

## MOBILISATION, CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PARTICIPATORY SPACES

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### ABSTRACT

*Mobilisation of public opinion and citizen participation in contested spaces has created controversy within the participatory paradigm. Constitutions and attendant policy and regulatory frameworks have sought to incorporate public opinion on issues that affect the very populace. However, citizens have, through local initiatives, created space for own participation, especially in governance processes. Electoral processes have been instituted as a manifestation of citizen participation in the decision-making processes. Contested spaces of participation such as ‘invented’ are identified as necessary initiatives prompting participation. A call to open up space for participation is also indicated in the paper. The voluntary institution of citizen participation initiatives in different states has created a scenario where citizen participation means different things to different people and nations. This paper explored the different facets and environments obtaining which would either promote or curtail citizen participation.*

### Introduction

This paper seeks to explore debates around citizen participation in governance process and whether citizens really partake in these processes of their own volition and with benefits. Various scholars have grappled with the concept and practice of participation to establish the extent to which citizens benefit from taking part in decision-making processes. Consequently special terms such as ‘invited’ and ‘invented’ participatory spaces have been coined to present opportunities created by government through enabling legislation, or where citizens take the law into their own hands to ‘create’ their own spaces, usually in defiance of existing laws, e.g

through protests, demonstrations and strikes (Gaventa, 2004:44; Ramjee & van Donk, 2011:12). Current debates on the deepening and consolidation of democracy have a distinct bias towards the introduction of participatory approaches that will enable citizens to take up their citizenship rights (Esau, 2006:1). Esau maintains that this process requires that citizens become more engaged with the state to enhance state responsiveness, ensure watchfulness and accountability and influence policy that affects their livelihood (ibid).

Citizen participation in community decision-making can be traced as far back as Plato's *Republic*<sup>1</sup>. Plato's concepts of freedom of speech, assembly, voting, and equal representation have evolved through the years to form basic pillars upon which established democracies such as the United States were established. Jackson (1962) and Billington (1974), in Shah (2007:249) contend that freedom and the right to make decisions on the early American frontier was the shaping force in grass roots democracy, i.e., people's right to participate. Citizen participation was first applied in the American towns of Plymouth and Jamestown, but soon spread west as new settlements were established. In time, many of these frontier villages began to grow and expand, both numerically and economically. This made it increasingly difficult for every citizen to actively participate in all community decisions. People began to delegate their involvement to representatives, either directly or through a community group. This resulted in the establishment of systems of selecting officials by public elections<sup>2</sup>. In the USA, requirements for private citizen involvement in the local implementation of federal programs have existed for a number of years now where in urban planning programmes; a role for *citizen participation* has been formalized since the Housing Act of 1954<sup>3</sup>. From the mid-1950s, citizen participation in civic affairs have gained in prominence and requirements for citizen participation have been incorporated in programs of a number of other federal agencies as well (Pollak, 1985). A citizen participates in community affairs varies, ranging from when one's willingness to pay taxes, obeys the law or

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<sup>1</sup> *The Republic* by Plato, is a genre of prose literary works developed in Greece in about 360 BC, and is one of the most influential works of philosophy and political theory, and perhaps Plato's best known work.

<sup>1</sup><http://nvs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/14/1/16> (Accessed 26 February 2008)

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Baron Pollak (1985). Does Citizen Participation Matter?: Toward the Development of Theory, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. 1985; 14: 16-29

through getting involved in the electoral processes where the individual contributes to the decision making process (Mize, 1972).

### **Citizen Participation: The Concept**

The Election Institute of Southern Africa<sup>4</sup> (EISA) (2007) asserts that "... the notion that democracy must be nurtured from within societies", an implicit argument which points to the significance of citizen participation. Citizen participation is a process which provides private individuals an opportunity to influence public decisions and has long been a component of the democratic decision-making process (Cogan & Sharpe, 1986:283). Spiegel (1998) defines citizen participation as the process that can meaningfully tie programs to people. Spiegel further argues that despite the angle from which one looks at citizen participation, it all boils down to community involvement in the decision making process. Mize reveals that the term "citizen participation" and its relationship to public decision-making has evolved without a general consensus regarding either its meaning nor its consequences (Mize, 1972).

Citizen participation is a process which provides private individuals an opportunity to influence public decisions and has long been a component of the democratic decision-making process (Mize, 1972). Knight, Chigudu & Tandon (2002) supports the foregoing argument on the importance of citizen participation by arguing that;

*If citizens are cut off from, or subordinate to, the authorities [who] make critical decisions affecting their lives;[and] the available means for getting redress are distant and effective ...[then]this means that government is a power over the people rather than a means through which people exercise their sovereign authority.*

Cohen and Arato (1992), cited in Knight et al (2002:158) concur with the above citation by maintaining that governments tend to become corrupt when pursuing a narrowly private agenda, rather than acting in the public benefit, with calls for reforms going unheeded. Mandaza (1998; 102) maintains that popular participation connotes the process by which the efforts of the masses

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<sup>4</sup> The Election Institute of Southern Africa [EISA] attempts to promote a culture of transparency in electoral process in the Southern African region through the provision of research.

themselves are combined with those of central government. On the significance of citizen participation, the World Bank (1997:110) maintains that people are the means and end of development. The World Bank further points out that “...the centrality of participation and decentralization arises from a realization that development in Third World states cannot be achieved by bureaucratic means alone (Mandaza 1998:102).

Participation by all people involved is a key cornerstone of good governance. Participation could be either direct or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives (Hyden,& Braton,1993:27). Participation needs to be informed and organized. This means freedom of association and expression on the one hand and an organized civil society on the other hand.

Dahl (1989), cited in Esau, (2006:1), aligns the definition of citizen participation to the freedom of expression, associational freedom and access to information. This perspective put citizens' rights on the forefront of participation. Kabeer (2004:5 adopts a generic view of citizen participation to mean “...people's ability to exercise some degree of control over their own lives”. Kabeer's contextualization of the concept of citizen participation does not take into cognizance the degree of citizen involvement, whether the involvement should be in the planning or implementation of decision-making. Jones and Weale (1999:90) on the other hand, acquaint direct citizen participation to decision making through representatives. By this, Jones and Weale indicate that a citizen should be actively involved in matters that affect him by demanding accountability from the state ensuring government's responsiveness to service delivery and other societal needs. This argument makes citizens partners in the decision-making process. Gaventa (2004) concurs with Jones and Weale by pointing out that citizens and the state should work together for the common good. Gaventa (2004:25) maintains that there should be a reconstruction of new relationships between state and citizens where decision-making is a collaborative process. Box (1998:3) upgrades the status of the citizen to that of government by defining citizen participation as the power of citizens to govern. This argument is further referred to by Cook (1975) who notes that “...citizen participation can legitimize a programme, its plans, actions and leadership”. Cook (1975) further implies that political leaders should base on the

support of citizens for the success of programmes in their constituencies, and without the support of the public, such programmes are likely to fail.

### **Citizen Participation a practicality or is it a rigmarole?**

There has been increasing disgruntlement on the application of the concept of citizen participation in recent times. A number of antagonists of citizen participation have expressed dissatisfaction at the nature and level of citizen involvement in decision-making processes. Lynn, 2002, cited in Shah (2007:59) argues that participation undermines institutions of representative government, and should therefore be left to government officials to make public decisions. Opponents of citizen participation suggest that political systems that have a record of poor governance may decide to foster participatory forums in order to increase the government's legitimacy (Moynihan, 2003; Olivo 1998, in World Bank 2007:59).

Demeaning the role of citizen participation, Navarro (1998), cited in Shah (2007:59) argues that "...even where participation is fostered, citizens may focus only on narrow issues that affect them directly and may be unwilling to make trade-offs and determined to exclude some groups". Andrew, 2004, cited in World Bank (2007:64), maintains that "... officials claim that participation efforts are consistent with tradition of public consultation, but are actually characterized by a bias toward including groups with technical or financial backgrounds and strong connections to government". This suggestion excludes the grassroots people in decision-making processes. The practical case of disputed electoral processes as well as the subsequent formation of Governments of National Unity (GNUs) as was the cases of Kenya (2007) and Zimbabwe (2009) are food for thought on the extent to which the voice of the people prevailed. Additionally, such scenarios brings into question the genuineness and legitimacy of citizen participation in the election of political leadership of their own choice.

It can therefore be argued that social movement activity is lacking in Zimbabwe because of restricted political space and the attendant obstructive legislation. Masunungure (2004) in Raftopolous (2006:7) notes that the development of social movements have been hindered by "...a combination of obstacles of an authoritarian nationalist state constructed through the

legitimacy of the liberation struggle in a rapidly shrinking economy that has comprehensively undermined the structural basis for the reproduction of social forces in the country”. Makumbe (2000:23) argues that in late 1990s, “...sections of civil society community had begun to depart from the strategy of linkages with government and to move into a more confrontational mod in the context of a broader social movement”. The use of the social movement theory in this paper helps to understand the different mobilization strategies that the selected civil society organizations have utilized in mobilizing their membership towards engaging government for the restoration of democracy in the country and how these mobilization strategies have added up to the broader action of enhancing citizen participation in governance processes in Zimbabwe. Citizen participation in electoral processes is deliberated below.

### **Citizen participation and the Electoral Process**

The electoral process is one vivid example where citizens have the opportunity to partake in the running of the country’s affairs through electing representatives and political leaders of their choice. A general observation is that notwithstanding achievements in multiparty democracy, many elections have not translated into citizen participation in state affairs<sup>5</sup>. Citizen participation has been manipulated by politicians ‘to legitimize a program [me], its plans, and [political] leadership (Cook, 1975, in Smith, 1996:3). While there is no doubt that the right to vote is the first primordial act of participation, the question that needs to be asked is to what extent these rights have translated into credible participation of citizens in the day-to-day activities of the state in SADC<sup>6</sup>. Citizens have to participate in the process of making laws and policies and their implementation, and have a constitutional right to be involved in these processes in all spheres of government (ibid).

Most SADC countries [Zambia, Tanzania, Botswana, Malawi, and lately Zimbabwe] use the *First-Past-the-Post System*, which is limited in terms of representation but is potentially able to

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<sup>5</sup> “The impact of Democracy on Public Participation in the SADC Region” in Election Institute of Southern Africa {EISA}, EISA Occasional Paper No.13, October 2003.

<sup>6</sup> “The impact of Democracy on Public Participation in the SADC Region” in Election Institute of Southern Africa {EISA}, EISA Occasional Paper No.13, October 2003.

offer a greater level of participation and accountability<sup>7</sup>. And the *First-Past-the –Post System* is renowned for addressing participation in the governance processes of their respective countries<sup>8</sup>. Legislation alone cannot ensure people's participation in governance. Referendums can be used to force fearful people to legitimize government policy proposals. Legislation has merely instituted the participative mechanism already at work<sup>9</sup>.

### **Forms of Participatory Spaces**

A number of debates have emerged on the creation of formal and informal participatory spaces and the deepening of democracy. Formal spaces are created by legislation, while informal spaces are those initiatives that individuals or organizations embark upon, e.g civil disobedience and protest action. Both formal and informal participatory spaces are necessary to attract the attention of government to a social need and to initiate or deepen interaction between government and individuals or organizations. State and non-state actors have made deliberate attempts to deepening democracy through creating participatory spaces. Cornwall and Coelho (2006:8) explores the normative underpinnings of participation which envisages the creation of '*invented*' spaces and '*created*' participatory spaces through which citizens can participate in public policy formulation and decision-making processes. '*Created*' spaces come through mobilization, advocacy and persuasion by civil society to its membership, while '*invited*' spaces come as a result of legal provisions specifically enacted to enable citizens to participate in public programmes (Archarya et al. 2004:41).

### **Participation and Mobilization within Social Movements**

State and non-state actors have made deliberate attempts to deepening democracy through creating participatory spaces. Discourses of participation have applied spatial metaphors involving "*opening up*" '*widening*' or '*broadening*' opportunities for citizen engagement, with some referring to '*deepening*' democratic practice (Gaventa,2006:7). These proponents of participation have talked about "arenas" of governance and even "political space" reference to

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<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

something which can be taken up, assumed and/or occupied, but can also be *created*, *opened*, *invented* or even *reshaped* (Gaventa, 2006:8). Feminist and alternative development discourses portray this as a process through which oppressed people recognize and begin to manipulate and use their agency; ‘creating new spaces, occupying existing spaces, or revalorizing negatively labeled spaces (Price-Chalita, 1994:239). Proponents of participatory spaces have however expressed the view that there are marginalized members of society who do not have the means to demanding or ‘create’ their own spaces. ‘Created’ spaces can assume a number of forms ranging from mobilization, advocacy, persuasion and protest participation<sup>10</sup> where civic groups entice their members to engage government through unorthodox means. Tapscott (2007:89) concurs that “citizens [can] create their own popular mode of participation, which entails mass protest, often with violent overtones”. Political contestation within ‘invited spaces’ could produce a variety of different strategies and can become sites of challenges, especially in instances when these invited spaces are viewed as having been ‘claimed’ back from government as conquered spaces (Cornwall and Coelho, 2006:6-8, in Thompson, 2007:97).

There are numerous mobilization strategies that have been employed by the civil society movements in different African countries, but the most prevalent have been those eclectically drawn from and informed by the feminist and social movement theories. These mainly involve unorthodox means of engaging government, such as protest participation, demonstration and passive resistance as a way of demanding the adoption of democratic principles, the observance of human rights and citizen participation in governance processes.

It has been argued that mobilization can be a more effective form of participation than formal participatory processes (Bond, 2002, in Thompson, 2007:98), and is sufficient to lure interest

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<sup>10</sup> Protest participation is first cited in the Women's Rights Convention of 1848 in which a feminist activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton & Lucretia Mott wrote the *Declaration of Sentiments* for the 1848 Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, deliberately modeling it on the Declaration of Independence. They wrote that “whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government” an insinuation that protest participation is the only route where citizens’ interests are not addressed by those in power. Available on [http://womenshistory.about.com/od/suffrage1848/a/seneca\\_declaratn.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/suffrage1848/a/seneca_declaratn.htm)



groups to pursue more than one participatory strategy, sometimes simultaneously. In such instances, citizens have often created their own popular mode of participation (herein referred to as protest participation) which entails mass protest, often with violent overtones (Thompson, 2007:89). In such cases, communities have reverted to forms of engagement with the state which characterize a move from adopting formal channels of engagement to utilizing created spaces which are citizen initiatives created on their own and which they think would draw government attention. Such action would take the form of any one or more of the following; demonstrations, strikes (including hunger strikes if in prison for unlawful detention/arrest), industrial action, civil disobedience, defiance campaigns, petitioning the government to take corrective measures to address an existing problem, issuing out ultimatum, protests and protest marches, hunger strikes, boycotting, as well as lobbying which can take place outside the formal spaces created by government. This is how civil society groupings, in particular the poor and excluded, become meaningfully involved in informal institutional spaces. Much of civil society has been effective in mobilizing citizens and according to Van Lieres (2007:70) “...despite the paucity of opportunities for citizen participation, there is now evidence of grass-roots initiatives creating new interfaces between marginalized people and the institutions that affect their lives, particularly those of the state”. This interaction has been enhanced by civil society mobilization of the citizens.

Mobilisation theory focuses on the social processes of collective action. Notably this involves how interests come to be defined as common or oppositional, the processes by which groups gain the capacity to act collectively, and the organisation and opportunity requirements for collective action (Kelly, 1998:35). Mobilisation theory explores how people come to see their interests as a common concern and generate within a group, a feeling of injustice, which is powerful enough to move an individual reaction or attitude to a collective response (Fosh, & Heery ,1990:45). Various elements of relationships and social interactions are seen as important in generating this sense of injustice and persuading people to come together in collective action in the trade union context. In particular, the actions of key activists or union leaders are seen as crucial in promoting group cohesion and identity, persuading members of the costs and benefits of collective action and defending the collective action taken in the face of counter-mobilisation

(Kelly, 1998:36). Overall, mobilisation theory is useful in its focus on social processes and in highlighting the multi-faceted nature of participation and activism in civil society organisations. In mobilisation theory, Bacon and Storey, (1996:24) emphasise the need to try and gauge the extent to which members identify with the union organisation and the degree of interaction, or density of social networks amongst members (Tilly, 1997:67). Through demonstrations, boycotting, embarking on strike (industrial) action, defiance campaigns, protest marches, writing petitions and when the situation gets out of hand, and civil disobedience to make the state ungovernable civil society organisations can draw public attention.

This paper eclectically draws from Social Movement Theory whose argument is based on the premise that social movements are a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which ordinary people made collective claims on others (Tilly, 2004:5). Social movements are grassroots organizations which operate informal structures. The social movement theory generally seeks to explain why social mobilization occurs, the forms under which it manifests, as well as potential social, cultural, and political consequences<sup>11</sup>. Tarrow (1994:24) notes that social movements are an organized collection of people who seek to influence political decisions and who present a collective challenge to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes. Social movements play a vital role with their focus on social and political change, and framing issues to make them resonate with the public; they help to mobilize the necessary structures and resources; seek to open up political structures to help accommodate the envisioned changes and generate consensus about social problems and possible solutions (Clark, et al.1998:192). As agents for change, they provide the networks of social relations necessary for action, the resources, the information, and the ideas to mobilize people for movement goals, as well as the norms and values about participating in policy-making and implementation, given that most people lack the confidence that they have the power to make a difference.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_movement\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_movement_theory)

### **Citizen Participation and government decision-making process**

Once elected into office, political leaders (at various levels of the political hierarchy) take it upon themselves to making decisions on behalf of the electorate. However, Becker & Gill (2003:48) point out that the existence of democracy does not necessarily mean that citizens always participate in the decision-making processes. They argue that in renowned democracies like “... the U.S. (which likes to be thought of as the leader of Western democracies) has no citizen’s initiatives at the national level; the reason being that the founding fathers deeply distrusted the citizens and gave as little power to them as they could in order to get their new form of government ratified”. They maintain that the US does not have national referenda where the national legislature decides to let citizens vote on a major issue of national concern (ibid). Becker and Gill indicate that in countries like Italy, Austria, Norway, Australia and Britain, citizen participation in issues of national concern “...where big issues are decided directly by the people” (2003:48). Cohen and Arato (1992:87) concur with the involvement of citizens in national issues by citing that:

*“...in recent years, citizens of Italy, Austria, and Sweden have voted to ban nuclear power in their countries; the people of Ireland voted to permit abortion in certain instances; those of Norway voted not to belong to the European Union; and the Australians voted to maintain their connection to the British monarchy; the French voted to cut the term of office of their president to five years, and in the near future, a national referendum will be tabled before the people of Great Britain decide whether to replace the pound with the Euro”.*

### **So what should citizen participation entail?**

Ideally, citizen participation should be beneficial to citizens. This argument is supported by Cahn and Camper (1968) in Smith (1990:3) who maintain that citizen participation “...promotes dignity and self-sufficiency within the individual, taps the energies and resources of individual citizens and provides a source of special insight, information, knowledge, and experience, which contributes to the soundness of community solutions”. Citizen participation can be encouraged by stressing the benefits to be gained (Rajan, 2002). Citizen participation can be facilitated if

there is an appropriate organizational structure for expressing interest. This may require organizing a more neutral group than may be in existence in a community. Situation judgment is required by persons with appropriate experience and competency (Kelbert 2000). Stressing the commitment or obligation each individual has towards improving the community can also facilitate citizen participation (Passewitz and Donnermeyer, 1989). However, people will not continue to participate unless the experience is rewarding or at least not too distasteful (ibid). Crisis situations have long been successfully used as a basis for gaining citizen participation. Cogan and Sharpe, (1986:88) argue that crises should not be invented but, if they exist, they become powerful motivation for citizen participation to find solutions to prevailing problems.

Purposeful citizen participation "...should be a trickle-down process that ensures that benefits so derived would gradually improve the lot of the poor (Rajan, 2002:253). Cogan and Sharpe (1986: 284) identify five benefits of citizen participation to the planning process, which are: the availability of information and ideas on public issues; public support for planning decisions; avoidance of protracted conflicts and costly delays; reservoir of good will which can carry over to future decisions; and spirit of cooperation and trust between the agency and the public.

Citizen participation in community betterment organizations is a deliberate process that involves communities (Tandon, 2006). Healthy citizen participation is one that is not coercive, but voluntary and happens because certain principles of organization are observed at an acceptable level to the participants (Cohen and Arato, 1992). Citizens will voluntarily participate in a community activity when they see positive benefits to be gained and an appropriate organizational structure is available to them for expressing their interests (ibid). People can feel obliged to participate in an operation when some aspect of their way-of-life is threatened and they feel committed to be supportive of the activity (Knight, Chigudu &Tandon (2002). Citizens should also be encouraged to participate in programmes when they have better knowledge of an issue or situation at hand. Citizens will voluntarily participate in a community activity when they feel comfortable in the group (Defee et al. 1987).

Looking at it from the perspective of citizen participation of community development groups, organizations should be there to provide the structure for citizens to become involved in

community betterment activities; citizens feel that they have an obligation to both their communities and to future generations. Citizens frequently participate because they feel an obligation/commitment to respond (Babchuk and Booth 1969, Kreps and Donnermeyer 1987, Dresbach 1992). Passewitz and Donnermeyer (1989) state that "altruism is rarely sufficient by itself to sustain motivation for joining and remaining involved in volunteer associations." Their personal values compel them to support a particular activity.

Local governance offers citizens the most craved for opportunity to elect local official who are both accessible and within reach of the electorate. Saltstein (2003) explores citizen participation from a local government point of view and suggests that "...local government has the best opportunity to promote face-to-face interaction between the elected officials and the populace, and this fosters a strong tradition of citizen involvement in local political decision-making". Irvin and Stansbury (2006:58) utilize citizen participation as a barometer to measure public opinion arguing that "...citizen participation in policy formation is useful for informing regulators of exactly where volatile public backlash is likely to occur and for winning the sympathies of a few influential citizens..." Folscher (2007:243) views citizen participation from both a local government and a national view. He notes that "Civic engagement in public affairs can increase state effectiveness when citizens are given the opportunity to make their needs known and hold public institutions to account, public resources are likely to be used more efficiently and to deliver public goods and services that are better aligned with citizens' needs". He further argues that local communities have the best knowledge of their needs and preferences and of local conditions and usually public policy and advocacy organizations outside of the state often give voice to needs and preferences that are not heard in closed budgetary processes (ibid). Folscher (2007:243) further asserts that citizen participation in decision-making "...reduces the information gap between citizens and the state ..."

Vincent (2004:110-111) views citizen participation from a developmental point of view by asserting that participatory development requires that citizens "...take time and energy in [to] establish[ing] the basis for, plan[ning],carry[ing] out and/or evaluate[ing]some activity[ies] that will bring about change in their lives". Mandaza (1998; 102) maintains that popular participation connotes the process by which the efforts of the masses themselves are combined with those of

central government. On the significance of citizen participation, the World Bank (1997:110) maintains that people are the means and end of development. The World Bank further points out that “...the centrality of participation and decentralisation arises from a realization that development in Third World states cannot be achieved by bureaucratic means alone (Mandaza 1998:102). This view calls for a deeper involvement of citizens in the decision-making processes of developmental issues that directly affect the citizens’ livelihoods.

## **Conclusion**

Notwithstanding the various arguments pertaining to citizen participation in governance processes, a plethora of situations have availed themselves to justify the validity of citizen participation. It has become prevalent for the concept of citizen participation to be manipulated, especially by politicians ‘to legitimise’ their stay in power, resulting in unpopular regimes being ‘elected or retained’ into power through controversial electoral processes. This, in turn, has resulted in political leaders engaging unorthodox means [such as electoral rigging] to get ‘elected’ into office on the pretext that they are the sole choice of the electorate. Citizen participation has therefore brought about precedence where everything is done in the name of the populace.

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