

## **Essay topic: Citizenship in a Democratic Society**

What needs to be done to develop a sense of citizenship in young people and help them realize their role in a democratic society? True reform occurs only when citizens actively participate in the governance process – it can't be achieved by street protests alone. Young people are an integral part of society and their input and participation in their countries' governance is necessary to effect political and economic reform. However, many lack the skills and opportunity to communicate with policymakers and get involved in their country's development. Youth are often disengaged from the political process and rarely develop the sense of citizenship that is so crucial to building an inclusive, participatory democracy. To become active citizens in their countries, young people must have the skills to develop their ideas on reform and outlets to express those ideas in a constructive manner. What does citizenship mean to you? How are citizenship and good governance connected? How can your country engage and enable young people to participate constructively in the governance process? Be sure to begin your essay by describing the situation in your country.

### **Summary**

The topic, "Citizenship in a Democratic Society" comes in as a timely intervention, at a period when Zimbabwe is in a period of Political Transition which might bring a robust and lasting multiparty and participatory democracy. Immense hope and faith has been invested in the process of transition and in the Government of National Unity which is mandated with spearheading national economic recovery, constitution making and conducting fresh elections at the end of the transitional period. The people's hope stems from the fact that the process is being monitored and scrutinized by international players and regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

In this paper, the concept of citizen political participation is highlighted as an inalienable human right. The paper exposes the nodal nexus between the right to political participation, human rights and democracy. An analysis of the history of political participation by young Zimbabweans is harnessed herein to expose the reasons as to why the right to political participation was perceived as privilege for the few and why it was difficult to enforce and to realize this right. The political history of Zimbabwe is very instructive as to how tyranny and disregard for the rule of law can result in untold human suffering and economic destruction. The lessons learnt from this history must now be used to shape our future decisions if the right to participation is to gain legal recognition and if it is to last for generations to come. The paper also highlights the challenges Zimbabwe faces in upholding and enforcing the right to citizenship and political participation and concludes by making recommendations and suggested solutions.

## **Background**

The interlink between democracy and citizen participation is one that has invaluable significance and emerging global trends clearly indicate that the involvement of citizens in government and governance processes is the gateway to lasting peace, stability and economic prosperity. In essence, citizenship has political participation as its hallmark. Notwithstanding the universal recognition and emphasis on the importance of citizen political participation, the world still faces enormous hurdles in seeking to enhance citizen political participation given the widespread existence of tyranny and poverty which often stifle the proper exercise of citizenship.

Young people are often the victims of tyranny and are widely disempowered and impoverished; particularly in Africa where the culturally embedded belief is that young people must only be seen and not heard. The senior patriarchs of most African societies are traditionally mandated with the role of decision making and in so doing they rarely consult or involve youths and often disregard the opinions of the younger generation. This cultural misconception is still widespread and abounds in Africa's modern politics where nations are often presided over by old dictators who often deliberately suppress the youths from exercising their right to citizen political participation. Young people in Africa and indeed in Zimbabwe are perceived as constituting the membership of opposition political parties and are hence disregarded and repressed by the old statesmen in African ruling parties, who are obsessed with entrenching and prolonging their political power. It is sad to note that the participation of youths in most African political parties is mainly confined to acting as the private militia of such political parties, and the role of young people is to mete out violence against opponents of their parties. This trend is common in revolutionary political parties which waged wars of independence from colonial rule. However, the trend is slowly being broken by emerging opposition political parties which are mainly youth based and give space for greater and meaning involvement of young people in the governance process.

In some African states, the deliberate disregard for civil and political rights, the exercise of tyranny, the strangulation of citizen political participation and the exclusion of young people has often led to conflict and wars which often last years, resulting in untold human suffering and the further underdevelopment of Africa. It is my conviction that some of the problems democracy and participation face in Africa are as a result of the way Africans are culturally socialized.

### **African Sociological and Cultural Context.**

While our African culture is rich in social mores, its ills must also be noted and corrected in order to advance the greater social good, and to rid Africa of the culture of tyranny, deprivation and social exclusion. In our African context, young people are often perceived as underlings whose rights and welfare are best catered for by adults. Our patriarchal societies make elders the decision makers and young people simply take orders without question. This sort of socialization curtails the confidence of youths and prohibits them from seeking political office and exercising their full

rights to citizenship. The Patriarchal nature of rural communities, where adult men are seen as fathers and are supposed to be respected and feared even where they make bad decisions contributes to lack of citizen participation by youths. Young people who vie for office are labeled rebels and treated as outcasts. Young Africans have been socialized to be dependant on adults and old people as their sources of leadership. If one looks at the age at which communal chiefs, kraal heads and African kings are enthroned, then one would understand why leadership opportunities are limited for young people. In Zimbabwe, the country has been led by Robert Mugabe for the past 29 years and now he is past his prime at the age of 85. Most of his cabinet Ministers and members of parliament are aged people who participated in the struggle for liberation. For ZANU PF, young people are enemies of the state who support the opposition, and must be taught sovereignty and loyalty through punitive measures and reprisals.

While this is the case in Africa and Zimbabwe, it is encouraging to note that the trend is slowly being broken given the rising levels of literacy amongst young people and the social changes and exchanges brought about by globalization and access to information. Young people are beginning to intensify their demand for political space and their right to participation. However, their need for involvement is not fully appreciated and they are often gagged and systematically silenced.

### **What is citizenship and how does it affect the Youth?**

My understanding of Citizenship is that it refers the legal condition of belonging to a nation state. Citizenship comes with rights and responsibilities such as the ability to participate actively in the affairs of ones nation through processes such as voting, paying taxes, joining an organisation and being represented by leaders of one's choice, chosen through free and fair elections. Citizens entrust their leaders with the authority to govern them and to make decisions on their behalf. In executing their duties, leaders must do so in constant consultation with their electors and must always act in the best interests of their constituencies.

There has to exist checks and balances to the authority of elected representatives so that they may not abuse their authority. Checks such as the Right of recall, not being voted at the next election, being named and shamed in the media are some of the ways useful in ensuring good governance. Public officials must always be accountable to the citizens, where they fail to do so, citizens must always demand accountability.

The active and progressive exercise of citizenship is often referred to as citizen participation and this requires the existence of civil and political liberties as expressed in national constitutions. It is encouraging to note that Citizen Political participation is a human right recognized in international human rights legislation. The right to citizen participation is clearly expression in the United Nations **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** of 1948 and in other

covenants and protocols. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states at article 21, that;

### **Article 21**

1. "Everyone has the right to **take part in** the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
2. ....
3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures."

The right to citizen participation was later emphasized in 1976 in the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** and was subsequently adopted into regional protocols such as the **African Charter for Human and People's Rights (ACHPR)**. Countries like South Africa then later introduced clauses of the same kind in their constitutions. This exhibits how citizenship and participation of citizens is fundamental and should gain legal recognition in any country. If citizen participation is enshrined in legislation and in the constitution it reassures the youths and encourages them to participate in many national processes of both a public and private nature.

### **Global Context and Global**

At present the world is grappling with a massive global economic recession. It seems the world has a lot to worry about in this era than at any other era before. Issues of global warming and the global economic recession top the list of the world's troubles. While developed countries are making frantic efforts of reversing the effects of the global crunch, developing nations bear the brunt of the recession as they do not have enough resources with which to turnaround their economies.

In terms of climate change it is the developing nations which suffer most, as Thomas Schelling. said, "...the real victims of climate change are going to be in the developing countries, where a third of the gross national product may be agricultural and maybe half the population practices subsistence agriculture,"

Such global trends influence the participation of young people in a world of growing inequality and imbalance. Young people form the bulk the world's population and are therefore entitled to citizen participation. Citizen participation is a process where people seek to influence decisions of government. In the present-day there is much talk of global citizenship implying that all citizens have a responsibility to influence the decisions of global decision making bodies. This comes in the wake of the concept of globalization and internationalization. The formation of global institutions such as the United Nations which seek to establish common standards of human rights and governance, also means that

nations must strive towards common standards of citizen participation for their citizens in an increasingly liberalized and globalised world.

Young people in Zimbabwe must now view themselves within the global context. Problems which affect the worlds also affect Zimbabwe; hence youths must exercise global citizenship. Global citizenship emanates from the fact that all of humanity are citizens of the world and share a common ancestry of the human race and have the same concerns over the world they live in, hence every living person must take care and responsibility over the world they live in. Issues such as pollution and climatic change affect all human beings all over the world. In any case the formation of international institutions such as the United Nations represents a will for all humanity to be bound common global interests for peace and development. Global issues such as global warming, the Global economic recession, and issues of sustainable development must begin to take centre stage if Zimbabwe's young people are to find themselves on the map of global citizenship. Zimbabwe faces a host of problems, such as poverty and disease given its ten year political and economic crisis, in this context; the youth must strive towards the realization of international commitments such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's).

A large number of Zimbabwean youths live in exile because they fled from the political and economic crisis. Even as migrants they are still endowed with rights and responsibilities wherever they may be. Hence their need to participate. Youths are dynamic and highly mobile, in any state they represent the majority of people who migrate to other countries. Some young migrate for economic, political and educational reasons. Such young people represent the face of global citizenship as they need to participate wherever they may be in global issues.

### **An historical perspective on Zimbabwe.**

Youths are the unsung heroes of Zimbabwe's revolutionary history. They played a pivotal role in the liberation of Zimbabwe and its subsequent attainment of independence in the year 1980. Indeed the same runs true of most nations that underwent revolutionary transformation to liberate them from colonialism and achieved the right to self determination and self governance. During the war for liberation, young people often dropped out of school and joined the liberation fighters in exile in waging a war against colonialism. Zimbabwe's Vice President Mrs. Joice Teurayiropa Mujuru joined the war at tender age when she had only attained standard two of her education.

Even in present-day Zimbabwe young people are still active in the struggle for democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which was incepted in 1999 and launched in the year 2000 has as young people and labour as its main support base. When the MDC was formed, young people were fully represented through the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU). Some of the student leaders such Learnmore Jongwe, Nelson Chamisa, Job Sikhala and Tafadzwa Musekiwa went on to become exceptional Parliamentarians while they were still in their early twenties. Such young

leaders broke new ground and did what had been generally presumed as impossible in Zimbabwe and in Africa; the election of youths into parliament. This goes on to exhibit how young people can excel in leadership and make meaningful impact if granted their right to citizenship and political participation under democratic conditions.

Less than a decade after Zimbabwe had attained independence, the Ruling party, ZANU, arm twisted the major opposition party at the time, ZAPU, to sign a unity accord which merged the two parties into one effectively creating a one party state in 1987. Young people at the University of Zimbabwe at the time acted as whistle blowers and rejected the one party state. Such an act exhibited how astute young people can be and how they can act as guardians of democracy if their citizenship is not fettered. Young Zimbabweans are still embroiled in the fight for democracy and full participation, but the conditions are yet to conduce to an environment where they are fully represented.

In the 1990's, bad governance and mismanagement of state resources by the Ruling party ZANU PF resulted in a massive economic downturn which continued to worsen since then. The economic crisis, coupled with the political and humanitarian catastrophe which arose as a consequence of the ruling party's disregard for the rule of law and refusal to respect the will of the people resulted in untold suffering for the majority of Zimbabweans. The youths, women and children were the worst affected as they bore the brunt of poverty, unemployment, and state sanctioned political violence. Most young people resorted to becoming political and economic refugees in neighboring countries, where as exiles, they cannot exercise their citizenship.

### **State of the youth in present-day Zimbabwe.**

Young people form the bulk of Zimbabwe's populace and any effort towards restoring Zimbabwe's pride will crumble without the inclusion of young people. Currently Zimbabwe's young people are impoverished and are the major victims of the nation's mass unemployment which is pegged at the rate of above 85%. The education sector is crippled and colleges, schools and universities are closed because of lack of adequate resources or because the staff are engaged in industrial action demanding better salaries. The formal sector has been destroyed through mismanagement by the state and investors and foreign own companies have been scared away by the lack of security of their property due to the government's chaotic indigenization policies.

Draconian legislation such as the **Public Order and Security Act (POSA)**, which had in essence, the effect of illegalizing political gatherings, has often been systematically used to stifle participation by youths. State sanctioned political violence and intimidation targeted at youths who are perceived to be supporters of the opposition is commonplace and widespread during election periods. Consequently, there is a general lack of confidence in governance channels and electoral processes, and non-participation of young people is the end product.

The failure to provide opportunities for youths has resulted in increasing manipulation of this energetic and vibrant generation. Conflict among political parties have often drawn in the youths, with youths often being at the forefront in running battles of a violent nature among political parties such as have seen the death of some young people in such outbursts of violence. These normally occur during pre-election periods and the immediate post election periods. In any case, political parties tend to target youths due to their vulnerability and lack of opportunity and use them as militias for their violent campaigns against their opponents. In Zimbabwe, there has been the creation of youth military camps under the banner of Border Gezi. These youth military camps have been used to brainwash and manipulate youths into violent automatons useful in meting out acts of violence and intimidation to perceived opponents of the ruling government. Youths have in this case been used to stifle democracy as opposed to advancing it.

In light of the above scenario, it is prudent to quickly proffer and propose recommendations and suggest solutions that can enhance political participation by young people in Zimbabwe and the world over.

### **Recommendations for improving citizenship and participation by young Zimbabweans**

Extensive damage has been done to Zimbabwe and the biggest victims of such damage are the youth, male, female and children. Making the political environment conducive is the surest way of developing a sense of citizen participation and restoration of confidence in governance systems. Creation of democracy. Enhancing the Justice delivery system and making it independent of political influence will restore confidence in the rule of law and assure citizens that their rights are legally protected. The following are suggestions as to how citizenship and political participation may be improved in Zimbabwe in light of the process of transition that it is undergoing at the present moment.

#### **1. Reforms to enhance youth participation through conflict resolution and non-violent means.**

The atrocities which happened during Zimbabwe's political crisis call for a process of national healing and reconciliation. The voice of youths must constitute part of the national dialogue and they must be actively involved in the process of national healing. Reformation of the political culture of violence, hostility, intolerance; murder and indoctrination of young people must have the youths as an integral part of the process. There is need to instill and inculcate a sense of democracy and respect for human rights in young people and to teach them to respect democratic outcomes. Political leaders must start to lead by example in order to leave a good legacy to young people.

## **2. Participation of Youths in Zimbabwe's governance, political and economic reform.**

Young people form the bulk of Zimbabwe's populace; they must participate in elections and even contest where possible. The setting up of youth organizations and community based groups which lobby and advocate for different issues can be a one such way of ensuring the involvement of young people in the governance process. Reformation and restoration of the economy requires the extensive involvement of young people as they are endowed with great amounts of energy which can be harnessed to turn around the crippled economy. In case the fact that Zimbabwe's populace is largely youthful lends credence to the fact that it is only the youth who can provide the labourforce necessary in making agriculture and industry functional once more.

## **3. Unlocking the doors of potential and Empowering Zimbabwe's youths with skills and opportunities.**

Youths must be exposed to Information technology and given opportunities for entrepreneurship. Giving young people entrepreneurship opportunities is one sure way of empowering them and ensuring participation of youths in national economic reform. They must be endowed with life skills of a practical nature through hands on trainings. Education must be restored and the education sector restored and reformed to match present-day international standards s as to make them internationally competitive. At this juncture the Zimbabwe government must implement a policy where youths are given social support grants to lessen their plight.

## **4. Opening avenues for dialogue amongst youths and facilities to enable communication with policymakers at both a local and international scale.**

Child parliament must be made independent and must get government funding. Representatives of the child parliament must be democratically elected at their respective schools, regions and provinces. This way it inculcates a sense of democracy and respect for election results amongst the youths and instills a sense of legitimacy and acceptability of outcomes. Youth Organizations must form a National Youth Council and such an institution must never be politicized. The proliferation of youth organizations must be encouraged and such organizations must work for diverse issues. This will ensure the existence of divergent voices and that no one youth organization purports to represent the best interests of the youths.

## **5. Developing the sense of citizenship and ownership of an inclusive and participatory democracy.**

The transitional Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe which came into being in February 2009 is mandated with the creation of people driven constitution before free and fair elections are conducted within a period of 18 months. A democratic and



people driven constitution, in which the input of youths is taken seriously and incorporated therein will ensure that youths fully exercise their citizenship. It is mandatory that the visions and aspirations of the youths are incorporated into the new constitution. A new constitution will certainly affect future generations; hence the youths are the future generation which will be affected by the constitution. Ushering in a new democratic dispensation will go a long way in developing a sense of citizenship amongst the youths of Zimbabwe.

#### **6. Entering the Matrix of Possibilities. Hope for Zimbabwe in light of the recent Unity Government.**

At the time of writing, Zimbabwe had freshly created a government of National Unity, in which the ruling ZANU PF party entered into an agreement to form a transitional government with the opposition Movement for Democratic change. The Government of National Unity as ushered in through the Global Political agreement signed by the two factions of the Opposition MDC and Zanu PF, under the facilitatorship of Thabo Mbeki and sanctioned by the SADC Regional Block, If taken in good faith may unlock youth participation in national issues. The transitional government is tasked, *inter alia*, with economic recovery, creating a people driven constitution and ultimately free and fair elections. This process will unlock a new era in the politics of Zimbabwe and present an opportunity for youths to shape the dimensions and dynamics of the new dispensation. In the said Agreement, the principals recognised and acknowledged the centrality of issues relating to the rule of law, respect for human rights, democracy and good governance<sup>1</sup>. The resultant government is only transitional and meant to cultivate an environment paving way for a democratic election. Hence the transition may be an opportunity to buttress the right to political participation and restore confidence of all Zimbabweans in political processes.

Below is an outline of the strategic areas of focus that need urgent addressing during the transitional period if Zimbabwe is to have a lasting democracy where human rights are respected.

#### **7. Regional and International Youth Integration and Exchange**

Regional Youth Integration and exchange of knowledge of best practices of democracy can compel young people to adopt democratic styles of leadership once they grow up and take up public office give their leadership potential. At present Institutions such Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights and The Zimbabwe chapter of the Africa Regional Youth Initiative are engaged in and a series of trainings for youth organisations and young leaders. The trainings emphasise on Good governance, Democracy and Human Rights and have a bias towards fostering a culture of human rights and citizen participation. Regional youth integration and exchange of

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraph 10 of the **Preamble to the Agreement between the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations, on resolving the challenges facing Zimbabwe.**

information and ideas by youths and indeed in Africa is one of the surest ways of enhancing global citizenship and ensuring world peace. It is common cause that youths are the generation that will lead the world in the near future. Countless numbers of young people have already taken up leadership in various spheres of life. If young people are inculcated with culture of fostering democracy and human rights, then this world will certainly be a better place as the future leaders will prioritise more pertinent issues such as peace and human rights.

### **Conclusion.**

It is hoped that this paper will be a valid contribution to the establishment of a spirit of citizen participation by the youths in Zimbabwe and will influence the modeling of policies promoting youth participation in other countries. Extensive policy and legislative reforms are crucial in guaranteeing the right to exercise citizenship in Zimbabwe, but is important that the youths should be proactive and actively involved in the legislative and policy making process. Citizen political participation must find expression in the constitution and in national legislation and government policy. The paper is a timely intervention, coming at a time when the operating environment has conducted itself for reforms and national dialogue. What is left is the engagement youths as an integral stakeholder in the dialogue process and to seek to effect the inclusion of the right to political participation in relevant documents such the constitution in order to permanently guarantee it and to make it enforceable through legal means.

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