

Turned off, tuned out - Jamaican youths opting out of political process

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File

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While people monotonously implore young people to vote because "their votes represent their voices", we respond in fury: "We nuh see nutten fi vote fah."

The People's National Party (PNP) and the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) persistently attempt to manipulate the minds of the masses with the dog-whistle term "change", but the youth of Jamaica remain highly disenchanted with the processes of our democracy.

The 2010 Latin American Public Opinion Project survey showed that 54 per cent of our youth between 16 and 29 did not believe in voting or campaign mobilisation.

Only 10 per cent had confidence in Jamaica's Parliament. These alarming statistics reveal the distrust that young people have always expressed towards political representatives. If this is the case, we need to find out immediately how Jamaican decision makers, policymakers and lawmakers can adapt to ensure a higher youth voter turnout and greater involvement in governance.

SILENT OR SILENCED

The youth votes and voices are silent in Jamaica because many of us feel that it is almost impossible to change the current social, economic and political arrangements that are institutionalised through the electoral process.

As a result, we have learnt to ignore the rhetoric and accepted the political world for what it actually is, what it has been made into. We have learnt: "A jus suh di ting set."

But let us make no mistake. Youth apathy is a reflection of the nation's overall political apathy. Many of us are accustomed to the lofty campaign promises that suddenly get lost with the homework that the dog ate, once our representatives get into office.

Many of us hear our parents deploring the behaviour of our parliamentarians and throwing their hands in the air in frustration. And when voting comes down to choosing the lesser of two evils, many will be completely turned off by the whole thing.

OLD LEADERS, OLD IDEAS

The PNP Member of Parliament Damion Crawford radically declared that, "A man who a plan him funeral cannot plan di future for di yutes!" The average age of policymakers in Latin America and the Caribbean is 52 years (Global Parliamentary Report, 2012). Decision makers 50 years and up tend to maintain a traditionalist perspective on how society should be governed. Additionally, the sticky process of getting new candidates in the mix only aggravates the problem. Simply put, there is just no room for youth or youth representatives to advance the necessary changes if they are not in the room.

Still, before you address the problem you must assess the problem. Many youth programmes exist and try to do what they can. However, some fail to address persons who are disadvantaged based on geographic location, cultural stereotypes, class and other institutional barriers.

If Jamaica's young people are neither leaders nor important stakeholders in the process of governance, it means that they are mere beneficiaries of programmes and initiatives.

How can we be certain that these programmes effect the necessary change when we skip the crucial step of assessing the problem in the first place? That is why the Green Paper of the National Youth Policy (2015) has cited youth consultation in policymaking as a key area to address.

THE NECESSARY REVOLUTION

Jamaica's revolution begins with its young people. We constitute the largest demographic group in this country. We must, therefore, demand proportionate representation in policymaking and governance.

Empowered, passionate youth advocates - and many exist, contrary to popular belief - need to start translating their passion on issues of national importance into action by organising and mobilising the pockets of concerned youth across Jamaica.

We are harming our own interests as youth when we defer to the will of career politicians. Voting is more than a right, it is also a civic responsibility to hold our government more accountable for their decisions and actions.

Elections around the world depend on the youth either coming out in their numbers or remaining apathetic. But the side that wants you to stay home, the side that would prefer it if you did not exercise your democratic right, is NOT the side that should win. Ever.

A true democratic process wants everyone to organise around shared interests, wants everyone to interact with the establishment and to challenge them to rise to expectations - not live down to them.

So when it comes to getting youth involved, consultation is a first step in allowing us to congregate around key issues. When we gather in our numbers to discuss our grievances it makes us thirsty for reform, it gets us more active. Many examples of such practices exist:

- Bahrain has consulted more than 16,500 young people to map the direction of its youth policy.
- Mongolia has implemented its civic education reform where young people are leaders in its social media advocacy campaign to aid in 'political talk'.
- Nigeria has consulted its young people in its constitutional review process.

Consultation, information and inspiration is what our new youth-led, long-term initiative 'Y-Klick' is about.

Y-Klick is a core group of young persons from every parish, selected to enhance advocacy and civic engagement by creating a revolution in the minds of other young people at the grass-roots and national levels.

So we urge you, fellow young people, get involved. It may not be a ballot, but your voice counts in the public arena, not just in your peer groups. Enough whispers will eventually build into a roar. So let us be catalysts for this change.

The choice, quite literally, is ours. Tell us about your views on youth apathy with the hashtag #yvote. Join the #KlickItUp initiative with Y-Klick on social media!

This week's Council members are Aleya Jobson, Elton Johnson, Orvilley Levy, Dervin Osbourne, Tina Renier, Kemario Davis, Andre Stephens, Odeka Haughton and Robyn Boyd.