

#EndSARS: Frustration among Nigeria's youth and the poor

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Nigeria, Africa's most populous country has, since the first week of October 2020, seen a series of protests to end perceived police brutality under the banner #EndSARS. In this opinion piece, I argue that these protests reflect the general frustration among Nigerians concerning the sorry state of affairs in the country's socio-economic and political space in recent times.

The #EndSARS protests called for drastic police reform in the country and specifically the disbandment of a police unit called Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS was formed in 1992 amidst concern for increasing incidences of armed robberies and other organised crimes in the country. The unit was equipped and mandated to respond to these crimes; they have what could be termed a licence to kill.

Abuse of power

In recent times, however, SARS morphed into a menace to the people it was supposed to protect, especially the youth. There have been a series of reported human rights violations in the form of torture, harassments, extrajudicial killings, extortion and downright corruption. Eventually, SARS became synonymous with abuse of power by the police with a concomitant toxic climate of fear and brutality. Amid heightened concern for the safety of citizens vis-à-vis SARS, some activists took to social media in 2017 and hence the birth of the #EndSARS movement. Since the movement started, the activists have succeeded in getting the government to commit to several police reforms. However, the impunity by the SARS continued and things came to a head on 3 October 2020, when a viral video allegedly shows SARS officers shooting an unarmed victim in Delta State. It seems this was the straw that broke the camel's back and the youth took to the streets to say enough is enough.

The relatively peaceful protest continued for several weeks and resulted in the country's leadership announcing the disbandment of the SARS unit. However, the leadership sought to replace SARS with yet another police unit called Special Weapons and Tactics team (SWAT). This was not accepted by the protesting youths and the #EndSwat followed the earlier call for #EndSARS. The youths went further to demand the end of bad governance and corruption in the country and refused to leave the streets until the president addressed them and these issues. Sadly, peaceful protesters were reportedly injured and or killed by security agents in different parts of the country during these protests. On the night of 20 October 2020, there were also reports of the army shooting innocent protesters at a toll gate at Lekki, a suburb of Lagos. There have been conflicting accounts over whether or not there was indeed shooting and killing of peaceful protesters, with the army and the Lagos state authorities denying that it took place. But what eyewitness accounts and video clips and pictures from the incident at Lekki show is that there was some form of violence perpetrated against peaceful protesters.

Looting and violence

As things stand now, it will seem that the #EndSARS protests have metamorphosed with reported cases of lootings including the looting of warehouses containing COVID-19 palliatives in many

cities of the country. Also, there have been reported cases of destruction of properties and breaking of jails in some cities. Hence opinions are divided over whether or not the initial #EndSARS protest has lost its vision or had the protests been simply hijacked by thugs and hoodlums sent by politicians to put a cog in the wheel of the protests. Amid the ensuing violence and lootings, President Muhammadu Buhari finally addressed the country on 22 of October 2020. However, it will seem that most Nigerians were not happy with his speech as many expressed shock that he did not address the main issues and concerns of the protesters. The commander-in-chief also seems to be mum on the unanswered question: who ordered the shooting of innocent peaceful protesters exercising their constitutional right in a democracy? So, the president's speech for some ended up not saying anything and according to some Nigerians on social media "the president's speech left them speechless".

Becoming a failed state

To address my opinion on these issues, two matters come to mind. Firstly, the youths' outcry calling for ending SARS, police brutality and other forms of abuse speaks to the numerous and persistent socioeconomic and political problems in Nigeria. It can be said that the country has become a nightmare instead of a country which allows the youth realise their dreams. Nigeria, in my opinion, is rapidly becoming a failed state, since with its humongous natural and human resources it has failed to provide for its teeming youth and the entire populace. Rather what seems to be the status quo is the reality of a geriatric ruling class which has apparently become insensitive to the plight of the youth and the rest of the country. Inept, corrupt and iniquitous can only be adjectives adequate to define the Nigerian ruling class. Notably, another parallel hashtag to the EndSARS was #EndBadGovernanceinNigeria and #EndNASSBloatedSpending which summarises the call of the Nigerian youths to end all forms of corruption and embezzlement which have crippled the country. In June of 2018 a Nigerian senator, Shehu Sani revealed that Nigerian senators earn about \$450,000 annually in allowances and a further \$25000 basic salary. This is in a country in which according to a 2020 Aljazeera report, 82 million of its citizens live on less than a dollar a day. Also, a former senator was seen on social media platforms showing off his fleet of cars and different assortments of shoes, clothing, perfumes, watches, etc. it seems, then, that what the ruling class in Nigeria has succeeded in doing is enrich themselves while the rest of the country live in abject poverty and squalor with a dilapidated infrastructure. For 60 years the ruling class has failed to provide stable electricity in the country. They send their children to the best schools abroad while the educational system in the country is in shambles. They go abroad for medical check-ups even for an ear infection or neck pain, while leaving a collapsed healthcare infrastructure in the country for the masses. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed, to a greater extent, Nigeria's healthcare shortfalls with notable politicians dying of the disease in incapable hospitals in the country, since they could not travel abroad as usual. In a now deleted tweet, the Ministry of Finance was seen unabashedly begging Elon Musk for ventilators to help with the pandemic and this from a country which spends a huge amount on lawmakers' upkeep and in the 2021 budget have apparently allocated an estimated 37 billion naira (about \$96 million) on renovation of the national assembly headquarters. Talk about misplaced priorities.

The youth's existential angst

Coming back to the youth, according to the latest data from the ILO youth unemployment in Nigeria stands at almost 14.2 percent. The country's universities produce an estimated 500,000

graduates per year most of whom do not get meaningful jobs to show for their years at the university. Interestingly, the sitting president in the 2018 meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of States was reported to have said that most of the country's youth [are uneducated](#) and lazy, which initiated another social media revolt #LazyNigerianYouths. Yet these same youths are either out of the country seeking a better life or are in menial jobs as hawkers, market traders, taxi or Uber drivers, etc. hustling to make a living without help from the corrupt ruling class. They also face everyday harassment from law enforcement agents like the SARS, who themselves are underpaid and have hence resorted to various means to make ends meet including using force and violence to extort from the populace.

The call of Nigerian youths to #EndSARS is their cry to end their existential angst and hunger in a country they did not choose but is theirs by right of birth. I personally do not support the looting and destruction of property that started after the peaceful protests were allegedly dispersed by live rounds of ammunition. However, the looting of palliatives could be a genuine sign that that people are hungry. Come to think of it, is it not ironic that COVID-19 palliatives meant for the people who are hungry were not distributed to them timeously, but housed in warehouses, perhaps waiting for politicians to use as a way of ingratiating themselves with the people during electioneering? The youth and the poor found these stashes and looted them to take care of their hunger. It was also reported that for reasons best known to the protesters some jails were broken. Does this not remind the reader of the 18th century French Revolution kindled by hunger for bread and resulted in the looting of food storage houses and the storming of the Bastille prison?

Promised change

Secondly, the #EndSARS protests reflect civil society's fatigue and their show of dissatisfaction with regards to the strained state-society relations Nigeria in recent times under the Buhari-led administration in the Fourth Republic. Buhari came into office in 2015 promising a better life for the people and a change from the status quo of apparent corruption in the Goodluck Jonathan's administration. The desire among most Nigerians for so-called change was also galvanised by the need to find a lasting solution to the rising insecurity in the country at the time. One will not forget in a hurry the series of Boko Haram attacks and killings in the north east of the country and the subsequent kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls, which precipitated the global movement #BringBackOurGirls. People were tired of the Jonathan administration for its apparent inability to address these issues and the promise for change was very attractive. Unfortunately, it seems that since Buhari took over, the situation of insecurity in the country has arguably worsened. Moreover, Nigeria under a supposed democratic dispensation is slowly descending into what can be termed a police state with the proscription of some civil society groups, killing of peaceful protesters, arrests and jailing of activists by state security agents, several attempts to inhibit people's freedom of expression, etc. Court orders to release activists have been ignored by state security agents, who have no qualms going against the sanctity of a court room (and indeed the principle of separation of powers) to arrest people with no observable consequences. Hence, the brutality meted against the youth and populace by the SARS unit should not come as a surprise; it is part of the growing culture of impunity perpetrated by both politicians and state security agents in the current administration. These events are redolent of the previous military regimes in Nigeria and are reflective of the efforts of the Nigerian state to constrain the space for contestation and or negotiation between itself and the wider civil society. The #EndSARS protests could be Nigeria civil society's way of saying enough is enough.

The 1984 words and question of late Nigerian musician Sunny Okosun comes to mind:

“Many years after our independence, we still find it hard to start. How long shall we be patient till we reach the Promised Land?”

A woken youth

Exactly [60 years after Nigeria's independence](#) and with arguably nothing meaningful to show for it, it will seem that Nigerians led by the youth do not want to be silent anymore. They have woken up to reject the debilitating socioeconomic and political issues that hamper their progress. Notably, the country has not seen such a rise and unity among the youths and the wider civil society. The divide and rule strategy in which politicians play up ethno-religious sentiments to divide the masses to stop them from uniting and focusing on issues that concern them did not work this time. In these protests there was no Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio, etc. there were only Nigerian youths who united their voices to say #EndSARS. It is pertinent that the AU and other world leaders and notable international organisations lend their voices of support to that of the Nigerian youths to call for a new Nigeria which recognises the right of its citizens and work towards realising a better life for all in that country.

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