

The aftermath of #Endears, Police Reforms and Nigeria's Internal Security

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1. State of Issue

In the midst of COVID-19, pandemic and lockdown of Nigeria, with restriction on gathering, protest broke out in October 2020 against continuing police brutality. A unit of the Police called the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) set up to fight armed robbery in the 1990s is seen as the symbol of police brutality and human rights abuse (Osha,2020). A viral video of a young Nigerian been brutalised by SARS operatives in October 2020 sparked off another online protests calling for police reforms. However, unlike the previous protests that was restricted to social media, the 2020 protest moved to the streets of major cities of Nigeria and outside the country with large presence of diaspora population (Whiteside, 2020). The protesters made a five-point demand from the authorities and vowed to remain on the street until the demands are met. Though the government, yielded to their demands, the protesters' insisted to remain on the streets until they see tangible results on the ground. This stance stems from the experience of failed promises of police reform in the past. When Government persuasion of the protesters to leave the streets failed on deaf ears, the government sent soldiers to disperse the crowd at the epicenter of the protest in Lagos. The 'Lekki Tollgate' shooting of protesters resulted in death of scores of protesters who are mainly youths. The shooting changed the dynamics of the protests that was peaceful for weeks into a violent demonstration that led to the destruction of public and private properties. Though the government instituted a judicial panel of inquiries across the states of Nigeria, the effect of the protest is still being felt in the country.

2. Causes and Analysis

The spate of alarming armed robbery incidents across Nigeria in the 1990s necessitated the setting up SARS but by 2009, the unit had become large and powerful, with a focus that expanded beyond armed robbery to internet frauds popularly called 'yahoo-yahoo' in Nigeria (Chow, 2020). The expanded role contributed in the increasingly uncontrolled power of the unit, with its members allowed to carry guns, drive unmarked cars and operate without badges or uniforms (Uwazurike, 2020). The unit became notorious with practices such as violent harassment of innocent young Nigerians, extortion, rape, sexual harassment, and flogging, maiming, and extra-judicial killing of suspects or detainees (Africa Center,2020).

The category of people that suffered most in the hands of SARS operatives in Nigeria were young people profiled unfairly. For instance, anyone wearing a dreg lock or designer clothes and carries an iPhone or laptop automatically becomes a suspect of cybercrime referred locally in Nigeria as 'yahoo-yahoo'¹ (Chow, 2020). SARS became dreaded as each suspects that unfortunately crosses their path come out with tales of woes. Viral videos of these brutalities on social media compelled Nigerians to begin the #EndSARS movement (Ojewale, 2020).

¹ Yahoo-yahoo is the use of internet to relieve unsuspecting clients of money in romance or business scam

Figure 1: A cross-section of #EndSARS Protesters in Lagos, Nigeria

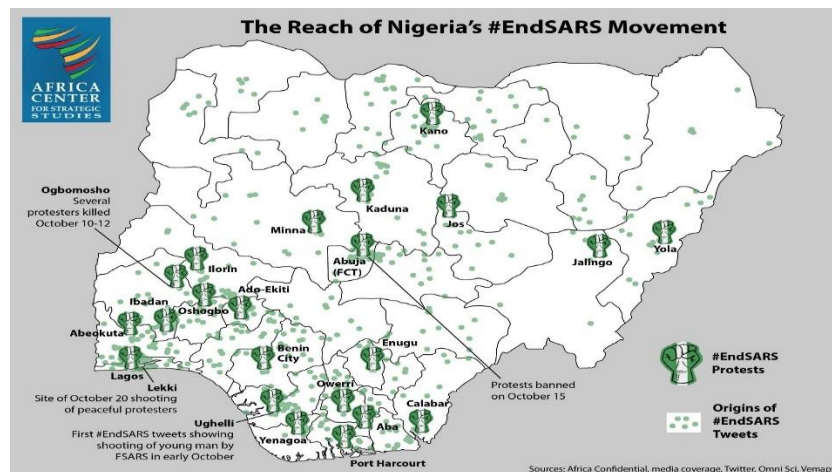


Source: BBC.COM

Source: AFP

Protests against SARS brutality date back to 2010, and announcements on disbanding were first made in 2014, then again in 2015, 2016, and 2019 (Ojewale, 2020). Prior to the August 2020 #EndSARS protests, SARS had been reformed, overhauled, decentralized, and disbanded about four times without success within three years(Osha,2020)..

Figure 2: Reach of #EndSARS Protest in Nigeria



Source: Africa Center

The latest #EndSARS protest began trending on October 4 after viral video that showed a young Nigerian in Ughelli, Delta State was pushed out from a moving car by operatives of SARS who drove off with the dead man's SUV car (George, 2020). The outrage and anger it sparked, increased as more videos and pictures showing police brutality, harassment, and extortions emerged. Inspired by the George Floyd's Black Life Matter demonstration of May 2020 in the United States and ignoring the COVID-19 restrictions on gathering, the online activism quickly snowballed into huge street demonstrations across Nigeria against police brutality (George, 2020). The support of celebrities who either showed up physically or tweeted in support of the protests swelled the number and gave confidence to the protesters. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp became very useful to mobilise people into the streets. The protesters made coordinated arrangements for the provision of food and water at locations of the protests. Music that kept the protesters busy were provided. There was also provision of medical

personnel on standby, ambulances, and mobile toilets for convenience. Furthermore, the protesters also hired private security (bouncers) for protection, raised money mainly from the diaspora, and ensured safety of properties. With the slogan of ‘sorosoke’² the protesters made it clear that the movement had no leader to avoid past experiences of leadership compromising to government pressure (Chow, 2020).

Figure 2: The Demands of #End SARS in Nigeria

OUR FIVE (5) DEMANDS
#5FOR5

11TH OCTOBER, 2020

#ENDSARS ✓

1	Immediate release of all arrested protesters	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation & prosecution of all reports of police misconduct (Within 10days)	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	In line with the new Police Act, psychological evaluation & retraining (to be confirmed by an independent body) of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Increase police salary so that they are adequately compensated for protecting lives and property of citizens	<input type="checkbox"/>

PLEASE TICK ALL BOXES

SIGNED: A NIGERIAN YOUTH

Source Vanguardngr.com

The government's first response came through the announcement by the Inspector General of Police of the disbandment of SARS, and later President Mohamadu Buhari announced that the government had accepted all the five demands of the protesters and appealed to the protesters to end the protest (Abati, 2020). But the protesters ignored the appeal and decided to continue because of unfulfilled government promises and assurances in the past. It was at this point that the Military authorities issued a warning to the protesters that they would not tolerate attempts to subvert the government by refusal of the protester to leave the streets (Abati, 2020). The largely peaceful protest became violent when hoodlums sympathetic to the government attacked the protesters in Lagos and Abuja. The announcement of curfew in Lagos made many to conclude that the sponsored clash was a pretext to disperse the protesters who were given until 10pm on October 20, 2020 to observe the curfew (Nerbrook, 2020). However, the soldiers that went to Lekki Tollgate to enforce the curfew were impatient to wait for 10pm before opening fire at the protesters and killing scores even while they were waving the flag and singing the national anthem as a sign of peace (Africa Center, 2020). The shooting watched by many around the world was streamed live by DJ Switch on her Instagram handle. The killing at Lekki Tollgate, enraged the protesters into destruction of public and private properties, including police station, bus parks, hotels and media

²'Sorosoke' a Yoruba language, translate 'say it louder' in English language

houses (Uke,2020). There was also lootings of public and private stores and shops for days as security systems in the country completely collapsed.

3. Future Expectations and Implication

The effect of the #EndSARS still lingers months after the protest. Even though the Police authorities said SARS was disbanded and replaced with Special Weapon and Tactics (SWAT), that new unit is not yet functional, thereby creating a gap in policing across the country. The police brutality and human rights abuse panels are still grappling with the assignment of about 1247 petitions filed across 30 states of Nigeria(Arise,2020). Not much is heard from the panels which attracted heavy media coverage shortly after the protest. One area of dispute is the number of people that died at Lekki Tollgate, whereas the government initially denied of any death, but later claimed that two people died, evidences from other sources counters this claim. For instance, the Lagos state chief Pathologist presented dead bodies of 99 people recovered across the state during the protest (Olubajo,2021). The embarrassment government has felt, led to clamp down on local media stations in the country reporting the shooting as massacre of youths. Major national stations such as Channels Television, Arise Television, and African Independent Television for breaking Nigeria's broadcasting code for using unverified videos (Uke, 2020). This clampdown is not restricted to local media, Cable News Network did not escape the reprimand of the Nigerian government for airing a documentary that contradicted the government's claims on the number of deaths at Lekki Tollgate (Proshare, 2020). Amnesty International also did a report stating that over ten protesters died directly because of the shooting at Lekki Tollgate (Orji & Busari, 2020). Another International organization, Intersociety, reported that the number of people killed in Eastern Nigeria was 110 and that Obigbo in Rivers State accounted for 50 of those killed. In Obigbo, the Army carried out the systematic killing of citizens for the death of security operatives in the area (Intersociety, 2020). The clamp down has continued even in June 2021 with the ban on use of Twitter in Nigeria which was the main social media platform used during the #EndSARS protests (Ewang, 2021)

Besides the death of protesters, security agencies also have their losses due to the protests. Police authorities, claimed that 22 police officers lose their lives while angry protesters burned 205 police stations, 17 of them in Lagos (Allafrica, 2020, Premium Times, 2020). These losses led to reluctance of security personnel to return to their duty posts after the protests subsided across Nigeria (Usman, 2020). There were also reports that security personnel deserted and resigned from the service due to attacks on security personnel during the #EndSARS protests (Sunday, 2020).

The aftermath of the protest is the worsened insecurity across the country as the country is witnessing spikes in robbery, kidnapping, banditry and insurgency(Olorunbi,2021). Its impact on business is staggering. Official records indicated that, hoodlums looted about 71 general stores and 248 private stores located across the country (Allafrica, 2020). Most of the public stores that were looted were largely food items and drugs meant for distribution as palliatives to ameliorate the lockdown of the economy due to COVID-19 pandemic. The weeks of protests impacted negatively on business activities, including banks and freights (Everstream, 2021). The fallout of the protest is seen in divestment out of Nigeria. Notable is Shoprite, Africa's biggest retail chain, which controls a large chunk of the retail market in the country (Asala 2021). Again, the recent decision of Twitter to establish its African headquarters in Accra Ghana instead of Nigeria, where it has over 40 million users is attributed to the effect of the protest (Princewill & Busari, 2021).

4. Conclusion

The Nigerian government did not anticipate the scale of #EndSARS protest but it exposed the fragility of the Nigerian state. The government sees that protest as attempt to bring down the administration headed by a northern Muslim by the Christian dominated south. Its attempt to clampdown on leaders of the protests, media houses and social media as well as a pronouncement on cryptocurrency transactions in the country are seen as attempt to stop future protest. Not much lesson has been learnt as Police brutality still continues in Nigeria and issue of governance get worse daily

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