

A Ticking Bomb for Nigeria? The EndSARS Protest in Retrospect

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Abstract

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, no social movement has had such a devastating impact across the country as the EndSARS protest in 2020. This protest not only exposed the cracks in the Nigerian nationhood but also reflected leadership failure in the country. The paper presents a retrospect on the EndSARS protest in Nigeria. The analysis is based on keen observations of Nigeria's socio-political trajectory following the October 2020 demonstration. It incorporates data primarily from secondary sources. This paper contends that serious efforts should be made in pursuit of genuine reforms, social justice and meaningful reconciliation for aggrieved citizens in all strata of the country. The EndSARS protest is not only a ticking time bomb but one of the few opportunities open by the Nigerian political leadership for inclusive governance for the teeming youth population.

Keywords: Nigeria Police, EndSARS, Youth, Lekki Tollgate, Nigerian Army

Introduction

In October 2020, activists, celebrities and aggrieved youth marched across Nigerian cities and states in a peaceful protest to spread awareness of the brutality and provocative extortion over the years by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a branch of the Nigeria Police Force under the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department (SCIID). Founded in 1992 to stem the rising wave of violent crimes in the country, SARS became notorious for various degrees of human rights abuses and other criminal acts which came to light in 2016 after a human rights activist began a campaign on Twitter against the Police. While the Police authority promised to reform SARS, nothing tangible emerged from this. Aggrieved youth, therefore, moved from Twitter (now X) as a site of mobilisation and took to the streets to demand the total disbandment of SARS. The protest later turned violent after it was hijacked allegedly by government agents and also came to an end after excessive use of force against peaceful protesters by the Nigerian Army and Police at Lekki in Lagos.

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, no social movement has had such a devastating impact across the country as the EndSARS protest in 2020. It did not only expose the cracks in Nigerian nationhood but also exemplify charges that reflect a failure of leadership in the country (Okurounmu, 2010). The large turnout of protesters made up of majorly Nigeria's youth demography is both a worrying sign and signal that the country may not survive another protest of this nature should it occur in the future. The article provides retrospect on the EndSARS protest in Nigeria. The analysis is based on keen observations of Nigeria's socio-political trajectory since the protest commenced on 3rd - 20th October 2020 and also incorporates data from secondary sources. The article contends that until serious attempts are made towards genuine reforms attainable in all strata of the economy, the EndSARS protest may not likely be the end to any meaningful demand for social justice for victims of police brutality in the future.

EndSARS Protest and Five-point Demands

The EndSARS protest was a clear demonstration by Nigerian youth to express

their grievance over certain infractions in the country. The protest was a genuine voice against unlawful arrests, brutal extrajudicial killings and torture by the Police, especially the SARS unit, and the lack of good governance encountered daily by the youth and all Nigerians. Although the protest started peacefully, it later turned violent after a clampdown by the government and its agents. The outrage caused by the clampdown led to the disbanding of the SARS by the Police echelon. The protest, however, did not stop as demonstrators broadened their requests into five key demands which include the immediate release of all protesters arrested by the Police, justice for all victims who died as a result of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families. They also demanded that an independent body be set up not only to investigate and prosecute all acts of police misconduct within ten days but also the same body charged with the responsibility of carrying out psychological evaluation and retraining of the disbanded SARS officers before they are redeployed elsewhere. According to the demonstrators, this demand was to be carried out in line with the new Police Act. The last demand hinged on the need for improved wages for the Police as a form of compensation (Lawal, 2020).

Each of the five-point demands is interesting because they provide some context to understanding the deep rot in several government institutions in Nigeria, the Nigeria Police in particular, and its destabilising impact on the Nigerian citizenry. It also points to the level of distrust citizens appear to express for government institutions to carry out their mandates without fear or favour and dispense justice accordingly. Lastly, the demands expose the government's failure at disaster management and poor response to critical challenges in the country as the study shall explain shortly.

The Federal Government considered the five-point demands by the protesters as an important step to establish trust and public confidence in law enforcement and,

therefore, agreed not only to meet those demands but also to set up a Presidential Panel on the Reform of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad to see to the implementation of the recommendations. Following a meeting convened by various stakeholders, one of which included members of the EndSARS movement, a communiqué was issued that focused on the implementation of the Presidential Panel's recommendations. One of the recommendations for implementation (cited in *TheCable*, 2023);

... reaffirmed the constitutional rights of Nigerians to peaceful assembly and protest and the role of the Police in protecting this right; affirms that the five-point demands of the protesters and the ENDSARS movement are genuine concerns and will be addressed by the Government.
[Emphasis ours]

As part of the government's response to the first demands and to restore citizens' confidence and trust in the Nigerian Police, it was agreed in the communiqué that all arrested protesters and citizens should be unconditionally released while communication and outreach to citizens should be opened to restore trust and confidence in the polity. For the third demand, the government, according to the newspaper, *Thisday* (2020),

...welcomed the proposal to set up an Independent Investigation Panel to look into the violations of human rights by the defunct SARS and other segments of the Nigerian Police [and] to the setting up of this Independent Panel by the National Human Rights Commission within the next one week. An open call for Memoranda from members of the public whose rights have been violated by the defunct

SARS and other segments of the Police will be released by the Commission within one week.

For the fourth demand, recommendations were made to psychologically evaluate, train and retrain officers of the disbanded SARS before any form of re-deployment is implemented. Furtherance to the Nigerian government's decision to accede to the demands of the protesters, state governments at the sub-national level were required to constitute state judicial panels charged with the responsibility to hear complaints by members of the public on the subject. Reports a year after showed that 2500 petitions were received in 30 states including the Federal Capital Territory where the panels were set up. Despite assurances to implement the recommendations of the Presidential Panel, and after the protest was forcefully brought to an end by the Nigerian military, the government did not appear to show genuine commitments to serve justice to the hundreds of victims brutalised by the Nigerian Police and the protesters in particular.

Emasculating Genuine Agitations

The moment the Nigerian government promised to initiate reforms in the Police and also meet the demands of protesters was also the day reforms were deferred and justice denied to citizens in need of closure after suffering the debilitating consequences as victims of deceased victims of police brutality and extrajudicial killings in the country. Several examples abound to demonstrate this claim.

Only a few weeks into the protest, and while still making efforts to meet protesters' demands, the Nigerian government warned the protesters to call off the protest and issued strong warnings that anarchy would not be accepted. According to the Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, this was because the protest had been hijacked by persons with covert motives to destabilise the government (cited in Akinola, 2020).

Within weeks also, the government through the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), commenced serious clampdown on persons believed to have supported the EndSARS protest. The CBN, through an ex parte filed before the Federal High Court, Abuja, applied for the restriction of 20 accounts of persons the apex bank fingered for providing or receiving financial support for the protest. The apex bank had earlier ordered selected commercial banks across the country to freeze all transactions on the 20 accounts. The CBN did not only stop at that by directing the banks to freeze the accounts for 90 days which was to be renewed should the applicant show a good cause to unfreeze the account but the applicant may apply to the court to hear his or her grievance or complaint. One example of such an applicant was BasseyIsrael, a pharmacist, whose account was flagged allegedly because he was identified as the Rivers State medical coordinator of the EndSARS protest (Essien, 2020).

The punitive measures put up against key members of the EndSARS protest by the CBN were extended by another government agency, the Nigeria Immigration Service, which was said to have prevented one ModupeOdele from travelling allegedly for her role in the EndSARS protests. Odele, according to reports, had not only helped to mobilise some 219,000 followers on her social media handle to join in the protest, but she was also responsible for the provision of free legal assistance to youths unjustly arrested by the Police during the protest (Akinkuotu & Adepegba, 2020).

The timeline of events from the beginning of the protests in Lagos and several parts of the country showed a deliberate attempt by the government at the federal and state levels, its agents and even the Nigerian Police to emasculate and discredit the protest in whatever capacity they could. Despite repeated calls, particularly in Lagos, to put an end to the demonstrations, protesters were emboldened by their resolve to get justice as it appeared the government did not show

any level of commitment to ensure reforms are pursued. For instance, while discussions on how to carry out comprehensive reforms in the Police was underway, the Police echelon quickly announced the formation of a new Police outfit called Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) (Kakanda, 2020). This tactical team was set up to take over and fill the vacuum created by the disbandment of the rogue SARS unit. Critics were, however, critical of the Police's hurried intentions to set up a tactical team which they feared was likely to be replaced by former officers of the dreaded SARS unit and, therefore, rejected a new outfit that they believed was not different from the defunct SARS (*Chronicle*, 2020).

The Police at the centre of the crisis failed to engage the protesters peacefully and civilly in the early stages of the demonstration. There were reported cases of the use of tear gas, water cannon and live bullets to disperse demonstrators while others were brutally manhandled (Iwuoha and Aniche, 2022). In a bid to forcefully push back protesters, several people were injured and three others were allegedly shot dead during the protest in Ogbomoso, Oyo State (Guardian, 2020).

At the state level, the approach to the protest was mixed. While in Oyo and Delta States, for instance, the governors appealed for calm and called on the Police in the state to treat protesters with dignity. The Rivers State governor at the time, Nyesom Wike, banned any form of protest in the state. The same fate met protesters in FCT where the Minister, Muhammed Bello, claimed that the protest had not only become uncontrollable but breached COVID-19 protocols (Adepegba, 2020). It did not matter that large socio-political gathering were held within the capital and across several states within the same period.

Noticeably, the peaceful protest turned violent as a result of infiltration by unknown persons and groups. In Lagos and Abuja, protesters encountered several attacks by people wielding dangerous weapons. A pro-government group under the aegis of Citizens Action for Good Governance was

reported by *Saharareporters* (2020) to have laid ambush on protesters and threatened violent response on them. The most intense aspect of the protest was the 20th October shooting of unarmed protesters by the Nigerian Army. Although the number of wounded and dead victims from the shooting remains in dispute and yet unaccounted for today, the brutal end of the EndSARS protest through the barrel of the gun foreclose a lasting solution to Police reforms in the country.

A Long Path to Reform and Justice

There is no doubt that the EndSARS protest was triggered by the historic excesses of the SARS which initially commenced on social media and later on the streets across the country. This is because, overtime, the Nigerian state often pays lip service to genuine reforms and implementation of even its laws. Although some may not agree with the modus operandi of the protest, however, virtually every Nigerian was likely to accept that the dreaded and notorious SARS of the Police had not lived up to the mandates required of it. A peaceful protest was, therefore, one of the best avenues to expose SARS excesses. The protest, however, turned violent after the government's cavalier handling of the situation. First, while making efforts to meet the demands of protesters, the government, on the other hand, decided to clampdown on genuine voices of the protest. The Police were also ungenerous with the way the protest was handled, leading to the killing of some of its men and the destruction of key public and private assets.

It has been three years since the EndSARS protest rocked the nation but only a year since the event, the demands for Police reforms as enunciated by the demonstrators and the promise to implement all of these demands by the government appear not to have been out rightly met. This indictment does not appear to be unexpected. Attempts at Police reforms are not new. The Police echelon was aware of several instances or cases of

abuse perpetrated by its officers and to correct the anomaly commenced key reforms in the rogue unit. One report indicates that reforms within the SARS unit commenced in August 2015 when the Police echelon split SARS into two units to checkmate human rights abuses. The Police echelon carried out an immediate reorganisation of the unit across the country in December 2017 while a presidential directive called for an immediate overhaul of SARS in August 2018. Between January 2019 and December 2020, several reforms were initiated. The first called for a comprehensive reform in the SARS. In October alone, the Police echelon banned the Federal SARS and other Police tactical squads from carrying out routine patrols; dissolved SARS; and renamed SARS as the SWAT. In April 2021, directives to reform Police monitoring units and disbanding of monitoring satellite offices in Lagos and Port Harcourt were initiated (Amata, 2021).

Taking a critical look at the five-point demands presented by the protesters a year after, critics have argued that partial implementation was made in some areas while largely unaccomplished in others. Several arguments have been postulated to explain why reforms in the Police have been hard to come by, particularly on the part of the government. A major argument links the Nigerian state as an accessory to police brutality. This argument is supported by the fact that the Nigerian state is the primary enforcer of security through the security forces it establishes not primarily for civil rights protection but to protect the interests of the ruling class. The Nigerian state puts in place laws that empower law enforcement agents to arbitrarily arrest citizens “without warrant, confiscate and demolish properties, and obtain information from any person or organisation without any restraint” (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2022). In other words, through its coercive authorities, the Nigerian state enforces rules and orders that caters most importantly for the interests of the ruling class and their immediate families rather than the citizens.

The five demands will be interrogated

here to identify whether they were fully implemented in line with the government's promise to reform the Police and enhance public trust in the force.

1. Immediate release of all arrested protesters

This was the first demand which protesters requested in the course of the protest. Despite the government's belief that peaceful protest remains an essential part of democracy, many demonstrators were picked up across protest sites throughout the country and illegally detained. Although in states like Lagos where 107 persons linked to the protest were released and another 253 exonerated, the federal government did not keep to its promise.

According to reports, a year since the protest, 300 protesters remained incarcerated in the correctional centre in Lagos (Akomolafe, 2021). This does not account for many other EndSARS protesters unlawfully locked up across Nigerian prisons, and whose condition or status remains unknown. Despite repeated calls made by spirited Nigerians and coalition groups to release all protesters incarcerated across the country's prisons, many still languish in custody (Onourah, 2021). The wilful disregard by the Police for calls to release protesters may not be unconnected with what Uwazuruike (2021) believes to be the holding charge under Section 293 of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, 2015. Suspects under this section could be charged and tried before a magistrate with no jurisdiction and then remanded in prison pending when advice is sought from the Attorney General. This explains why arbitrary arrests were made in February 2021 when youths marched on Lekki Tollgate to protest its reopening and in a similar style arrested protesters who gathered at the Tollgate in remembrance of the shooting in 2020.

2. Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families

Following the shooting at the Lekki

tollgate, the federal government recommended the setup of Judicial Panels of Inquiry and Restitution in each state of the federation to investigate allegations of police brutality. The panels, among others, were mandated to identify the extent of human rights abuses emanating from police brutality and award compensation where necessary. Of the 36 states of the federation, only seven states failed to set up a judicial panel. These include Borno, Yobe, Zamfara, Kebbi, Jigawa, Niger and Sokoto States. While Lagos, Ekiti and Kwara States paid compensation to victims, Bayelsa, Abia and Imo States, although received reports of the panels, failed to pay any compensation (Azu et al., 2022).

Incidentally, disagreements over whether the federal or state government should bear the cost of compensation to the over 2500 victims of police brutality across the country led to the failure of appropriate compensation for the families of police brutality. The federal government's declaration to state governors to submit the final reports of their panels to enable it to determine the modus operandi of compensation prevented this from moving forward. Ekiti State, for instance, which had commenced compensation to victims was forced to put a stop to the process citing the inability of other states to submit their reports. Governors of Rivers and Plateau States, respectively, were of the view that the federal government should pay the compensation since the policemen accused of police brutality were federal employees (Nejo, et al., 2021).

Taking a critical look at the disposition of the sub-national to this particular demand, one observes the attitude of indifference on the part of the state leadership to pursue justice at the highest level of government. The disagreement on who to pay, how much to pay and the justification for paying marred any genuine attempt to appropriately make restitution. Half measures were simply pursued to ensure that a small group of victims are compensated while those unable to seek justice remain scarred for life. Demands for

justice for all deceased victims of police brutality have not been actualised while no visible “update on what has been done to ensure that victims get justice and due compensation (Amata, 2021),” aligning with critics' arguments of government complicity in human rights abuses as exemplified by the Nigerian Police (Kazeem, 2017).

3. Setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation & prosecution of all reports of Police misconduct

In its report, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) set up by the federal government to investigate human rights abuses by officers of the dreaded SARS unit came up with far-reaching recommendations. Part of the recommendations include the call for the prosecution of 33 Police officers 35 of whom were indicted, recommended 26 cases for further investigation, and public apology in the national newspaper and through other avenues for over 32 cases of human rights violation (Olufemi, 2020).

Shortly after the NHRC submitted its report, the federal government set up a committee to review the panel's recommendations which it subsequently claimed did “not meet prosecutorial needs [and] No proper investigation was concluded in all cases” (Shibayan, 2020). According to the Attorney General, “Admissible evidence such as exhibits, medical evidence, statements of the suspects and witnesses that can be used in court have not been obtained or recorded in the appropriate sheet from the suspects and witnesses by the appropriate [persons]” (Shibayan, 2020).

The Attorney General, therefore, mandated the Inspector General of Police, “who is well aware of the sensitivity of the matter...to set up a special investigation team to conduct a thorough investigation into the individual cases” (Shibayan, 2020). This was to be able to identify “cases that are federal offences or fall within the FCT [which] will be prosecuted by the office of

the HAGF while those that are state offences will be transferred to the respective states for prosecution” (Shibayan, 2020). It is unclear why the report of the NHRC was made the responsibility of the Police to carry out a thorough investigation into a matter that concerns it rather than the Ministry of Justice or any other body or committee with independent powers and no form of interference whatsoever. By tasking such a responsibility to the Police, the Attorney General had positioned the former as a judge in its own case. This may explain why a year down the line, prosecution of these officers and many others remains a pipedream.

Sensing the federal government's intent to disavow its report, the NHRC, in its response, argued that all obstacles preventing the prosecution of the indicated SARS operatives were cleared and all relevant materials and original case files required to pursue the case had been sent to the Attorney General and also the states (Asadu, 2020). Whether the 33 SARS officers were subsequently prosecuted by the authorities is still unclear. However, with evidence of suspected human rights abuses by Police officers since the EndSARS protest in 2020, opportunities to put in place corrective measures, sanctions and even consequences for misconduct by public officers in all strata of the polity have for now been lost.

4. Psychological evaluation and retraining of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed.

From observations of the recommendations made by the federal government at its stakeholders' meeting to meet the above demands, the Police appear to show indifference by coming up with their own ideas on how this process should be actualised. By forming a SWAT Team to replace SARS and recommending its officers to undergo “psychological management, re-orientation and training of officers...deployed for tactical operations

and other duties, (*Thisday*,2020)”the action of the Police runs contrary to the position of the stakeholders' recommendation which mandated “the psychological evaluation, training and retraining of *disbanded SARS officials* prior to re-deployment. (*Thisday*,2020)” [emphasis ours] In other words, while this demand was met, it was, however, applied to the wrong personnel, since the Police echelon reiterated that personnel of the disbanded SARS would not be part of the new tactical team. The opportunity to test the emotional, psychological and mental abilities of Police personnel and re-orientate them to meet ethical standards and best international policing practice has not been fully achieved. This is because the new tactical team does not seem to be different from its predecessor unit which has been accused in recent times of extortion and underhand tactics (Odeniyi, 2022).

5. Increase Police salary so that they are adequately compensated for protecting lives and property of citizens

Critics have argued over time that the poor welfare paid Police officers was a significant contributor to the endless cycle of corruption perpetrated by Police personnel as well as the mindless extortion of citizens (Omidiji, 2024). The EndSARS protesters recognised this huge challenge which encouraged abuse and violation of citizens' human rights and, therefore, presented it as a key demand for Police reforms. Incidentally, two years before the EndSARS protest, the Nigerian government had approved a new salary structure for Police officers whose implementation had been slow. What this illustrates is that actions that push Police officers into committing human rights violations in whatever form are a consequence of the state's inability to provide a comprehensive remuneration and welfare package for its Police (Omodiji, 2024). In a brutal assessment of the debilitating situation of the Police, Amata submits that the government has failed to take necessary

steps “so far to improve the welfare of Police officers and ensure that the Police force is equipped psychologically to enhance civil interaction with citizens” (Kazeem, 2017).

The Youth as a Fundamental Challenge

The EndSARS protest in Nigeria is a subject that touches at the heart of Nigeria's past and recent history which has witnessed consistent and deliberate suppression of genuine voices of change (Dami, 2021). The protest which 'disturbed' Lagos and other states in Nigeria in October 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic speaks to a very fundamental challenge in the country which is the youth (Dajo&Okafor, 2021). What do we mean? As it appears, we do not mean that the Nigerian youth are lazy as a few have once argued. Rather, they are the most sophisticated, most talented, highly skilled and most innovative citizens, and continue to make giant strides in virtually all spheres of human endeavour (Raymond &Isigwe, 2019). However, there is only a fraction that could be accounted for within this particular human demography as a vast number of Nigeria's youth population is trapped and continues to bear the impact of bad governance (Ibukunoluwa, 2021).

According to available statistics, 70 per cent of Nigeria's population is aged thirty and below. In the second quarter of the year 2020, unemployment figures in Nigeria stood at 21.7 million. Of this figure, 13.9 million account for youth. This is not only scary but a time bomb waiting to explode. It explains, therefore, why the youth made up a large chunk of the people who participated in the EndSARS protest (Yusuf &Benisheikh, 2021). While the protest could be said to be mainly a campaign to end police brutality and human rights abuses, several underlying factors triggered one of the most successful youth protests in terms of the organisation against the Nigerian state in recent times.

Since 1999, although this argument goes back in time, Nigeria has consistently failed to maintain a trajectory of improving

economic development which one writer observed is about 2 per cent to match its population growth of close to 3 per cent (Akpakpan, 1987). This has created the inability to provide the needed education in the country for its teeming population, expand its workforce to create more jobs and provide basic infrastructural needs such as electricity, housing, good roads, portable water and food. Given that much of what Nigeria earns from crude oil revenue is frittered into private pockets while the capacity to manage even dwindling resources is usually foreclosed, the political leadership has very little financial resources to stabilise, in economic terms, its growing population (Gboyega, 1996). What this demonstrates is that Nigeria is prone to threats like the recent EndSARS protest and other induced and self-inflicted crises such as Boko Haram extremist insurgency, herdsmen-farmers clashes, banditry and general insecurity. There are arguments that the current socio-economically induced crisis that Nigeria has faced in recent times is at its worst since 1960. What this suggests is that Nigeria may have reached this stage in its history because of the massive accumulation of youths whose talents over the last decades or so were not developed or put to productive use. Incidentally, the youth are often described in derogatory terms by the political leadership in the event of a protest without the requisite political will to address the genuine agitations of this particular demography. It explains why the EndSARS protest was more than a campaign against Police abuses but also an avenue to demonstrate against years of maladministration that have deprived the youth of the benefit of good governance in Nigeria (Raheem, 2018).

Conclusion

The EndSARS protest was a path-breaking phenomenon that shook the Nigerian state and drew global attention to the country's debilitating state of affairs as exemplified by the disbanded SARS unit. It demonstrated the resilience and determination of the Nigerian youth to

change the narrative around police brutality. As it appears, particularly years after the protest, a greater number of the inherent causes that triggered the protest remain unresolved. Public mistrust of the Police and state remains strong. Opportunities for open dialogue, genuine reforms, social justice and meaningful reconciliation of aggrieved families of deceased victims remain foreclosed. Most of the genuine demands pointed out by protesters have still largely not been met by the Nigerian government both at the federal and state levels. The serious clampdown on major known faces of the protest in the midst of finding a resolution to the genuine agitation for reforms emboldens newer voices to seek justice. In retrospect, it is safe to conclude that the Nigerian state considers the protest as a threat to the corporate existence of the country rather than a rare opportunity to pursue true reconciliation and a genuine attempt to mobilise its youth population for good governance.

In the words of human rights lawyer, Abdul Mahmood, he concludes that not only has the government failed to engender any form of police reform in the country, it “continues to pay lip service to police reform...Police officers are still shooting defenceless Nigerians...If we cast our gazes far across the public space, you'd find out that the demands of #EndSARS protesters, which form part of the larger reform of the Police, have not been addressed”(Olawale, 2021).

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