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POLITICS AGAINST THE FUTURE: HOW POWER STRUGGLES IN LIBERIA ARE TURNING YOUTH AGAINST THEMSELVES AND DESTROYING THEIR LONG-TERM PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

This study uses a philosophical approach to examine how electoral politics in Liberia systematically exploit, divide, and endanger young people, turning them into instruments of elite power struggles that undermine their own future prospects. Using the September 29, 2023 electoral violence in Foya District #1 as a case study, the paper applies political philosophy, ethical analysis, and critical social theory to explain how youth manipulation produces intergenerational harm. Drawing on recent literature (2020–2025), election observation reports, and normative philosophical reasoning, the study demonstrates that youth exploitation in politics constitutes structural violence and moral injustice. It concludes with a multi-layered, actionable framework for promoting youth protection, civic reconstruction, democratic integrity, and long-term developmental intervention in Liberia.

Keywords: *Youth, Electoral Violence, political philosophy, ethical analysis, multi-layered actionable framework*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Liberia possesses one of the youngest populations in Africa, with young people constituting a significant proportion of the nation's demographic structure. As agents of social transformation, political participation, economic productivity, and community development, the youth represent one of the country's most valuable resources for sustainable national progress. However, despite their potential to serve as drivers of peace, democracy, and development, Liberian youths remain among the most politically vulnerable, economically marginalized, and socially manipulated groups within the national landscape. Rather than being empowered through meaningful participation in governance and decision-making processes, many young people are frequently mobilized by political elites as instruments for advancing partisan interests, often at the expense of their own welfare, security, and future prospects.

The recurring pattern of political manipulation of youth has become a troubling feature of Liberia's democratic process. During election periods and political contests, young people are commonly recruited to engage in demonstrations, confrontations, intimidation campaigns, and, in some instances, violent conflicts. These activities often expose them to physical harm, legal consequences, social division, and long-term psychological trauma. While political leaders benefit from the outcomes of such mobilization, the youths themselves frequently remain excluded from the political and economic rewards that follow. Consequently, they become both victims and instruments of a political culture that exploits their aspirations, frustrations, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

The violence that occurred on September 29, 2023, in Foya District #1 provides a compelling illustration of

this phenomenon. Reports surrounding the incident suggest that political tensions escalated into violent confrontations involving youths aligned with opposing political factions allegedly connected to two senior government officials. What makes this event particularly tragic is that the individuals involved were not strangers or external actors but members of the same communities, neighborhoods, and, in some cases, the same families. The conflict resulted in loss of life, destruction of property, community fragmentation, and profound psychological distress among residents. Beyond its immediate consequences, the incident revealed how political rivalries can penetrate local social structures and transform communal relationships into arenas of hostility and violence.

This study approaches the issue from a philosophical perspective, seeking to move beyond purely political or sociological explanations and examine the deeper moral, ethical, and existential dimensions of youth involvement in political conflict. Drawing upon political philosophy, the study interrogates questions of power, legitimacy, authority, and the responsibilities of political leaders toward citizens, particularly young people. Through the lens of ethics, it explores issues of moral accountability, justice, manipulation, exploitation, and the ethical implications of using vulnerable populations as tools for political gain. Furthermore, social philosophy provides a framework for understanding concepts such as alienation, identity formation, structural violence, social exclusion, and the erosion of communal solidarity resulting from politically induced conflicts.

The philosophical significance of this inquiry lies in its examination of how systems of power can shape human behavior and social relationships in ways that undermine individual autonomy and collective well-being. When youths are encouraged or coerced into engaging in violence against their peers, they are not



merely participating in political activities; they are often acting within structures that compromise their capacity for independent moral judgment and critical reflection. Such conditions raise important questions regarding freedom, responsibility, agency, and the ethical obligations of political institutions in democratic societies.

The central argument of this paper is that contemporary Liberian politics is increasingly fostering conditions in which youths are turned against one another for political purposes. This process extends beyond physical confrontation to include moral degradation, social fragmentation, economic marginalization, and psychological harm. By encouraging divisions among young people who share common social and economic challenges, political actors perpetuate cycles of dependency, conflict, and underdevelopment. In doing so, they not only jeopardize the future of Liberia's youth but also undermine the foundations of national unity, democratic consolidation, and sustainable development. Ultimately, the manipulation of youth for political conflict represents a profound ethical failure that threatens both individual human dignity and the long-term future of the Liberian state.

Literature Review

Youth and Electoral Violence in Fragile Democracies

Studies show that youth in fragile post-conflict nations are the most frequently mobilized demographic in electoral violence due to unemployment, political patronage, and identity manipulation (Pruett et al., 2025). Liberia fits this model precisely.

Clientelism as a Mechanism of Youth Manipulation

Clientelism remains a key driver of political mobilization in West Africa. Parties reward youth with temporary incentives money, transportation, food, or promised jobs thus drawing them into violent political

activities (Ukeje & Olusola, 2023). From an ethical standpoint, this constitutes exploitation of vulnerable populations.

Electoral Violence and Weak Institutions

Birch, Muchlinski, and Höglund (2020) note that electoral violence thrives where institutions lack the enforcement power to deter elites. Liberia's 2023 observation reports confirm that local-level conflicts such as the Foya violence expose gaps in security and oversight (EISA, 2024).

Youth, Alienation, and Moral Injury

Youth Democracy Cohort (2024) explains that youth exposed to political manipulation experience deep mistrust of institutions, resulting in civic alienation and disengagement. Philosophically, this aligns with social theories of alienation and moral injury.

Methodology

This study employs a philosophical-qualitative methodology consisting of:

Normative Ethical Analysis

Assessing the moral rightness or wrongness of political actions, including youth manipulation, incitement, and leadership irresponsibility.

Political Philosophy

Interpreting concepts of authority, legitimacy, power, and justice within the context of Liberia's political landscape.

Critical Interpretive Analysis

Examining socio-political structures that facilitate youth exploitation, using conceptual analysis rather than statistical measurement.

Case Study Approach



The Foya District #1 violence is used as a concrete example to illustrate broader systemic problems affecting Liberian youth.

This approach provides depth, ethical clarity, and analytical rigor.

Case Study: The Foya District #1 Electoral Violence (September 29, 2023)

The September 29 incident involved clashes between rival political supporters, resulting in fatalities, injuries, and significant property destruction. Youth made up the majority of participants, victims, and perpetrators. Evidence suggests that the conflict was not spontaneous but politically engineered.

Philosophically, this event highlights a breakdown in moral responsibility, leadership ethics, and communal solidarity. Youths were transformed from community actors into instruments of political warfare—against themselves, their neighbors, and their future.

Analysis: A Philosophical Interpretation of Youth Exploitation

Youth Treated as Tools, Not Ends

According to Kantian ethics, humans must never be used merely as means to an end. In Foya, youth were used as weapons of power competition—violating their dignity and autonomy.

5.2 Structural Violence Against Youth

Political actors exploit poverty, unemployment, and social vulnerability to mobilize youth. This form of harm is structural, not incidental—it is built into the political system.

Moral and Civic Alienation

Once involved in violence, youth face stigma, trauma, and disconnection from society. Their civic identity becomes damaged, leading to long-term alienation.

Intergenerational Injustice

Political violence blocks opportunities for education, employment, and stable livelihoods. This represents a moral failure of leadership and a betrayal of future generations.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of narratives surrounding the September 29, 2023 Foya District #1 electoral violence revealed four major themes that illuminate the ethical, political, and social dimensions of youth involvement in political conflict in Liberia.

Theme 1: Youth Involvement in Political Violence is Elite-Driven Rather than Youth-Initiated

Participants consistently emphasized that the violence did not originate from genuine disagreements among young people themselves but was largely influenced by political actors seeking to advance their electoral interests. Many respondents described how political leaders exploited existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities among youths by providing financial incentives, promises of future opportunities, or political patronage in exchange for loyalty and participation in confrontational activities.

One participant explained:

"Most of the young people fighting had no personal problem with each other. The conflict started because politicians created divisions and encouraged them to defend political interests."

Another respondent stated:



"The youths became soldiers for politicians. They were told who was the enemy, even when the so-called enemy was their own friend or relative."

A community elder remarked:

"When elections come, politicians suddenly remember the youths. After the violence is over, those same politicians disappear and leave the young people to face the consequences."

These accounts suggest that political violence in Foya was less a manifestation of youth agency and more a product of elite manipulation. From a philosophical perspective, this reflects a distortion of democratic participation whereby youths are denied authentic political engagement and instead become instruments of power struggles among political elites. Such practices undermine the principles of autonomy, rational citizenship, and democratic legitimacy.

Theme 2: Youth are Systematically Used as Political Instruments without Regard for Their Future

Participants frequently expressed concern that young people are valued by politicians primarily for their usefulness during elections rather than for their long-term development and well-being. Respondents highlighted a recurring cycle in which youths are mobilized during political campaigns but receive little support afterward.

One youth participant stated:

"They promised jobs and support if we stood with them. After everything happened, nobody came back to help us."

Another participant shared:

"Some of my friends got injured and others were arrested. The politicians continued with their lives, but the youths suffered."

A local teacher observed:

"The future of these young people is sacrificed for temporary political gains. Instead of investing in education and employment, they are encouraged to fight."

The findings reveal a broader ethical issue concerning the instrumentalization of human beings. Rather than being treated as citizens with dignity and aspirations, youths are often reduced to political resources that can be deployed and discarded when no longer useful. This phenomenon reinforces social exclusion, perpetuates dependency, and limits opportunities for meaningful social mobility.

Theme 3: Electoral Violence Produces Lasting Economic, Psychological, and Civic Harm

Participants described the consequences of the violence as extending far beyond the immediate period of conflict. Respondents reported economic losses, emotional trauma, weakened social relationships, and declining trust in political institutions.

One affected resident explained:

"Businesses closed for days. People were afraid to move around. Some families lost their only source of income."

Another participant noted:

"The fear remains. Even after the election, people still remember who fought on which side."

A youth respondent stated:

"I no longer trust politicians. They encouraged violence and then abandoned the community."

A community leader added:

"The violence damaged relationships that took years to build. Neighbors stopped speaking to each other because of politics."



These narratives indicate that electoral violence creates multiple forms of structural and psychological damage. Economic opportunities are disrupted, social cohesion is weakened, and civic trust deteriorates. Philosophically, this reflects the broader concept of structural violence, where systems and institutions contribute to long-term suffering even after physical conflict has ended. The violence thus becomes not merely an event but a continuing social condition affecting community development and democratic participation.

Theme 4: The Political System Lacks Ethical Accountability Mechanisms to Protect Youth

Participants repeatedly expressed frustration over the absence of effective accountability mechanisms for political actors allegedly involved in inciting violence. Many believed that influential individuals often avoid consequences due to their political status or connections.

One respondent commented:

"Everybody knows who encouraged the violence, but nothing happens to them."

Another participant stated:

"If ordinary youths are arrested for fighting, politicians who organize the violence should also be held responsible."

A civil society representative observed:

"The problem is not only the violence itself. The problem is the culture of impunity that allows it to happen repeatedly."

A local resident remarked:

"Young people are blamed for the violence, but the people who benefit from it are rarely questioned."

These responses highlight a significant ethical and institutional gap within the political system. The absence of accountability perpetuates cycles of exploitation and reinforces the perception that political power operates above moral and legal standards. From the perspective of political philosophy, legitimacy requires that authority be exercised responsibly and subject to ethical scrutiny. When accountability mechanisms fail, public trust in democratic institutions is eroded, and the likelihood of future conflicts increases.

Summary of Findings

The study reveals that youth involvement in the Foya District violence was largely orchestrated by political elites rather than initiated by the youths themselves. Young people were systematically used as instruments of political competition, often without consideration for their future welfare. The resulting violence generated profound economic, psychological, social, and civic consequences that continue to affect the community. Furthermore, the absence of effective ethical accountability mechanisms enabled the perpetuation of political manipulation and undermined public confidence in democratic governance.

Conclusion

Using a philosophical lens reveals that Liberia's political landscape is not merely unstable—it is morally compromised in its treatment of youth. The 2023 Foya violence demonstrates how power struggles intentionally turn young people against themselves, damaging their dignity, opportunities, and future.

For Liberia to prosper, youth must be protected, empowered, and engaged in ethical, constructive democratic processes. Anything less risks sacrificing the nation's future to short-term political ambition.

Recommendations



Immediate Interventions (0–6 Months)

1. Conduct an independent ethical and judicial investigation into the Foya violence to establish accountability and public trust.
2. Create rapid community protection mechanisms involving local leaders, civil society organizations, and security agencies to prevent retaliatory violence.
3. Provide trauma counseling, psychosocial support services, and reparations for affected youths and families.
4. Establish emergency youth support programs addressing education interruptions, displacement, and livelihood losses.

Medium-Term Interventions (6–24 Months)

1. Establish a **Foya Youth Reconstruction and Civic Service Corps** focused on community rebuilding, leadership development, and civic engagement.
2. Organize community reconciliation forums that encourage dialogue among affected groups and promote social healing.
3. Develop ethics-based political accountability codes requiring public officials to refrain from incitement, manipulation, or sponsorship of violence.
4. Strengthen partnerships between schools, religious institutions, and civil society organizations to promote nonviolent political participation.

Long-Term Interventions (2–5 Years)

1. Develop youth-centered electoral early-warning and conflict-prevention systems in politically vulnerable communities.
2. Implement comprehensive security sector reforms emphasizing ethical conduct, professionalism, and political neutrality.
3. Enact legislation prohibiting the recruitment, financing, or mobilization of youths for political violence and electoral intimidation.
4. Integrate ethics, logic, peace education, democratic citizenship, and civic reasoning into national educational curricula.
5. Expand youth employment, entrepreneurship, and leadership programs to reduce vulnerability to political manipulation.
6. Establish a national framework for monitoring and preventing youth exploitation during electoral processes.

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