



Briefing Paper 335

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## South Africa's Youth: Agents of Change?

*"No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline."*

Kofi Annan

### 1. Introduction

South Africa's youth are meant to be the beneficiaries of the post-apartheid era; indeed, some of them were born in a period where the entire system of grand apartheid had already dissolved. Today, they are the most sought-after social grouping for political parties, as their votes could have a major impact on the political landscape, particularly in the upcoming elections. The challenges they face today in relation to the challenges the youth had in apartheid are very different. Yet, their struggle is no less important; in fact, seeing that they are the future leaders of this country, it is imperative that South Africans ensure that the youth of today benefit in a way that honours all that was fought for by previous generations. This paper seeks to outline the challenges faced by the youth; the way these issues inform their political views; and their likely effect on the youth's voting patterns in the 2014 elections.

### 2. The Youth

'Youth' has been defined as the population between the ages of 15 and 35<sup>1</sup> or, according to the National Youth Policy 2009-2014, those between the ages of 14 and 35<sup>2</sup>. It is significant that this social group now contains the 'born

frees', people born after 1994 and hence after the dawn of democracy. In the 2011 Census 28.9% of South Africans were between the ages of 15 and 34.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Challenges

The youth experience numerous challenges that have an impact on the way they position themselves and on their worldview. In 2011, the youth made up almost 72% of the South African unemployed group of 4.2 million,<sup>4</sup> while StatsSA has given the number of unemployed youth between 15-24 years of age at 1 042 000. Little wonder that the youth may feel despondent about their, and the country's, future. In an article in the Daily Maverick<sup>5</sup> one author noted that

"Young people are vulnerable to many health risks. Racism and discrimination remain serious concerns. Teenage pregnancy, alcoholism and drugs are a massive threat. So is suicide. Politicians fail to recognise the many challenges that can define the lives of a diverse South African youth and yet it is the myriad of challenges that cause some of the problems they are so concerned about".

From this, it is evident that the struggles of the youth encompass numerous experiences. The fact that some young people fall prey to drugs or

alcohol, or give up looking for work, or turn to crime, may give the impression that the youth generally have no interest in politics, and that they are apathetic, apolitical and uninterested. For some, this may be so, but there are also thousands of strong, vibrant young people who actively challenge the circumstances they are faced with (see section 5 below for some examples).

One must also note that the youth have increasingly been a part of the many protests occurring across the country<sup>6</sup>. This shows, on the one hand, their frustration over issues of service-delivery, and on the other, their willingness to take a stand and to demand change.

#### 4. Elections and Statistics

Over the last few elections there has been an emerging trend of increased registration amongst young voters<sup>7</sup>. In the 2009 election youth were targeted by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), and eventually constituted 47% of registered voters<sup>8</sup>. The age group 20-29 made up 23.69% of the total number of actual voters in the same year<sup>9</sup>. However, this is the group that reflects the lowest levels of actual participation in elections, as compared to the rest of the population<sup>10</sup>. An HSRC study reveals that the youth are the grouping “less likely to turn out on Election Day than [all] other age groups”. On the other hand one author, citing the IEC’s 2009 results, argues that 73% of the total new registrations were from the 18-29 year-old grouping<sup>11</sup>. As these figures indicate, studies of youth participation throw up many contradictions, sometimes portraying them to be actively engaged politically, and sometimes showing them to be passive citizens. To add further complexity, as of 27<sup>th</sup> Sept 2013 the IEC’s statistics show that 162 234 people between the ages of 18-19 were registered to vote; this is a very small proportion of the 1.5 million South Africans in that age-group<sup>12</sup>. This all reflects the mystery that seems to exist around this voting bloc and makes it difficult to understand whether or not their vote will make a significant difference to the outcome of the election.

Despite the fact that the 2009 statistics may be important in assessing how the 23-35 year-olds of 2014 will vote, it is essential to note that these figures do not necessarily tell us anything about how the 18-23 year-olds will vote in 2014. The fact that their birth took place at a time in South African history that saw democracy procedurally

realised means that it is necessary to look at the ‘born-frees’ through different lenses; they are the group least affected by the injustices of apartheid, and have few, if any, memories of violence and oppression of that era.

Another study throws up an alarming fact: 35% of the 18-30 year old grouping feels that they would rather refrain from voting than choose one of the existing parties<sup>13</sup>. If the 18-30 year-olds account for over 35% of the total 31.4 million voters, while the sub-grouping between the ages of 18-24 account for 22% of the possible voting bloc, it is evident what a difference the youth could make to the validity of our elections should they choose to withhold their ballots.

The forthcoming elections have had much media attention, and the youth are one of the prime focuses, since their vote is not only valuable, but may reflect a shift in terms of voting patterns. This can be attributed to the fact that the born-frees are now part of this voting bloc, and may not follow the party loyalties of older generations.

But the challenges facing the youth do not play themselves out only in electoral politics; they manifest themselves socially as well. Recently, the former Reserve Bank Governor, Tito Mboweni, echoing the National Development Plan (NDP), referred to the youth as the “ticking time bomb”<sup>14</sup>; the NDP also describes the South African youth as “our single greatest risk to social stability”<sup>15</sup>.

#### 5. Influences on Youth

There are various issues that may influence and inform the voting pattern of the South African youth. Their way of thinking, their circumstances and the larger environment generate their attitudes and perceptions.

The South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) noted in their ‘Ticking Time-Bomb or Democratic Dividend: Youth and Reconciliation in South Africa’ survey in 2012 that 58% of young South Africans would consider supporting a different political party than the one preferred by most of their friends and family. This shift in thinking suggests an important change in attitudes. However, it should not be overlooked that there will be many who feel an embedded and internalised support for parties which represent their racial or ethnic identity;

and it must also be noted that the influence of the older generation may have much more of an effect on the youth than expected.

Young people today connect with the world through several new channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, and the internet. They are loaded, sometimes overloaded, with information from all sides, but in particular from other youth who also engage through these networks. They are thus heavily influenced and informed by things that their peers are interested in, and this will likely have an impact on the way they decide to vote.

The negatives about South Africa's youth are often highlighted – drug abuse, their involvement in crime, their apathetic attitude towards important issues, etc. But this is far from being the whole truth about our young people; indeed, it is arguably little more than a media stereotype. A survey by the HSRC in 2009 showed that “young South Africans emerge as interested, aware and engaged in political matters to the same extent as their elders”. These results pose a convincing challenge to representations depicting youth as ‘disengaged’ or ‘lost’<sup>16</sup>. We should be aware, though, that this negative discourse can become self-reinforcing: young people may decide not to participate in a system that tells them that they are disengaged and lost; if they are portrayed as uninterested and apathetic, they may begin behaving that way.

There are other indications that the youth take political issues seriously. According to the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), the level of trust in politicians amongst the youth is declining; almost half of young people do not trust South Africa's leaders<sup>17</sup>. It is also clear that the youth are familiar with instances of corruption and with the lack of quality leadership that focuses on the good of ordinary citizens.

The generation of youth that will vote in the upcoming elections is well aware of its duty to be active citizens. A study by the HSRC in 2009<sup>18</sup> shows that the youth are not as apathetic as believed, and that they are politically conscious; however, they “tend to veer towards engagement with civil society groups...rather than support the broad mandate of a political party”. In the same way, in a recent ‘Youth Imbizo’ organised by IJR, in which 30 young people from the Western Cape presented their projects after a youth and reconciliation camp in June, demonstrated that the young activists saw themselves as possible agents of change in South Africa. Some of them decided to find ways of painting their school

toilets, while others held ‘reconciliation through the arts’ workshops, and opened up spaces for talking about the issues facing young people. There are many indications of an upsurge in active participation in society, suggesting that the traditional portrayal of the youth will have to change. They are making choices that are based less on the past, but are a reflection on where they wish to go in the future. And if they do not trust the current political leadership to guide them to that future, then their vote will reflect that.

## 6. Conclusion

At the IJR's 2013 youth and reconciliation camp, participants said:

“activism is about raising consciousness”;  
“Let's not make others out to be Angels or Demons... Just human”; one participant noted that she hoped to leave the camp “with affirmation that the #youth are not apathetic or apolitical”.

Young people are more than simply a potential vote. They are struggling dreamers, hoping for a better South Africa, and in the words of a participant at the IJR camp, they “don't need sympathy, they need solidarity”. South Africans at large should stand with the youth, not engage them through a discourse that looks down on them, not try to make them conform to what society expects them to be, or make them vote for the parties of their parents, but rather value and encourage their ability to actively change society when allowed to.

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<sup>1</sup> Dexter, N. (2009) Election Brief-The Youth Vote. <http://www.polity.org.za/article/election-brief-the-youth-vote-2009-04-21>.

<sup>2</sup> The National Youth Policy. (2009) <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/MediaLib/Downloads/Home/Publications/YouthPublications/NationalYouthPolicyPDF/NYP.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Fisher, R. (2013). The ANC and South Africa's youth vote. <http://reconciliationbarometer.org/2013/01/the-anc-and-south-africas-youth-vote/>

<sup>4</sup> Ed Pillay, U; Hagg, Gerrard, Nyamnjoh. (2013). State of the Nation. (2012-2013). HSRC Press: Cape Town

<sup>5</sup> Nicolson, G. (2013). Analysis: Desperate youth of South Africa. Daily Maverick. <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-06-18-analysis-desperate-youth-of-south-africa/#.UkpsMz9UYl0>

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<sup>6</sup> See 5

<sup>7</sup> Scott, D; Bhana, A; Swartz, S; Vawda, M. (2012). HSRC Review (2012). Punching below their weight: Young South Africans Recent Voting Patterns.

<http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/review/september-2012/Punching-below-their-weight-young-South-Africans-recent-voting-patterns>

<sup>8</sup> IEC (2009). 2009 National election report.

<http://www.elections.org.za/content/WorkArea/linkt.aspx?LinkIdIdentifier=id&ItemID=1287>

<sup>9</sup> See 7

<sup>10</sup> See 6

<sup>11</sup> Hoane, T. 2009. Durable or Terminal? Racial and ethnic explanations of the 2009 elections. Journal of African Elections.

<sup>12</sup> IEC (2013). National Registration statistics as of the 27<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

[http://www.elections.org.za/content/Pages/Statistics.aspx?id=1413&LeftMenuId=88&name=Voters%20Role&ekmense1=14ae2c49\\_88\\_248\\_btnlink](http://www.elections.org.za/content/Pages/Statistics.aspx?id=1413&LeftMenuId=88&name=Voters%20Role&ekmense1=14ae2c49_88_248_btnlink).

<sup>13</sup> 'Youth emerge as wild card in election'.

<http://www.leadershiponline.co.za/articles/youth-emerge-as-wild-card-in-elections-8002.html>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> see 3

<sup>16</sup> Letsoala, P; Roberts, B. (2009). The young and the restless: political apathy and the youth. HSRC Review.

<http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/review/April-2009/political-apaty>

<sup>17</sup> Tracey, L. 2013. Will Corruption affect the youth vote in South Africa's 2014 elections?

<http://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/will-corruption-affect-the-youth-vote-in-south-africas-2014-election>

<sup>18</sup> Mataboge, M. (2009). The politics of youth.

<http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-02-04-will-generation-next-show-up-to-vote>.