

SURVIVING THE UNNECESSARY CHAOS THAT IS NIGERIA MY REFLECTIONS ON #ENDSARS PROTEST

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"If there is need to call who I know to call whoever they know to rescue me from apparatuses of the State trying to demean my existence, then it's worthless to call this country home."-Ehi Zogie

One seemingly cool morning of June 2019, the date of which I am no longer certain of, I hurried into my blue denim jeans and a white Tee-shirt bearing the "smiley" logo of Thinking Tomorrow Initiative, a student tech-based platform focused on social reforms. Looking into the mirror, I studied my afro and for geeky reasons that day, I decided to leave my hair uncombed as it looked perfect in my own eyes.

Of course, I grow a well-trimmed beard, so I simply brushed it and said a positive prayer in front of the mirror as had become one of my habits: speaking things into existence before acting upon them. This has always worked for me. According to Brandi L. Bates, "Like caterpillars our metamorphosis begins with what comes from our mouth... all transformation starts with what comes from our mouth."

As lead-servant of Thinking Tomorrow, I am on the roads most of the time, especially when there's a proposed event we are planning and there's the need to meet face-to-face with Thought Leaders and other intending guests/artistes.

This is Nigeria, waking up to it and moving has become a dirge of survival. One way to easily die in Nigeria is by its roads. On the Nigerian bad roads, anything can happen, because the value of life has been reduced to mere statistics of fallen brothers and sisters, here and there. Statistics that only heighten reactions and buzz on Social Media but die a natural death after trending for at most three to five days.

On February 22, 2020, Remo Stars Sports Club @RemoStarsSC tweeted that one of its footballers, Tiyamu Kazeem (alias Kaka) has been killed by a policeman from the Special

Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Ogun State Command. In a few hours, the tweet garnered 1.9k likes and 3.2k comments. Major tabloids carried the news immediately, and a day after, Cable News published a detailed think piece on the subject matter. But two days later, the buzz and digital cry for justice surrounding the hashtag #JusticeForKazeem died down.

Like most Nigerian roads, young people hold their breath while travelling on the Benin-Ekpoma route, a beehive of police activities. You could literally throw a stone every one or two miles, and it could fall on a Police officer's head. Every mile there's a checkpoint, you'd find young boys (who have been picked out from commuter buses and private cars) standing with police officers by the corner of the road, or a little deep into the bush. You need not wonder "what's going on".

It is the usual. Verbal harassment that most times escalate into physical manhandling, especially in cases where a boy refuses to hand over his phone or other digital devices for searching, or in cases where he complies, but refuses to part with money which is usually taken by force by these rogue officers that give the Police Force, and by extension, Nigeria, a bad name.

Worst case scenario, a boy can be shot dead in the process of his attempt at nonviolent civil disobedience to the officer's orders. And yes, there's the default POS in that not-so-deep of the bush's path by the expressway for those who'd say, 'officer, ai nor carry cash'. And one wonders if the Police is now an advance Mafrobian scheme (MMM) or a money-making machine of the government, disguised.

Initially, I had only experienced these injustices from a not-too-close range. Because up until that day, no police officer had ever pulled me out for questioning. Maybe because I rarely wore jeans, especially while travelling. For fashion sense/needs, I am more of the African print guy.

But on that day, I was wearing a denim jean, and the unexpected happened. The vehicle I was in stopped (no big deal, I was used to it). But for the first time since I started hearing of and reading about shared experiences on SARS (police) brutality, I was told to step out of the bus with another boy wearing a beautiful hairdo with a tint the colour of gold.

After pointless questioning and ransacking my phones and seeing nothing of interest, I received the shocker of my life for asking a question, 'why should I give you my debit card?' Two slaps in quick succession and I blanked out. When I got myself back, I heard an officer say, 'because you be Law (student) you dey misbehave abi?'

They had found out from emptying my sling bag of its content and seeing my Ambrose Alli University student ID card. They let me go, sorry, fixed me into another bus as they had asked the driver of the Sienna car I was in before the incidence to leave the scene the moment I blanked out.

I have this natural inclination to not note down dates of gory incidences, to not give it a voice or a name; so as to heal quickly from it, move on, and get closure. And I have since put that gory incident in that folder of my memory I coded 'dark & void'.

My hatred for the police did not however show, as I had been groomed by ideologies of nonresistance to evil. Such that whenever I was oppressed, I don't fight back. And in rare cases where I did, I did so only with my voice.

I either wrote a poem, while crying and soaking my keypads, or attempted an essay that ends on Facebook or Twitter, with splices of humour. These outpourings sometimes gathered rave reactions and died there. Other times, I don't even make the post 'public' yet publish it on Facebook, for my eyes only.

But this is me, an empty set in the larger set of irate youths who have been abused by SARS, the now-scraped or need I add, renamed as

SWAT – the official face of police brutality in Nigeria. Irate youths consumed by hate towards this sinister sect of the Nigeria Police Force. Families who have lost their loved ones, some of whom were their breadwinners. And so, in October 2020 when the #EndSARS protests started brewing, however in low tones on Twitter, I joined the fray to add my voice – the only weapon my conscience permits.

I changed my profile on Twitter and I'm yet to un-change it even as you read this: MY REFLECTIONS ON ENDSARS PROTEST. I changed from my previous professional bio: to a new one, brief, casual but intentional. Writer | Poet | Editor | Currently focused on #EndSARS. I also changed my location as displayed on Twitter to: 'somewhere safe'.

The only thing I did not change was my DP (display picture). And when the protests

graduated from online to onsite, I change my header to the picture of a girl with a raised fist, stones and bullets focused on her and the Nigerian flag in the background.

I took the task of tweeting and retweeting any tweet with the #EndSARS hashtag. I followed every Ade, Abu and Agu that gave hoodwink

about #EndSARS, without thinking whether they belong to my niche (the literary community), without caring whether those handles had little following or not.

In Ekpoma, my little corner of Nigeria, I joined students on the streets to add my voice to the protests, students who had been trapped at home owing to prolonged ASUU strike. This was for the days my phone went dead because Nigeria is still a dark hole for electricity her leaders have invested heavily on over the years.

I do not want to add, that perhaps, these billion-dollar electricity investments have been 'siphoned' over the years because I only speak upon facts, not fiction, not even the newspapers – I hold most of their stories with a pinch of salt – because they have overtime become brown envelop accomplices

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pocketed by our presumably corrupt government.

Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) reported in 2017 that, "The total estimated financial loss to Nigeria from corruption in the electricity sector starting from the return to democracy in 1999 to date is over Eleven Trillion Naira. This represents public funds, private equity and social investment (or divestments) in the power sector."

The morning after DJ Switch went live on Instagram to record the most gruesome of all atrocities the government had committed day after day in a bid to quelling the protest, I wished I was in Lagos. I wished that after the rain of bullets and the blood of our fallen #EndSARS heroes were being mopped up by the Lagos government, I could tag along with a new batch of defiant young boys and girls, mounting again the holy site of the protest, waiting to become heroes.

But my wish was just a wish, my pockets empty at the time to board a bus from Ekpoma to Lagos, because there's no job for young people here to make money unless we create it ourselves or are by chance 'connected'. And so, I continued my protest using my keypad, and to this day, I still tweet and retweet #EndSARS in honour of our dead.

Like many, I wish(ed) for a second wave, even as I see the dictatorial moves of the government towards stopping a vision whose time has come: a vision like a dream, where all things are made right in all sincerity (because the government now cares), and young boys and young girls are no longer scared 'to move' and chase their dreams.

In dreaming this dream, I also dream along this path: that the government 'soro soke' (speaks up) beyond the rhetoric and act aright. In doing this I again join my undying voice with the largest creative force (and development-savvy) army Nigeria currently underutilizes (the Youth) to not only call for true police reforms, but again

represent our five simple yet justifiable demands.

1. Immediate release of all arrested protesters.
2. Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensations for their families.
3. Setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reported police misconduct within a period of 10 days.
4. Carrying out psychological evaluation and retaining of all disbanded SARS operatives before they can deploy (this should be verified by an independent body).
5. The government should increase police salary and adequately compensate them for protecting lives and property of the citizens.

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According to the Oliver Owen's research on - "Supporting police reform in Nigeria" published by the Oxford University's Department of International Development, "Public security issues are among the biggest challenges to Nigeria's consolidating democracy and the Nigerian Police Force is central to managing and responding to those

challenges."

Therefore, for recommendations, this essay attempts to hastily expound (only) demands number three through five as it affects police reforms. This is so because we tick items 1 and 2 and give a half-pat on government's stiff back for ticking those boxes. So, we focus on what is left of what is right, what is right of what is left (undone).

Firstly, in setting up an independent body to checkmate the unwholesome excesses of the Nigeria Police, I recommend that, among others, government should be transparent in its approach and ensure that this body is independent and free from the usual arm-twisting by the executive.

In selecting individuals to man this body, government should also do so with the eye of

meritocracy rather than mediocrity occasioned by political, ethno-religious and other hellish sentiments that further divides the nation. That the architecture behind the idea of State Policing be considered in the formation of this police watchdog organization, such that, we could experience its perceived effectiveness and then institute same in the Nigerian Police. Secondly, on psychological evaluation and retraining of all disbanded SARS operatives.

Aside mandating an independent body to take charge of this duty for the common good, government must ensure that in cases where an officer exhibits traces of mental health imbalances occasioned by drug abuse and other factors, a well-equipped Police Psychiatry Hospital be built in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria to treat these officers rather than just sacking them and creating a new problem for society.

This is because, from experiences, irate officers who have been relieved of their jobs may become fertile soil for crimes such as armed robbery and kidnappings. Connected to this, the police needs a deep purge: sack all officers with criminal records, and employ fresh officers drawn from our teeming unemployed graduate community (products of our tertiary institutions, most preferably).

Thirdly, but not the least important is the need to improve on the welfare of officers of the police force. Salary of a police constable in Nigeria is currently pegged at 46-47,000 Naira (BBC.com). And this is a sum too paltry for an officer whose duty it is to protect lives and property, considering the skyrocketing cost of living.

Government also should improve other living standards, to wit: renovating the eyesore that is police barracks across Nigeria, among others. In doing this, it wouldn't also be a bad idea should government consider a housing scheme specifically designed for police officers. This is because our barracks cannot adequately cater for the over-bloated shelter needs of the police. We must tell ourselves the truth. The police cannot police itself, as this heightens the level of

impunity exhibited by a corrupt Nigerian Police Force.

Therefore, an independent body should be created and empowered to checkmate the excesses of the police, such that swift investigations can be made, and strict sanctions meted out in cases of default to set standards. To add further, the entire police force should be retrained and sensitized routinely with regards to profiling. The idea where young people are harassed based on the colour or style of their hair, the way they choose to express the art that is their bodies, via tattoos, dreadlocks, among others, is so drab and inhuman.

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Also, state policing (and by extension community policing at the local government level) is the surest way out of this mess; a situation where the police force is decentralized, reorganized and maintained by the respective states as against the federal government. This again takes us to a sacred

truth we need to internalize: the Nigerian Constitution (1999 as amended) is NOT truly the people's constitution, but a constitution of the oligarchs, and I wonder how this works in our so-called "democracy".

It is quite sad that we hide our faces from this major problem. Fixing this problem fixes the police and fixes everything else that is wrong with Nigeria.

In conclusion, though the highlights of the five-for-five demands are available everywhere on the internet and other sources, they are again re-presented here owing to the opportunity the Francis Ibhawoh Foundation Essay Competition for Undergraduate Students offers me (and millions of Nigerian students) to keep speaking up against social injustice in Nigeria and push for an equitable and egalitarian society where, every citizen feels safe to follow the texture and colour of their dreams.

The representation therefore again becomes pertinent because from the body language of the government, it is obvious government is still dragging its feet to meeting these demands (summed up into true police reformation) which

is for the common good of one and all denizens of our beloved country. And yes, I am worried if a critical essay of this nature would see the light of day, but again, who cares?
We move!

#EndSARS

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