, such

as electoral violence, malpractice, lack of qualified candidates, etc. While these reasons are valid, are they sufficient enough for citizens to deliberately not participate in the elections?

Citizen participation is necessary to sustain democracy and is the only way to get rid of leaders who fail to deliver on their promises to the people. Unfortunately, voter participation has declined significantly, especially in the last three election cycles. In 2011, only 53.7% of 73,528,040 registered voters voted in that election. In 2015, 43.7% out of 67,442,005, while in 2019, 34.75% of 84,004,084 registered voters voted.

While voting during elections is a crucial indicator of citizen participation, it does not end there. Citizen participation includes people getting involved in governance structure and having the opportunity to influence political, economic, and social decisions that affect us. Sadly, many Nigerians are not aware of the immense powers residing in their hands and how they have unconsciously surrendered to politicians who have consistently failed to deliver.

Ultimately, young people must be deliberate about their interest in leadership, whether as voters or being candidates themselves. Making sure that the administration of Nigeria works in favour of the people requires a lot of work, and young people have the heart, energy, zeal, and commitment to make it happen.

If "Nigeria go better", it is young Nigerians that can make it happen.