

## The #EndSARS Protests, Corruption and Insecurity Debates in Nigeria

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### Abstract

The mass protests to end the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (known as the #EndSARS protests) was a decentralized social movement and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria. The protest started in 2017 as a Twitter campaign using the #ENDSARS to demand the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. This paper argues that the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria was a microcosmic manifestation of the deeply rooted dissatisfaction of Nigerians with the social, economic and political situation of the country. Data was collected using secondary sources such as internet materials, journals, research reports and textbooks, were analyzed using the expository and analytical method of inquiry, the paper demonstrates that the protests were just the avenues the Nigerian youths got to ventilate their frustration, disappointment and anger with the government. The paper asserts that nepotism, tribalism, insecurity and corruption are the underlying issues that fuelled the protest. Restructuring and resource control, which underline the gross inequality in Nigeria, are other current debates that gave rise to the protests. Following the analysis, the paper concludes that nepotism, tribalism, insecurity and corruption are the bane of Nigeria's economic, political and social development.

**Keywords:** Nepotism. Insecurity. Corruption. #EndSARS protest. Restructuring. Nigeria

## Introduction

In 1992, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was formed to combat armed robbery and other serious crimes. Before that, anti-robbery policing was the responsibility of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Nigeria Police Force (Aljazeera, 2020), which from 1984 existed separately in different states. Other special units, which went by different names at different times, included the Intelligence Response Team, Special Tactical Squad, Counterterrorism Unit and Force Intelligence Unit—all formed to tackle rising violent crimes following the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 (Aljazeera, 2020).

By early 1990s, armed robbers and bandits were terrorizing parts of southern Nigeria in unprecedented ways, particularly Lagos and Benin. Simeon Danladi Midenda, a police officer who was in charge of the anti-robbery unit of the CID in Benin in 1991 (Aljazeera, 2020), recorded some success in combating armed robbery, earning him a recommendation from the then Inspector General of Police (IGP). With the rising crime rate in Lagos, Midenda was transferred there (Aljazeera, 2020) and tasked with uniting the three existing

anti-robbery squads operating in Lagos into one unit in a bid to break the strongholds of armed gangs. As the new sheriff in town, equipped with 15 officers and two station wagons, Midenda formed an amalgamated unit and named it the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in 1992. In the early days of the unit, combat-ready SARS officers operated undercover in plain clothes and plain vehicles without any security or government insignia and did not carry arms in public. Their main job was to monitor radio communications and facilitate successful arrests of criminals and armed robbers.

For 10 years, SARS only operated in Lagos, but in 2002, it spread to all 36 states of the federation as well as the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. It was counted as one of the 14 units under the Nigerian Police Force Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department. Its mandate included the arrest, investigation and prosecution of suspected armed robbers, murderers, kidnappers, hired assassins and other suspected violent criminals (Aljazeera, 2020).

## The conceptual debate: Insecurity and corruption

A tribe is a cultural or ethnic group or sub-group with identifiable linguistic and other features, sometimes including prominent biophysical ones. Nigeria is reputed to have at least 250 ethnic nationalities, with an even larger number of ethnic sub-divisions and over 500 languages and dialects.

Tribalism is the belief in the inherent superiority of one's ethnic group. In terms of conformity, tribalism may also refer to, in popular cultural terms, a way of thinking or behaving in which people are more loyal to their tribe than to their friends, their country, or any other social group. Tribalism has been defined in engaged theory as a 'way of being' based upon variable combinations of kinship-based organization, reciprocal exchange, oral communication, and analogical enquiry. It is defined as "a label for social groups who feel a distinct sense of difference by virtue of common culture and descent."

Cornelius (2007:385) defines tribalism, from a social and ideological sense, as follows:

Tribalism is both a social phenomenon as well as an ideology. In its traditional sense it refers to a social system in which human society is divided into groups, independent of each other. Each of these groups has its own recognizable cultural norms and commonalities which form the basis of its identity as a tribe. This is manifest in the basic and instinctive sense that human beings are divided into "us" and "them." These divisions are based on traits acquired at birth or upbringing, race, language, religion, clan or caste membership.

Mercer (1977) has defined tribalism as loyalty to or preference for one's tribe that results in difference against other tribes in the nation within which it is practiced. He further posits that it could also be defined as a prejudice towards one's own tribal affiliation as opposed to that of other tribes. Tribalism, according to (Turaki, 1999: 3), "refers to the conception of a tribe as the central focus of things and tribal identity above all else. It is also a belief which places one's tribe superior and others inferior."

Nnoli (1998) contends that tribalism or negative ethnicity serves as an organizing force, which assists in bringing the people together to fight or seek a common goal, thereby creating a sense of communalism, family, and togetherness, which also deepens the sense of belonging that invariably fan the embers of nepotism and corruption in public service.

Divisive or negative ethnicity or tribalism is defined as a social phenomenon associated with the identity of members of a competing communal group(s) seeking to protect and advance their interest in a political system. The relevant communal factor may be language, culture, race, religion and/or common history. What is peculiar to ethnicity or tribalism is that "it involves demands by one group on other competing group(s)" (Nnoli, 1998). Chinua Achebe, in his view, describes tribalism "as discrimination against a citizen because of his/her place of birth" (Achebe, 1983).

Tribalism is conduct, particularly of a public official, in a manner that favours inordinately persons or issues which relate to their tribal affiliation. Tribalism is closely related to nepotism in that they have comparable effects on the economic, political and social lives of a society. Both are discriminatory and, therefore, legally

unjustifiable, as they debase the idea of equality and fair play.

According to Muzan (2014),

Nepotism involves acts of favoritism, especially relating to patronage or benevolence by public officials and is directed to various categories of relatives. Such conduct confers advantages, often unmerited, and thereby defeats fair play and denies the competitive rights of similarly situated parties. The public officer's conduct may be said to be monopolistic and thereby distorts competition, particularly when the beneficiary pays for the benefit. Morally and legally, it is wrong because it denies others the right to compete. Applied to employment opportunities, it distorts the labour market and thereby disturbs an otherwise even distribution of labour in the market and interferes with the employment of the right personnel for maximal efficiency and productivity.

Nepotism, according to Mulwa et al. (2009:56), "is the showing of favoritism for relatives or friends based upon that relationship, rather than on an objective

evaluation of ability or suitability". It describes a situation like offering employment to a relative, despite the fact that there are others who are better qualified, willing and able to perform the job. It leads to a highly biased method of distribution of state resources where a public officer prefers his or her relatives and family members or friends in awarding contracts, job recruitments, promotions and appointments to public positions. Nepotism tendencies ignore the principles of merit and competence, thereby downgrading the quality of the public service (Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management, 2010). It also includes the exemption of one's relatives and friends from the application of certain punitive laws or regulations, which may undermine esprit de corps and trust.

The 2020 report of the Global Terrorism Index ranks Nigeria third among 163 countries on the scale of key global security trends and patterns of terrorism, the first and second being Afghanistan and Iraq respectively. Nigeria has maintained the third position since 2015, suggesting that efforts targeted at mitigating the security challenges in the country have not produced optimal results. The report reveals that Nigeria

accounted for about 9 per cent of all terrorism-related deaths globally in 2019. As far as the impact of terrorism is concerned globally, these three countries are rated very high. Afghanistan has 9.592%; Iraq has 8.682%; while Nigeria has 8.314%. The four terrorist groups responsible for the most deaths in 2019 were the Taliban, Boko Haram, ISIL and Al-Shabaab. Boko Haram, Nigeria's deadliest terrorist group, recorded an increase in terrorist activity mainly targeted at civilians by 25 per cent from that of the previous year. Additionally, Fulani extremists were responsible for 26 per cent of terror-related deaths in Nigeria at 325 fatalities. What is even more disturbing is that out of the first 10 countries, five are classified as being in a state of war: Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria, Somalia and Yemen.

These statistics correspond to the reality on the ground in Nigeria, as seen in the activities of Boko Haram, bandits, kidnapers and killer herdsmen, all of which have continued to terrorize Nigeria(ns). The kidnapping of schoolchildren from Chibok, Dapchi, Kankara, Kagara and recently Kaduna, among others, are clear indicators that western education and its beneficiaries

(schoolchildren and the youth) are the primary targets of the attacks.

Corruption can be defined as any means of abuse of a position of trust in order to gain an undue advantage. This involves the conduct of both sides: that of the person who abuses their position of trust as well as the person who seeks to gain an undue advantage by this abuse.

Similarly, Khan (1996) defines corruption as an act that deviates from the formal rules of conduct governing the actions of someone in a position of public authority because of private –considerations, such as wealth, power or status.

According to Orite (2000: 89),

Corruption is the perversion of integrity or state of affairs through bribery, favour or moral depravity ... It takes place when at least two parties have interacted to change the structure or processes of society or the behaviour of functionaries in order to produce dishonest, unfaithful or defiled situations.

In other words, corruption is a systematic vice in an individual, society or nation that can manifest as favouritism, nepotism, tribalism, sectionalism, undue enrichment, amassing of wealth, abuse of office,

power, position and derivation of undue gains and benefits. Corruption also includes bribery, smuggling, fraud, illegal payments, money laundering, drug trafficking, falsification of documents and records, window dressing, false declaration, evasion, underpayment, deceit, forgery, concealment, aiding and abetting of any kind to the detriment of another person, community, society or nation (Ojajide, 2000).

Corruption is a multidimensional concept that has legal, social, political, economic and ethical connotations. It manifests in various forms and dimensions. It is simply conceived in this article as the deliberate misuse or improper use of power and influence for personal aggrandizement or group advantage. In this sense, corruption connotes the abuse of public rules or resources, or the use of illegitimate forms of political power and influence, by public or private parties (Ogundiya, 2009). Conceived in this manner, corruption is inextricably tied (but not limited) to politics, more especially if politics is defined from the tradition of who gets what, when and how and perhaps how much. The struggle for resources, otherwise known as the (sharing of) "national cake" in Nigeria's political parlance, has taken a debilitating

dimension, permitting all forms of corruption. Every political issue is tied to who gets what, when and how (much). The idea that the "national cake" is meant to be shared rather than baked by the various ethnic groups that constitute the Nigerian federation provides a fertile ground for the kleptomaniac elite who are obsessed with siphoning the public fund.

The Anti-Corruption Plain Language Guide maintains that "Corruption involves behaviour on the part of officials in the public sector, whether politicians or civil servants, in which they improperly and unlawfully enrich themselves or those close to them, by the misuse of the public power entrusted to them" (Transparency International 2009:14). Corruption is a universal social phenomenon throughout human history, against which every society has struggled to combat. Each culture has its own conceptualizations of corruption, but all consider it immoral. Both aspects of the corruptive practice of bribing (giving and taking bribes) are considered fraudulent (Nhep, 2001).

Gerald and Caiden (1977) suggest three categories in which corruption may be conceived: public interest, public duty, and market-centred. Public interest corruption refers to bribery or other rewards leading a functionary to favour those who offer

bribes and to damage the public interest in the process. Public duty corruption refers to behaviour that deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of so-called private gains, such as money or status. Finally, market-centred corruption refers to attempts by individuals or groups to influence the bureaucracy. When defining corruption, one has to take into account the components like societal, cultural and governance norms and values.

### **Theoretical framework**

Enwere (2015) posits that a theory is a set of hypotheses postulating the relationship between variables or conditions advanced to describe, explain and predict phenomena and make prescriptions about how positive change ought to be engineered. Just as it is difficult to point to a single factor as responsible for order in society, so one cannot point to a single factor as responsible for the emergence, escalation and protraction of conflict (Faleti, 2006). Thus, one theory is considered grossly inadequate for a study of this nature. The research is, therefore, built on the structural, frustration-aggression and psycho-cultural theories of conflict.

First, the structural theory of conflict has Marx, Engles, Ross, and Galtung as its proponent. This theory sees conflict as a

build-up of the particular ways societies are structured. That is, conflict occurs as a result of the exploitative and unjust nature of human societies and the domination of one class by another (Faleti, 2006). The implication is that when societies are designed to suppress and oppress a particular group or class of people socially, economically or politically, conflict ensues. The theory is relevant to our study in that this study has hypothesized that the way Nigeria is structured has problems and therefore the call for restructuring.

The frustration-aggression theory was developed by Dollard and his research associates in 1939 with modification by Berkowitz and Yates (1962). According to this theory, violent conflict behaviour stems from the inability to fulfil needs (Gurr, 1970). The theory stresses that where expectation does not meet attainment, the tendency is for people to confront those they perceive are responsible for frustrating their ambition. This implies that frustrating other people's expectations or needs lead to aggression, and the consequence is a violent confrontation of the perceived obstacle. This theory is also relevant to this study because there are many whose basic needs of food, shelter and security are not met,

hence the agitation to confront the government that is supposed to cater for such needs.

The psycho-cultural theory of conflict emphasizes the role of culturally induced conflict; it shows how enemy images are created from deep-seated attitudes about human actions that are learned from the early stage of growth (Ross, 1993). Ademola (2006) contends that even though there are different forms of identities, the ones based on people's ethnic origin and culture, which are learned on the basis of that ethnic origin, constitute one of the most important ways of explaining violent conflicts. Identity is thus seen as one of the agents of social conflicts, which, in most cases, take longer to resolve. Enwere (2015), on the other hand, buttressed that the inability of racial groups to recognize and identify differences in culture leads to irrational and unfounded hatred, fear and mistrust provoking feelings of dislike and harm, especially of one particular religion or ethnicity against another. The holding of such performed opinions based on irrational feelings or inaccurate stereotypes is the key source of most violent religious and ethnic conflict.

Psycho-cultural conflict theorists argue that social conflicts that take long to resolve become possible when some groups are discriminated against or deprived of the satisfaction of their basic (material) and psychological (non-material) needs, especially on the basis of their identity. These needs are identified in Maslow's theory of 'Motivation' (1970) and Burton's (1990) 'Human Needs' theory, both of which describe the process by which an individual or group seeks to satisfy a range of needs moving from the basic ones, such as food and sex, to the high-order needs described as 'self-actualization' or the fulfilment of one's greatest human potential (Ademola, 2006).

Crighton (1991, cited in Enwere, 2015) urges that the long history of humiliation, oppression, victimization, feelings of inferiority or superiority and memories of past persecution, which erodes a person's dignity, racial identity and self-esteem usually, causes people to resort to vengeance, which raises conflicts to pathological heights. Overreactions to threatened or actual attacks are major themes in Spinoza's (1951) argument that violent conflict results in situations where passions overwhelm reason.

Similarly, MacLean (1975) argues that under the anxiety of threatened attack or actual denial of basic needs, the probability that people will react violently increases. Ademola (2006) maintains that conflicts are caused by a crisis of identity, which, according to him, is often the most dangerous and most violent. Identity is usually a firm sense of self-worth, which makes life meaningful and includes the feeling that one is physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually safe.

Northrup (1989) views identity as a psychological, as well as worldly, sense of self. Self-definition takes place on different levels: interpersonal, community, organizational, cultural or international. However, events that threaten to remove the feelings of 'safety' tied to different forms of identity usually lead to defensive reactions aimed at avoiding such spiritual or physical exposures. Identity operates in this way not only in relation to conflicts between people but also in situations of conflicts between groups.

As observed by Lake and Rothschild (1996), actors form beliefs in a subjective way that draws mainly on the experiences of past interactions with others. The fear that individuals and groups experience tend to force them to see threats –

whether real or imagined– and to suspect the motive of others around them. The tendency to see things in a selective way is mostly due to the past history of competition for scarce resources in which the opposition always comes out as the winner. Therefore, the psycho-cultural conflict theory implies that conflict is a product of a crisis of identity and the struggle for racial, cultural and value domination (Enwere, 2015).

In light of the above, it can be concluded that human beings tend to be violent when they are deprived of both their basic (material) and psychological (non-material) needs based on their identity.

These theories are useful to us in this paper because they would help us to understand that social vices and ills of nepotism, tribalism, insecurity and corruption are the underlying factors that have brought discrimination and sectionalism that impact negatively on the citizens. These vices, as argued earlier, are the bane of Nigeria's progress. Given that Nigeria is structurally more favourable to the core north and Moslems, there is an outcry, which ultimately led to the #ENDSARS protest. This further explains why the protest was more intense in the southern part of Nigeria.

While Nigerians were still struggling with these problems, the very people that were supposed to protect them and ensure their safety became their oppressors, maiming, killing and robbing them in broad daylight.

### **The metamorphosis of SARS**

How a police unit that was established to combat armed robbery became synonymous with unlawful killings, torture and extortion remains difficult to explain. SARS officers' abuse of their powers reflects the moral bankruptcy of the system that the corrupt Nigerian ruling elite has put in place. SARS had been accused of several human rights violations, illegal "stop and search" illegal arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, sexual harassment of women and brutalizing of young male Nigerians. The human rights abuses were documented in trending videos on social media (Aljazeera, 2020).

Precisely on 8 October 2020, large numbers of Nigerian youths took to the streets to protest against the incessant brutality, assaults and killings by SARS, which has become a rogue police unit. These demonstrations, which soon flew across major cities in southern Nigeria and other parts of the world, gained national acceptance and global solidarity. They

were a response to videos posted online around August 2020 where members of the security unit were seen subjecting an innocent youth to torture, eventually killing him and taking his car away. The peaceful demonstrations against police brutality were cracked down with an aggressive response and shootings unleashed by the same security officials accused of heavy-handedness. Worthy of note is the killing that took place at Lekki Toll-Gate, Lagos leaving scores dead. The event seemed to be well-calculated, arising from the reports that, earlier, the closed-circuit televisions and streetlights mounted at the site were switched off. Despite the available and viral video footage which showed officers of the Nigeria Army in uniform assembling and shooting, the Army has denied involvement, making many wonder who ordered them. The events that trailed the Lekki shooting were unwelcome as the angry youths again took to looting and vandalizing public and private properties. Moreover, in the heat of the protests, social media was full of news, both false and true, throwing the masses into confusion regarding what to believe. Many people's mental health were affected as a result of the fear of the unknown.

However, Nigerians need to understand the place of peace in volatile situations such as this because without peace, nobody rests and the livelihood of the contending parties is at stake. All the popular religions in Nigeria—Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion—lay specific emphasis on the indispensability of embracing peace. Without doubt, the 16th Sustainable Development Goal (Peace, Justice and Stronger Institutions) is the spine of a progressive society. To rebuild Nigeria, everyone—the government, religious institutions, youth, the media, women—has a role to play.

#### **The causes of the #EndSARS protest**

In March 2017, SARS arrested 23-year-old Miracle Ifeanyi Chukwu Okpara and detained him in Anambra State, eastern Nigeria, on a charge of stealing a laptop. Amnesty International (2017) reported that he was tortured and hardly given any food during 40 days of detention before he was taken to court and charged with armed robbery. The court discharged the case for lack of evidence. Now, Nigerians say they have had enough. Since 2017, protests have been building momentum across Nigeria, stemming from online advocacy to street protests.

Nepotism and tribalism are forms of corruption. Achebe (1983:42), lamenting the socio-political corruption in Nigeria, noted that:

Nigeria is a nation for sale, hijacked since independence by thieves, bigots, mass murderers, war criminals, unpatriotic opportunists, election riggers and other such vermin who have run the nation through an unnecessary civil war, corruption and total despoliation. Nigeria is consequently a failed state, plagued by social injustice, unrest, debilitating poverty, disharmony and ethno-religious turbulence.... corruption has grown enormously in variety, magnitude and brazenness since the beginning of the Second Republic because it has been extravagantly fuelled by budgetary abuse and political patronage on an unprecedented scale. Public funds are now doled out to political allies and friends on the guise of contracts to execute public works of one kind or another or licenses to import restricted commodities.

Corruption is a huge challenge in the public administration in Nigeria. It is at

the core of the crisis of governance and legitimacy, the establishment of a stable democratic order, the rule of law, development and the welfare of citizens. Of all forms of corruption, political corruption has remained a major obstacle to national progress in Nigeria. Corruption is indeed the major explanation for the seemingly unsolvable problem of poverty, diseases, hunger and the general acute tragedy of development in Nigeria. Egbue (2006: 88) states that corruption has "seriously impeded the growth and effective utilization of resources in Africa."

Thus, one finds that corruption manifests in the affairs of the family circle, schools (primary, secondary and universities and other higher structures of learning), worship places, security outfits, market places, mainstream politics, village meetings, women organizations, electoral activities, the appointment of people into public offices, the manner and character in which funds are disbursed from the centre to states and local councils, rigging of elections, and many more. All of these stages and categories of corruption have over the years constituted themselves into a huge albatross bedeviling the Nigerian state. Corruption, whether political, economic, judicial, familial, institutional or bureaucratic, could, by and large,

impede the progress of any society where such attitudes are widely tolerated and accommodated in the scheme of things. From the outset, it has been said that corruption involves the violation of public trust, which in itself is a negation of the collective social contract entered into between the governed and the governors. It takes place in two phases. On the one hand, it involves unwholesome cornering or diversion of public funds into private coffers through the instrumentality of primitive accumulation with impunity by public office holders. On the other hand, it shows itself in the arbitrary use of ill-gotten wealth and the forceful application of state powers by politicians to either

perpetuate themselves in office or maintain the status quo by every available means necessary(Erunke, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the underlying factors of nepotism, tribalism, insecurity and corruption are, to a large extent, responsible for the protest. The brutality of the police force only heightened the underlying tensions in the country. The structure of Nigeria favours the northern part, and therefore the need to address this structural imbalance. The 2014 National conference report should therefore be implemented.

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