Dear readers of The Parliamentarian,

I am really excited by yet another opportunity to share with you. I was sure that my contribution in the last issue would be my last one but yet again I have been given the honour to contribute another article. I am humbled by the Editorial team and of course, our readers for this opportunity. This time around, I have chosen to discuss the critical issue of the engagement of youth for future political leadership. I have purposely picked this topic among the various other options presented to me because I believe that the youth are the bedrock of building strong democracies.

The youth are traditionally active politically in universities worldwide but very often disillusioned with political leadership and political institutions and excluded from policy development. As a result, political activism of youth is not organised according to formal groupings.

Opportunities for youth to engage in governance and participate in political and decision-making processes depend largely on the political, socio-economic and cultural contexts where social norms in many parts of the world result in multiple forms of discrimination against young women. Both formal and informal engagement can be understood as political participation, and both are beneficial for a vivid and resilient democracy and should be supported.

There is strong evidence that the participation of young people in formal, institutional political processes is relatively low when compared to older citizens across the globe. This challenges the representativeness of the political system and leads to the disenfranchisement of young people.

Young people between the ages of 15 and 25 constitute a fifth of the world’s population. While they are often involved in informal, politically relevant processes, such as activism or civic engagement, they are not formally represented in national political institutions such as parliaments and many of them do not participate in elections. This can impact on the quality of democratic governance. I am happy to note that the international community has recognized the importance of youth participating in political systems, including through several international conventions and UN resolutions.

In line with these commitments, I think it is important that we should view youth as a positive force for transformative social change, and we must therefore aim to help enhance youth political participation.

Benefits of engaging youth in political leadership
Meaningful democracy requires the meaningful participation of youth. Young people have much to offer societies – from innovation to creativity to new thinking. Their participation in democracy promotes active citizenship, strengthens social responsibility and can enhance democratic processes and institutions. And today’s young citizens are tomorrow’s leaders and decision-makers.

By allowing the youth to voice their opinion, we could be opening and moving the political world forward. This is not only good for society, but necessary for society. If the young did not engage with politics, even if it is through pressure groups, there would be many issues with our political establishments in trying to keep policy fair and sustainable for future generations. For example, equal rights for women required many young women to engage with the issue at hand. Why? Because they had strong feelings for the issues at hand; and that is something that countries should work to increase – interest and opinion on political matters.

Way forward
Going forward, we need to ensure that the support for the political participation of young people should extend across the electoral cycle. Capacity development for young candidates, for example, has proven to be more effective as a continuous effort than as a one-off event three months before an election. Young people who participate actively in their community from early on are more likely to become engaged citizens and voters.

Another core principle is that youth political participation needs to be meaningful and effective, going beyond token gestures. Capacity development is an integral measure, and while building individual capacities is key, the capacities of organisations and the degree to which an environment enables individuals and institutions to participate in political processes can also be factored in.

Enabling Legal Framework
An enabling youth-friendly legal framework is crucial in enabling youth political participation. In one-third of countries, laws stipulate an eligibility age to run for parliament at 25 years or higher, creating a gap between the legal age of majority and/or voting age, on the one
hand, and the age at which an individual can serve in elected office. Since national governments and parliaments can review the legal framework, they can consider:

1. Aligning the minimum voting age and the minimum age of eligibility to run for office;
2. Introducing youth and women’s quotas in electoral laws; and
3. Identifying and addressing context-specific legal barriers to youth participation, such as to facilitate the registration of youth-led organisations.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and political parties could:

1. Review and discuss the legal framework for youth participation;
2. Consider proposals for a youth-friendly legal framework; and
3. Campaign for changes.

In my country Uganda, there is an affable legal framework for the engagement of youth in leadership. Article 59(1) provides that every Ugandan of 18 years of age or above has the right to vote. Article 78(1) (c) provides also for youth representation in the Parliament. The youth in Uganda have enjoyed representation to the Parliament ever since the enactment of the constitution. The case for youth political inclusion has been has stipulated in: The African Youth Charter (2006); the 1995 Constitution of Uganda; the Uganda National Youth Council Act (1993); National Development Plan Uganda Vision 2040; and the 2011 – 16 Youth manifesto.

Pre-Electoral Period
The pre-electoral period is crucial for encouraging and supporting youth to participate in elections. The civic engagement of youth and youth-friendly political parties are important building blocks, given that education for active citizenship is most effective if students not only read about it in textbooks, but also try it out themselves. Youth-led CSOs and their networks can be important means of participation for many young people across the globe. Depending on the contextual factors, they can have a positive impact on their communities and create spaces for participation.

Engagement with Political Parties
In many countries, the relationship between youth and political parties is strained. To break a cycle of skepticism and mistrust, youth can develop the skills and motivation to successfully interact with political parties. At the same time, political parties could be encouraged to create space for them by removing barriers to youth involvement. In some contexts, youth wings of political parties have played a central role, by providing a powerbase for young members, retaining and grooming them, and reaching out to young voters.

During the Electoral Period
Across the globe, youth tend to participate in elections less than older citizens. Bringing more youth to the ballot boxes requires specific measures and an overall environment empowering youth to participate in civic life. As part of an electoral cycle strategy, it is important to engage youth in the immediate electoral process to participate actively in the democratic life of their countries.

Dear readers, there is so much to write about what we can do collectively to put the youth on the proper path for future political leadership but most importantly the message is that we should let them begin now! I wish you happy reading.

Key facts about Youth and Leadership:

• In the area of political participation, in a third of countries, eligibility for national parliament starts at 25 years old or older.

• 1.65% of Parliamentarians around the world are in their 20s and 11.87 % are in their 30s.

• The average age of Parliamentarians globally is 53 years old (50 years old for women Parliamentarians)

• Young people between the ages of 15 and 25 constitute a fifth of the world’s population.

Source: un.org/esa