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**YOUTH REFLECTIONS ON
THE #EndSARS PROTESTS**

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YOUTH REFLECTIONS ON THE #EndSARS PROTESTS

Title

SÒRÒ SÓKÈ: WINNING THE WAR AGAINST POLICE BRUTALITY IN NIGERIA

Abstract

Nigeria has for decades been oppressed by a host of agents, from the colonialists of the past to the Boko Haram insurgents of the present. And like our great historical rallies, a line was crossed when the Police began to steal the spotlight in this show of tyranny. Through the 2020 #EndSARS movement, Nigerians took the baton from heroes past and took the nation's future into their hands. This essay contemplates the #EndSARS protests, when our anti-brutality movement shook the ruling elites with the overwhelming force of truth. Subsequently, it discusses the pitiable state of Nigeria's Police Force, proving that SARS was a fraction of the bigger policing problem. At its climax, the essay proffers strategies to revitalize the police, roles of Nigerians in complementing the reforms, and government policies to strengthen those reforms. Finally, it suggests mechanisms for financing police renewal.

Keywords: EndSARS, Nigeria, police brutality, police reform, sòrò sókè, youth.

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List of Abbreviations

AI	-	Artificial Intelligence
ICT	-	Information and Communications Technology
ID	-	Identity
NPIB	-	Nigerian Police Investigation Board
SARS	-	Special Anti-Robbery Squad
SERAP	-	Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project
UN	-	United Nations

Introduction

The gruesome events of Tuesday, October 20th 2020 would forever stand out in the chronicles of Nigeria. On that day, the iron curtains of repression were reinforced, and democracy was overridden by military rule. On that day, Nigerians knew the gap between the power of the people and that of the people in power. And while political leaders slept soundly in their ‘other rooms’, their followers were showered with bullets and blood. But on that same night, the resolve to transform our nation was firmer than ever before.

It is appalling that sixty years after her independence, the Giant of Africa is still dwarfed by the hydra-headed beast of police brutality and military oppression. But that the #EndSARS protests occurred in the same month of our freedom from colonialism is perhaps no accident. Rather, it is a reminder that the dreams nurtured since Nigeria’s inception remain alive in the spirits of the people. It is a clarion call to become crucibles that burn with passion for Nigeria’s development. And in our age, it is a cry to advance the agenda of renaissance for the Nigeria Police Force.

The #EndSARS Movement: A Message—and Messenger—of National Transformation

Shortly after celebrating her diamond jubilee, Nigeria woke up. We woke up to question the incessant killings of our brethren. We woke up to comprehend why we existed in a democratic war zone, one where the protectors repeatedly pillaged the protected. We woke up to the reality that although the British imperialists had been vanquished, everything they stood for remains in our society. And in unvarnished unity and electrifying patriotism, we embarked on a mission to inform the entire nation that corruption had met its nemesis.

The #EndSARS movement transcended space, time, location, and generations. It affirmed that ethnoreligious and cultural divisions were nothing but the ruling class pitting us against one another. #EndSARS soon took a life of its own, becoming a messenger and not just the message—one whose cries shocked the nation to its roots and chilled the spines of the guilty. “*Sòrò sókè*” became the nationwide symphony to advocate against evil. And the ‘lazy Nigerian youth’ did not fail to prove who was lazy and who was truly Nigerian.

Through #EndSARS, we stood in solidarity and refused to be treated as empty receptacles of charity. We revealed a glimpse of the Nigeria of our dreams, a Nigeria for, by, and of the people. Until the Lekki massacre and hijacking by hoodlums, our micro-nation was

complete. Nameless and faceless, it was at once the perfect defence and attack. Funded by an altruistic model of economy, its Gross Domestic Product was measured in impact. We had everything: doctors, engineers, lawyers, security personnel, psychologists, and—the group every member belonged in—waste management. We had international aid and diasporan support. We even had the grounds to question the purpose of the Nigerian State!

#EndSARS remains emblematic of the challenges in eliminating Nigeria's spate of crises. It was a protest of intense ambivalence, as we fought in pain and joy, in anger and gladness, in fear and faith. While condolences are due to those who lost relatives, friends, and property in the carnage with which the protests were replied, it was a demonstration of remarkable discipline, respect, and empathy by patriotic Nigerian youth. And it must be understood that such attributes were strongly exhibited, partly to elucidate the quality of character that should characterize Nigeria's police.

The Chronic State of Nigeria's Police Force

If the now-defunct SARS was a microcosm of the rot inherent in the Nigeria Police Force, then the Police is indeed a microcosm of the rot inherent in Nigeria's public institutions. Despite establishing special units and unknown tactical squads, crime still prevails in Nigeria. And though there are positive results and good-spirited officers in the force, it is self-evident that when negatives far outweigh positives, the net result is chaos. This is why police reform is non-negotiable.

With roughly 371,800 members across the federation,¹ the Police is Nigeria's apex law enforcement agency. But its problems are as abundant as its operations are widespread. Officers earn abysmally low salaries—starting at ₦9,019.42 per month for a recruit—with which they still have to purchase their uniforms. Police infrastructure is dilapidated, resulting in terrible standards of work and life. There are no training programmes for officers, nor are there regular medical and psychological examinations. And to crown this catastrophe, Nigeria's police-to-population ratio is far below the UN standard of one officer to 450 citizens: as of 2019, 72,644 personnel were needed to meet this mark.² This figure has sparked debates as to whether working in the Police Force is not a better option than unemployment.

But the trouble with the Police is not foreign. Just as with many other public institutions, the rot of this fish starts at the head. The government has not only refused to attend to the intricate predicament of the Force but also crippled its last legs by appointing unqualified

persons to hold strategic offices.³ These cancers of neglect and nepotism have spread through the ranks and files of the institution, culminating in a lack of standards, absence of meritocracy, incompetence, and astounding levels of corruption. In an attempt to reload their wallets, officers take to haphazard stop-and-search routines, bribery, extortion under duress, and drug/substance abuse.

Currently, the Nigeria Police Force maintains its record of being the worst in the world. The World Internal Security and Police Index 2016 ranked Nigeria's police 127th of 127 countries, with 81% of survey respondents admitting to having paid a bribe in the past year.⁴ The Global Corruption Barometer 2019 revealed that 69% of surveyed Nigerians think that most or all police officers are corrupt.⁵ And if those are not astonishing enough, a survey executed by the SERAP resulted in the police being the most corrupt Nigerian public institution between 2015 and 2019.⁶ In the words of a concerned Nigerian, "Is the Police *really* your friend?"

Achieving Police Reform: Strategies for the Police Force

It is axiomatic that the greatest wealth and guarantee a nation can possess is a safe and secure population. And so, if Nigeria is to discontinue this thorny history and write a new story, she must first ensure the protection of her citizenry. In contrast to the cosmetic surgery of change we have witnessed for years, below are profound recommendations to transfigure the Nigeria Police Force and restore its soiled reputation:

- 1. Ethical reorientation:** For any attempt at reform to be fruitful, ethics and morals must become the skeleton and muscles of the Police. Officers should embrace integrity, transparency, accountability, and respect for the rule of law; adhere to their Code of Conduct; and serve as beacons of excellent character. Furthermore, civil rights abuse should be addressed through training on human rights and citizen protection. Officers should be reminded that their objective is to protect Nigerians, not a military regime. For in the words of Henry Ford, evil is but ignorance bumping its face in the dark.
- 2. Effective recruitment:** If prevention is better than cure, then changing the face of the Police must start at the door. National security should be a matter of serious consideration, both for prospective officers and for the Police recruiting them.

Candidates should be screened on intellect, skill set, emotional intelligence, passion for security, and ability to learn, among others. An improved recruitment system would not only ensure that the Police recruits the best candidates but also guarantee an assembly of officers focused on the agency's mission.

- 3. Capacity building:** Officers should be trained in the fields of psychology, criminology, negotiation, intelligence, and human behaviour. Whether in communicating with victims of a crime or in questioning alleged criminals, understanding the human psyche will always be an invaluable asset. Furthermore, police officers should strive to learn the cultures and customs of their work locations. If an officer from Taraba State were posted to Ebonyi, for instance, his knowledge of Igbo culture would acquaint him with the local population, secure their support, and even lead to a collaboration with informal security agents to better safeguard the community.
- 4. Decentralization:** The current model of police management has proven to be bureaucratic and ineffective for the Nigerian climate. Moreover, such a centralized model favours partisanship, as officers are but mere pawns at the disposal of the President—and indeed his political party. To ensure equity in the Force, accelerate decision making, and eliminate political interference, its management should be decentralized with more responsibilities allocated to State and Local governments. Decentralization should be backed by a legally increased autonomy of the Police, so that it does not bend to the selfish interests of any government official.
- 5. Increased salaries:** The measly wages earned by police officers have been the popular excuse for their evil deeds. And although we refuse to accept such an excuse, it would be out of place to ignore a salary structure insufficient to cater for even themselves. The Police should be better compensated. Increased salaries would enable officers to operate with integrity, improve competence, and ensure that citizens focus on profitable activities, which would boost Nigeria's revenue and secure even more funds for the Police.

- 6. Renewed infrastructure:** From police stations to operational vehicles to hostels for trainees, Nigeria’s police infrastructure desperately needs an overhaul. It is reprehensible that the Police would complain of lack of fuel for their operational vehicles or an absence of pens to write statements. And it is inexcusable that officers who work the most have to live like street rats. There is no future for the Police without developed infrastructure, and action must thus be taken swiftly. Furthermore, the Police should be equipped with forensic tools—fingerprint matching machines, DNA analysis, etc.—to increase the accuracy and speed of investigation.

- 7. Technological adoption:** From databases and web forms to cryptocurrency and mobile banking, technological solutions powered the #EndSARS protests. And just as the movement would have fizzled out without them, so would any attempt at police reform collapse without tech. In collaboration with tech-savvy youth, The Police ICT Department should develop a database of all officers, containing their personal information and an ID for tracking them if need be. There should be a regularly updated database of criminals to facilitate investigation and prevention of future crimes and, in some cases, help identify suspects through AI and data analytics. To complement these databases, a mobile app should be built through which Nigerians can report grievances or harassments to the local police administration and other concerned organizations in real-time, to accelerate the case resolution. Developing such platforms would not only create 21st-century jobs for Nigerian youth but also increase their involvement in national security.

Complementing Reform: Roles of Nigerian Citizens

The equation of police development is incomplete without mention of those whose lives are placed in their care. And indeed, the foremost role of the Nigerian populace is to plant its foot firmly through an **increased interest in matters of socio-economic importance**. While apathy and lack of patriotism may seem inconsequential, we must remember that it is only by remaining alive to the challenges of the nation—as we were during the #EndSARS protests—that we can tackle them. For instance, following the example of Olusegun Onigbinde and Joseph Agunbiade of *BudgIT*, we should set the precedent for other nations by independently

reporting police crime. As the Chinese maxim goes, better it is to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Furthermore, every Nigerian must say **no to social vices and corruption**. It is unacceptable that our nation has already gained an international reputation for fraud (Nigerian scam). And the mandate of reformed police is meaningless if we persist in criminal acts that decelerate their growth. Thus, we must reorient ourselves as we reorient the police. We must be the change we desire to see in our society. When Nigeria unites in this noble cause, we would uproot the present weeds of vice and secure future generations of virtue.

No exposition of the necessary steps would be complete without emphasizing the prowess of **social media** in police reform. That the #EndSARS movement topped global trends and earned a Twitter emoji is a testament to the intensity of social platforms, on which no police officer would wish to be ridiculed. These connectivity tools strengthen the spirit of unity and nationalism. Hashtags such as **#SayNoToPoliceBrutality** would ensure that every message reaches and resonates with the international arena, and as such, anti-brutality campaigns would persist until justice has taken its course. Moreover, social media would strengthen the link between the Police Force and the citizens, augment the work of officers, and establish our oneness in the war against corruption.

Strengthening Reform: Policy Recommendations

In the thrill of the #EndSARS protests, trending questions “So why does Nigeria exist?” and “What is Nigeria doing for us?” epitomized the dearth of confidence in our government. And no matter the extent of police reform, it is unquestionable that the nation would keep standing on broken feet unless this public disdain is averted. As a priority, the Federal government must address its disharmony with Nigerians by not only hearing their needs ‘loud and clear’ but also meeting them, through sincerity and political will.

With regard to police reform, the government should establish **incentives** that encourage police officers to strive for excellence in their profession. A Best Officer of the Year Award or Presidential Medal of Service, backed by financial rewards and support for their families, would keep officers alive to their responsibilities and glorious cause. This simple strategy would metamorphose and create a Police body where strength of character is the rule, not the exception.

Additionally, the Nigeria Police Council should **institute an independent body**—perhaps called the Nigerian Police Investigation Board (NPIB)—responsible for investigating and reporting police crimes and ensuring that no charge is left unresolved. The NBIP would be interdisciplinary, comprised of members from diverse backgrounds including the Nigeria Bar Association, the National Human Rights Commission, a human rights non-governmental organization, and a civil society organization. It would take a shot at police impunity, prevent high-ranking officers from hiding cases, and ensure prosecution for guilty officers rather than unlawful ‘disciplinary measures.’

The government should exemplify **respect for the rule of law** by strengthening policy implementation and law enforcement. The 2020 Police Act and 2017 Anti-Torture Act should be upheld, with the judiciary checkmating any officers who wish to exploit loopholes in these laws. Furthermore, the Police Trust Fund should be managed with transparency, and the Ministry of Police Affairs should publish periodic financial reports on the use of the Fund. Indeed, the government will take a giant leap in this journey of regaining public trust by prosecuting officers who have perpetrated evil over the years.

Financing Reform: Sustainable Mechanisms

In 2008, the Presidential Committee on Police Reform estimated that ₦560 billion was required annually to transform the Police over five years.⁷ 12 years later, we can expect such a requirement to have increased. Moreover, the Force was grossly underfunded between 2011 and 2016, receiving only ₦67.9 billion out of ₦1.175 trillion for both capital and recurrent expenditure.⁸ Considering that Nigeria has been trapped in a seemingly unending economic recession for years, the weight of inadequate financing is crushing the shoulders of the Police more than ever before.

To abate this pressure, the first and most consequential solution is to **reduce the cost of governance**. It is the height of irony that statesmen in the world’s poverty capital earn world-record wages, and several deep-seated problems could be solved with a fraction of their allowances. For instance, 109 senators each earn non-salary allowances of ₦13.5 million per month,⁹ amounting to a yearly allowance of ₦162 million per senator and ₦17.658 billion for all senators. If each senator earned 50% less in allowances, Nigeria would free up ₦8.829 billion per annum to strategically develop key areas of national security.

Similarly, **corporate social responsibility** (CSR) should be channelled towards developing national security. The government should implement a CSR-for-security policy that encourages foreign/multinational companies to contribute to police reform, understanding that their presence in Nigeria is only as secure as the nation herself. Such a policy should then be backed by incentives—tax bonuses, for instance—to accelerate compliance by these corporations.

Amidst the unending emphasis on inadequate financing, it is easy to forget that even the little allocated to the police is poorly apportioned and sometimes embezzled. The 2021 Police budget has earmarked ₦57.87 million for purchasing ‘riot-controlling equipment’,¹⁰ but to what importance? Moreover, although the government increased Police salaries in 2019, officers lamented not only that their salaries were not increased, but also that they were not being paid.¹¹ The Police Force must address these problems through financial wisdom and strategic action, for they will never be successful in managing the great if they cannot manage the small.

Conclusion

Green red green. This was the national emblem on that dreadful Black Tuesday night, a flag that went from being waved in patriotism to being used to wrap corpses. But this is a flag that will never triumph, because no Nigerian wishes for an emblem soaked in blood. And while we may not be on the streets, we must unite to ensure that the trigger-happiness of the Police is replaced by a deep respect for human rights and human life.

Once upon a time, police brutality was utilized in Nigeria to perpetuate oppression, fuelling itself by the gaps of generation, a false ideology of respect, and the fault lines of ethnoreligious division. Now, we are changing that narrative. Through the #EndSARS movement, the leaders of tomorrow have become the champions of today. We have shown the world what it means to be truly Nigerian. And with this spirit, we will create a Nigeria where, in the words of Aisha Yesufu, “the child of a nobody can become somebody without knowing anybody”—all while being protected by a Police Force that maintains a just and fair society.

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