

Social Media and October 2020 Endsars Protest: Rethinking Police Reforms in Nigeria

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Abstract

It is true that the Nigeria police force is the main law enforcement agency and has its force deployment across the federation. The activities of some units of the Nigeria police such as the Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) have been variously brought into test as a result of their brutality and extra-judicial killings which triggered the October, 2020 ENSARS protests in Nigeria, the reason that motivated this study. On the other hand, internet has developed into a significant medium of communication that has expanded into a macrocosm of the people's mouthpiece through constant informal, unofficial engagements of the government and its representatives by means of protest, of which October 2020 is not an exception. The main aim of this study is to examine the influence of social media on EndSARS protest: Rethinking police reforms in Nigeria. The study adopted Utazi Model propounded by Duruamaku-Dim in 2002 as its theoretical framework. The model emphasizes the inseparability and non-segregatory aspects of utazi green leaf which connotes sweetness and bitterness of utazi leaf. This study uses descriptive survey design, which is more focused on establishing the state of a phenomenon rather than identifying the single causative component. The statistical tool used in study was the regression statistics. Information was gathered and findings were discussed using secondary data. The study found that the October, 2020 violent protests were caused, among other things, by public mistrust of government, police violence and/or brutality and poor governance. Among other things, it was suggested that the Nigerian police force as a whole needs social re-engineering in order to make it become a functional force, hence the call for police reforms. The significance of this study is that it will better enhance public service efficiency in public governance across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Social Media, October 2020 EndSARS, Protest, Rethinking, Police Reforms, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

It is fundamentally true that the country's main law enforcement agency is the Nigeria Police Force (NPF). There are Force personnel deployments across the federation. The force is superintended by the Inspector General whose duties are as contained in Sections 6 of the Police Act of 1990 and 215(2) of the 1999 Constitution as amended. It is implemented by utilizing the rank-designated force insignia and is predicated on the Force's regimental organization. The NPF's principal duties are to prevent and detect crimes, apprehend criminals, maintain law and order, protect lives and property (Nigeria Police Force, 2021). Globally, the various human rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (AI), have compiled extensive evidence of police inordinate activities in Nigeria. This includes instances of extrajudicial killings, rape, physical assault, harassment, extortion, torture, excessive use of force, abduction, unlawful arrest, illegal detention and other forms of human right violations (Campbell, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2000). The inhuman and appalling treatment suffered by Nigerians in the hands of law enforcement agencies and other security services such as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) called for serious concern. The NPF formed the SARS in 1992 to fight violent crimes of various kinds such as kidnapping, banditry and armed robbery (Nnadozie, 2017). Initially, the #EndSARS protest was a social media campaign by Nigerians as a way to communicate their experiences and feelings about police abuse as hundreds of young Nigerians flooded the streets, but as the movement gained momentum, the protesters demanded an end to police brutality and the dissolution of SARS. The global upswing in protests and the widespread use of social media platforms have sparked intense debates on the use of digital media as a catalyst for decent protests and other forms of contentious politics (Omeni, 2022). These discussions have been on the front burner across fora, especially as social media was used during the period of international protests such as “The Arab Spring”; “The Umbrella Movement”; “Occupy Wall Street and other demonstrations like The Occupy Nigeria Protests” and ultimately, the EndSARS protest (Fominaya, 2020). Later, when the protests were mostly peaceful, security personnel used violence against them, which led to fatalities and injuries (Husted, 2022). EndSARS protests started in Nigeria on October 4, 2020 as a result of the news that a young Nigerian was shot by one of the SARS personnel in Delta State. Even though #EndSARS started trending on social media on October 4, 2020 but the widespread street protests in Nigerian cities started on October 8, 2020. The campaign took a global dimension by swiftly spreading to other countries including London and New York (Abati, 2020; Adeshokan, 2020; George, 2020). The Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos was the centerpiece of the #EndSARS protest even as protests were taking place spontaneously in all major cities in Nigeria. Following several days of protests, the Federal Government was compelled to declare the squad's dissolution. The demonstrators countered that similar pronouncements had been made in the past without any meaningful reforms therefore this did not put a stop to the protests.

Aims of the study

This study examines the impact of social media on the October 2020 EndSARS Protests in Nigeria.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The essence of police formation was to protect lives and property, maintain law and order, and not limited to arrest and prosecuting criminal elements, but the recent trends of police brutality, extra-judicial killing and the like, culminating into protests of unimaginable magnitude are things far more than we can imagine. Police unpalatable and iniquitous displays in the society calls to mind the necessity for its reforms, hence the need for this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual clarifications

The Nigerian State, Police Oppression and the October 2020 EndSARS Protest Vortex

While marching to the Louis Edet Building, the police headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria, on October 11, Angela Christian was part of a crowd of over 200 protesters when they encountered the police and water cannon blockade. This was the 24-year-old's second demonstration; the first had been a gainst sexual assault in June. Now, on another sweltering Sunday, she was brandishing a carelessly cut carton with the words "END SARS" written on it to express her opposition to police brutality. Protesters continued to chant the same slogan, "Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)," even as high-pressure water cannon bursts struck them. Christian dropped to her knees, knowing that things might become worse, but she was motivated to raise a rebellious fist by those surrounding her. She added, "I heard that the police were using tear gas canisters and firing warning shots, so I was scared for myself." We were becoming more and more in number, so the cops attempted to scatter us. Even though we were acting calmly, they attacked us shortly after it was declared that SARS had been eradicated (Odesola, 2020). The police chief announced the abolition of the SARS unit three days after the protests on October 8 started as a result of a video on X, formerly known as Twitter, showing policemen driving away after shooting a young man and leaving his body by the side of the road. However, the government has made this commitment to abolish or restructure SARS four times since 2017. Originally formed in 1992 to combat armed robberies, vehicle thefts, and kidnappings, SARS has grown to be a despised police force that is well-known for its brutality, extrajudicial executions, extortion, and illegal arrests. The #EndSARS social media campaign was launched in 2017. However, the recent incident of protests has seen a tipping point in the unrest due to the incessant instances of police violence. Christian declared, "We won't stop protesting until SARS is eradicated and the police are reformed" (Odesola, 2020). This same sentiment is evident in Lagos, where youth-led protests have rendered traffic impassable and transformed the Lekki toll gate, the scene of multiple protesters being shot deaths, into an avenue of rebellion. According to 21-year-old university freshman Kazeem Balogun, "I have attended two protests in Lagos, but the one in Surulere is still fresh in my memory because we were attacked by state-sponsored thugs" (Adeshokan, 2020). "Some of us were beaten and injured when they arrived on public transportation buses, and the nearby police did nothing to assist us." "The youths of Nigeria are tired with the way their country has been governed, which is why this is now more of an issue than SARS". "Insufficient security, social amenities, and politicians who

are overpaid” Change is what we desire (Adeshokan, 2020). These were all the clarion calls by the Nigerian youth on protest in October, 2020.

Social media influence and October 2020 EndSARS protests in Nigeria

The timing of these protests prompted researchers to carry out studies on the potential influence of social media on congregating people with similar intend and purposes (Castells, 2012). Similar studies have demonstrated that there is a connection between participation in protests and the use of social media for political purposes. Corroboratively, Lee, *et al.* (2020), found a correlation between the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong by young people and their usage of social media especially for protest purposes. The study concludes that social media is a potent platform for protests even in the lack of robust social mobilization. Sinpeng (2021), averred that the #FreeYouth demonstrations in Thailand were based on networks of defenseless links with X empowering and encouraging the campaign. Additionally, Chang and Park (2021), demonstrated that the use of social media for such purposes might increase in tandem with protests. This suggests that the use of social media by protesters tends to rise as more individuals join and participate in them. Simultaneous protests, like the 2016–2017 South Korean presidential corruption scandal, serve as an example of this tendency (Chang & Park, 2021).

Conceptualizing repressive state of Africa

The inglorious activities of the police have a long history in Nigeria and other African countries and upon which political leadership failure is to blame, not the legacy of colonialism (Abati, 2020). In a similar view, Ihonvbere (2003), averred that the post-independence African states have been frequently employed as instruments through which police repressive tendencies and severe torture are vehemently propagated. On the other hand, Ake (1981), sees a state as a form of class domination. According to him, one essential feature of a state is the autonomy and general independence of institutional mechanisms of the social classes, especially the dominant class. He further maintained that African states are characterized by intense ethnic conflict, mono-party system, efficiency rules in political rivalry, political repression, and inadequate economic progress. Similarly, Buyse (2018), observes that the state through its repressive agents is gradually shrinking public spaces in order to protect the interests of the ruling class by granting greater power to the security institutions such as the military, the police and other security agencies who violate human rights uncurbed and/or uncontrolled (Margulies, 2018). The result is a generalized suspicion among the populace of the government and its law enforcement apparatus.

Oppressive state, reduction in public spaces and police brutality in Nigeria

The authoritarian use of open violence and intimidation by the state’s security agents turns its population into victims (Heywood, 2007). It uses constant surveillance, coercion to control the masses and demolishing the infrastructure of citizens' collective organization to instill intense terror in the public. These states outlaw public gatherings, promote police brutality, and impose arbitrary limitations in an attempt to reduce the quantity of public space. Repressive tendencies

can be seen in both authoritarian and non-authoritarian regimes. Citizens are victims of the authoritarian use of open brutality and intimidation regularly orchestrated through surveillance, use of force to control the masses and breakdown of the infrastructure of citizens' collective organization which are all employed to instill greater terror in the public (Heywood, 2007). These states encourage police brutality, outlaw public meetings, and impose arbitrary limitations in an attempt to reduce the quantity of public space. A state that is repressive, prioritizes coercive and intellectual tactics to further its repression. The coercive mode is exemplified by the military, law enforcement, and correctional facilities. Examples of the coercive method include the courts and other institutions of the government's ideological machinery, as well as the police, military, and imprisonment. The state's coercive and ideological apparatuses mainly employ violent and nonviolent social orders to protect the ruling class and preserve their dominance over masses (Iwuoha, 2020).

The police and other postcolonial institutions of justice continued to be the state's agents of repression against labour union, student unions, civil society, political opponents and the like in Nigeria after the country gained political independence (Cole, 1999). This is true since serving and protecting the people was not the Nigerian police's primary goal when they were founded. Rather, its purpose was to protect and assist the government so that it could appropriate and utilize resources (Kalu, 2017). This is the cause of the growing mistrust that the general population has for the police and the government. Young people in Nigeria are often treated like criminals unless proven innocent. This is because no institution or agency of government including the police is independent (Afenso, 2014). In an attempt to protect the ruling class and its interests, police and other security agencies regularly employ disproportionate and violent force against the people. The Nigerian government also used legislative and regulatory measures to support official transgressions, oppression and human rights limitations. Among others, Section 45 (1) of the 1999 constitution, declares that no law as contained in Sections 37, 38, 39, 40 and 41 of the said constitution shall be inconsistent with law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society in the interest of defense, public safety, public order, public morality, public health, rights and freedom of others, among other things. Excessive limits were justified by these regulatory tools. These regulations empowered law enforcement officers to make arbitrary arrests, destroy property at will and request information from persons or group without restrictions, thereby legitimizing excessive limitations on human rights. This is akin to the manner in which the police in China function, wielding immense authority with less responsibility (Wang and Madson, 2013).

Rethinking police reforms in Nigeria

Although rethinking about abolishing the police is becoming more popular as many Nigerians are ranking police reforms higher on their wish list. However, it has not permeated the political mainstream. The goal of abolition takes a lifetime. Olu Timehin Adegbeye, a Nigerian feminist and speaker who is also unfamiliar with the abolitionist framework but watching the protests online, stated that there has never been a better moment to begin than now. However, we must always remember that we are in this for the long run. "After learning more, I've realized that abolition entails changing not just the criminal justice, jail and policing systems, but also the way

we see interpersonal relationships and punishment in general. It necessitates a radical change in the way we interact with one another as a community," she stated. "It will take generations for this kind of thinking to take root, so the only way to sow it in the public consciousness is to do so very deliberately through political education." Protesters in the streets have concerns beyond SARS. This includes using water cannons and tear gas on nonviolent #EndSARS demonstrators like Christian, as well as killing at least eighteen people while enforcing COVID-19 lockdown tactics. Nigeria's police hierarchy declared that SARS will be abolished and that a new tactical team called SWAT would take its place. However, SWAT remains biased toward functioning inside militarized policing paradigms, just as SARS. The Nigeria police, as an institution, "plays a limited role functionally", according to Ayo Sogunro, a human rights lawyer and writer from Nigeria who was watching the demonstrations from South Africa. He clarified that since matters like traffic control and community security are overseen by other organizations, the police essentially exclusively deal with serious crimes. "The use of the police as an agent of violence instead of an unbiased arbiter of the law is woven throughout the entire fabric of our criminal justice system." According to Sogunro, Nigeria's national mentality is profoundly ingrained with the notion of a police state or police institution as a result of its colonial and military past. Therefore, it is unlikely that Nigerian government will support the abolition of the police in the near future, but improvements in this area should be reconsidered. Sogunro continued, "But it's true that the #EndSARS demonstration has created a forum for this kind of discussion. What matters is that Nigerians no longer view police actions as unchangeable realities that are immune to public opinion. There is a slim but real chance now that more people are starting to draw attention to the internal issues and outside effects of Nigerian policing. A new, more compassionate method of ensuring human security may gradually come to be accepted as more people start to draw attention to the internal issues and external effects of Nigerian policing. This is a slight but real possibility that the entire framework of our criminal justice system, particularly policing, will come under examination.

The demands expressed by the #EndSARS Protesters for more widespread political reforms were usually met with clampdowns and official repression, rather than positive progress. According to reports, during the demonstrations, agents of the Nigerian state engaged in live-gun shootouts with peaceful, helpless and unarmed #EndSARS protesters, suppressed dissenting voices and restricted civic freedoms all without facing any opposition (Reform Observatory, 2020). Sad to note that hoodlums and thugs allegedly paid by state/political actors attacked the protests with the intention of disrupting and dispersing protesters in several states of the federation such as, Lagos, Edo, Abuja, Oyo, Abia inter alia (Cable Network News, 2020). The attention to be drawn to the purported actions of thugs with state support, the Nigerian Army and Police, clampdowns and harsh treatment of peaceful #EndSARS protests. The #EndSARS movement finally moved beyond police brutality as demonstrators demanded significant changes including economic freedom, political reformation and good governance (Abati, 2020). The protesters demanded to be addressed by their "absentee" president to no avail until a postmortem statement that did little to appease the public. The President's actions drew harsh criticism from Nigerians (Odesola, 2020).

The Nigeria Police hierarchy with immediate effect ordered SARS officers on duty to always wear their uniforms going forward and forbade them from conducting roadblocks or patrols.

Despite the government's responses to the demonstrators' demands, which included reforms to the police, the movement continued unabated, which likewise suggests two things: Firstly, that the protestors and the government lack trust in one another and secondly, that the demonstration involved more than just the police using force (Abati, 2020). The fact that Nigerian youths persisted in their protests despite the country's administration declaring that all of their requests had been fulfilled raises the possibility that the October 2020 #EndSARS protest had deeper, more distant, or precursor origins. For example, the protesters reminded the government of the three previous times it had failed to carry out and execute their demands and they asked that they be done immediately. This illustrates the lack of trust that the people have in their government. One of the primary features of the #EndSARS demonstration is its decentralized structure, which is because it lacks a single leader and this made it difficult for the government to negotiate, have them compromised and infiltrate the demonstrators (Abati, 2020). There was evidence to show that the primary hashtags trending on social media were focused on ending Nigeria's insecurity, corruption and bad governance. There were about 24,799 tweets and retweets and 19,609 Facebook posts and reposts during that period. Compared to other hashtags like #EndSARS, which had merely 30.7% of Facebook posts and reposts, the hashtag #EndBadGovernance generated the greatest social media traffic with 35.1%. A total of 69.7 percent were reported for other Facebook categories, including #EndCorruption, #EndBadGovernance, and #EndInsecurity. 38.2 percent of all tweets and retweets had the highest rating (#EndSARS), with the remaining 61.8 percent coming from all other tweets and retweets combined. This suggests that rather than focusing mostly on police changes, the demonstrators' demands were more in line with democratic governance and strong leadership. Stated differently, the protesters believed that #EndSARS would assist the country in achieving capable leadership and democratic administration. This also explains why the protesters continued their demonstrations despite government claims that the Nigeria police would be reformed and announcement of the disbandment of SARS on October 11, 2020. Sequel to the above, instead of relaxing, appeasing and dispersing the demonstrations rather, government promises gave rise to other demands for good governance.

Some Reform Measures for the Nigeria Police Force

Lessons from the western civilizations have these as the various lens through which Nigeria Police Force can be properly reformed for optimum performance devoid of violence, brutality and intimidation. These include among others (<https://medium.com>);

1. Establishing clear organizational policies on the use of force -It may sound illogical, but it is fundamentally true that political leaders and organizations need to clearly define and redefine limitations on the use of force, given the influence police leaders have on the ordinary police officer.
2. Effective monitoring of police use of force- This buttresses the fact that police organization needs to track and measure the use of force among its personnel. Police should be made

submit the use of force reports for all serious incidents and develop standardized data in official records

3. There should be introduction of training in violence reduction – Police officers who resort to violence often receive minimal or classroom-based training which leaves them unprepared for frightening situations.
4. Internal review system – The most effective change occurs where police organizations buy-into change and establish internal review system. This includes formal review system which monitors the use of force and provide senior monitoring on alternatives.
5. Administrative review – This is when other government bodies can review police actions which can have limited but significant impact in curtailing police violence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study theoretical framework is anchored on the Utazi Model.

The Utazi Model is a theoretical construct of an indigenous concept propounded by Duruamaku-Dim in 2002. This model is rooted in the bitters and sweet conditions of Utazi green leaf, which gives a taste of bitterness and sweetness. With this model, Duruamaku-Dim explains that there is a natural condition of man, which does not exclude from pleasure. Rather there is usually a blend or a mixture of pleasure and pain in human experience at any given time, condition or situation. Human life and experience are not strictly divided between pain and pleasure as assumed by the model of economic man or the minimum satisfaction condition of the administrative man, rather man is naturally exposed to the experience of pain and pleasure regardless of which condition weighs more favourably. Consequently, the siemese nature of Utazi taste or leaf, referring to the non-separability and non-segregatory condition of utazi green leaf pointedly reminding public bureaucrats or administrators, political actors that social media has both bitter and sweet conditions and depending on which side weighs more favourably. It is suitable in this study because it makes both government and the public to know the potency of social media in putting the actions of government and public in check.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs the descriptive research design, oriented towards determining the status of a phenomenon rather than towards the isolation of causative factor. The descriptive research design essentially and systematically aims at obtaining information to describe a phenomenon, situation, or population and what it exists at present. The justification for the adoption of this design being its ability to lead investigation of the phenomenon as it exists in documented form. It also aids the researcher to appropriately describe the variables under study. Secondary sources of data were also utilized through the review of scholarly literature, articles, newspapers, which were eventually used for the discussion of findings. This was considered most appropriate because generally it

saves time and effort collecting large data which would otherwise have to be collected directly through the primary source.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The documented results of the researchers show that the demonstrators' demands included broader, more substantial and comprehensive demands in addition to police reforms. Which is why the disbandment of SARS did not induce the demonstrators not to talk of becoming subdued; instead, it gave rise to a new demand for good governance as expressed via well-known hashtags such as #EndBadGovernance, #EndInsecurity and #EndCorruption. Only in the first ten days of the protests did the hashtag #EndSARS gain widespread traction on social media. Nevertheless, many Nigerians consistently supported the removal of corruption, bad governance, and insecurity, placing them above the hashtag #ENDSARS, both during and after the protests. The main hashtags used by protestors were #EndSARS and police reforms.

In essence, the demonstrators saw the #EndSARS and police reform demonstrations as a crucial means of pressing for the nation's better democratic governance and capable leadership. Therefore, in addition to the large-scale, physically staged rallies, there were also intense, highly trafficked online protests taking place on social media where a large number of Nigerians expressed their dissatisfaction with the government and the country's inadequate democratic governance. Accordingly, non-state actors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) equally and aggressively mobilized support for the protesters and called for political and constitutional changes (Adeshokan, 2020). Therefore, it is not shocking seeing that Nigeria is ranked among the least in the Global Democracy Index. According to the World Economists Intelligence Unit (2020), Nigeria is categorized as a "hybrid regime" and is ranked 110th out of 166 countries worldwide. Nigeria receives extremely low scores for all ten democracy indicators to wit: Political involvement (3.89%), political culture (3.75%), electoral process and pluralism (5.17%), government functioning (3.57%) and civil liberties (4.12%). In general, a weak democratic environment makes it harder to have full democracy and good governance. This reduces public confidence in the government and its leadership and heightens discontent about democracy. World Economic Forum Report (2018) averred that Nigeria is one of the nations where citizens have the greatest mistrust of government institutions. Therefore, the grounds for the ongoing civil unrest are created by the oppressive nature of the state's repressive agents. Hence, the protests against police brutality were motivated by a strong agitating movement against the government as a result of the declining public trust in government institutions in Nigeria. State's demonstration of history of incompetent leadership, coupled with regular misappropriation of public funds caused the breakdown of social contract. This demonstrates the severe degree to which the state is intolerant of the freedoms of speech, assembly, travel, and life. Police abuse of civilians appears to be the primary motivator now. It appears that the primary cause of Nigeria's declining civic space is police brutality against the populace (Human Rights Watch, 2000). Fundamentally, this creates unsafe environment and scares off foreign investment, costs economic fortune, increases poverty and hardship in the land. Consequently, it sets off the formation of armed organizations, the spread of SALW, the breakdown of law and order, causes anarchy, theft and criminal activities, among other things. The general public mistrust of the state and its institutions predicated on the violent

use of force to suppress unarmed protestors. This result supports the contention made by Althusser (1970) and Ake (1981) that majority of the African states are repressive in nature regardless of their democratic status. The faith of an average Nigerian including those living abroad have been damaged as a result of the country's security forces' harsh reactions to demonstrators calling for the #EndSARS movement. Massive turnouts for the #EndSARS protests were recorded in Ontario on October 12, 2020; Germany on October 23, 2020; Dublin on October 11, 2020; London on October 11, 2020; New York on October 11, 2020; Michigan on October 18, 2020; Hungary on October 22, 2020; Ohio on October 25, 2020 (Abati, 2020). This marked the internationalization of the protest. As previously mentioned, Nigeria's democracy, development, and national security are all gravely threatened by these events.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigeria's security architecture is headed by Nigeria police which in recent times has been on the news headlines across the Nigerian dailies. The insensitivity of the Nigeria Police on the people they sworn to protect is something to regret. Police brutality became a recipe for violence which took place in October, 2020 culminating into what commentators called glamour of social media campaign. The debilitating nature of police rancorous act of violence towards the civilian population in the country in the just past years is a called for serious caution if our society must be a place for decent livelihood, hence the call for police reforms. The study recommends among others things that:

1. Nigeria police force in all entirety needs social re-engineering in order to make it become a functional force. This is as a result of the rots that have tainted the image of the Nigeria police especially in recent past.
2. It is not fallacy to say that good governance is an anchor upon which every society stands. Therefore, leaders of this country must ensure that good governance is propagated and/or entrenched across the federation.
3. Nigerian public is now adequately informed and well guided as to what technology can do as regards communication especially through the instrumentality of social media platforms. Therefore, government and its agents must also be ready to entrench the culture of good governance in order to forestall citizens' revolt and bad blood among people.
4. The downgrading incident of the EndSARS protest in October, 2020 which almost turned into a revolution has become an eye-opener to both the security agents and the leadership of this country, given the level of destruction and its cascading effects on the lives and property of some innocent citizens who were caught in the web.

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