

YOUTH REFLECTION ON THE ENDSARS PROTEST

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"There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice but there must never be a time when we fail to protest" Elie Wiesel

THE PRESENT REALITY OF NIGERIA

Nigeria which has often been referred to as the giant of Africa owing to its large population and economy, leaves a lot to be desired and has lost its footing for it has over the years been confronted with a myriad of socio-economic and security issues. These include but are not limited to poverty, hunger, zero amenities, insurgency in Northern Nigeria, incessant economic meltdowns, rollercoaster oil prices, recessions, inflation, corruption, unemployment, low quality of education and terrorism.

The same Nigeria which once espoused the true definition of prosperity and revealed plethora of potentials, human, natural and mineral resources in abundance, has now become a territory with administration fraught with a history of underperformance and warning influence in the global community such that the relevance of a public outcry became evident to all.

Nigeria houses one of the largest populations of young adults in the world, for it is home to over 58 million youths between the ages of 15 and 35 who amount to whooping 29% of the Nation's population of roughly 200 million people. However, youth recognition and empowerment has not been one of Nigeria's strengths. This is in spite of the historical reality that Nigeria was delivered from the shackles of colonialism and imperialism through the struggles of young individuals, such as Obafemi Awolowo, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Ahmadu Bello and a host of others who left their footprints on the sands of time and led Nigeria to glory at their prime.

The fact that youths have an immeasurable role to play in our society is not in doubt, and this is not only because of their important position as emerging leaders, but more importantly because of their population size, innovativeness,

entrepreneurial spirit, and awareness of global trends of events. It took only months into year 2020 for Nigerian youths to see themselves through changemaking lenses which brought about an unorthodox protest without a centralised leadership.

THE ENDSARS PROTEST

The year 2020 began quite uneventful but turned out to be a memorable one for the world and Nigeria in particular. We were all a part of a historic moment as we faced a generational catastrophe when the Corona virus pandemic which hit earth in 2019 began to spread like wildfire. Afterwards, Nigeria was riddled by a protest which rocked its foundation. At this point the words of caution "stay safe" echoed all over the country and these words came to have a poignant meaning for most people.

These developments posed new social challenges. Graduates of Nigerian tertiary institutions have had to contend with a history of unemployment and marginalization so much so that students in exit classes are filled with horror of what the future holds. It is a generally assumed that youths are the future of tomorrow. However, the future came quite early as some young adults cut their dependence on the government for job opportunities and took to internet fraud and cybercrimes to make ends meet.

For those who opt for these nefarious activities, they provided a solution to their unemployment. But such activities have also tarnished the image of our dear country in the global community of Nations. These negative elements defraud both fellow citizens and foreigners using unscrupulous means. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in discharging their duties directed much of their operations against these criminal elements among the country's youthful population.

SARS was established in 1992 as a masked police unit to perform undercover operations against violent crimes like armed robbery, car snatching, kidnapping, cattle rustling, the bearing and use of illegal firearms and other social vices. The squad was created following a need to ward off daredevil criminals, detain, investigate, and prosecute individuals involved in violent crimes and criminal tendencies. The squad's good intentions and vitality in warding off daredevil criminals is applaudable for maintaining law and order and curbing crimes that regular officers of the law are not equipped to address.

However, it didn't take long before young adults in Nigeria became the target of the squad's brutality with male youths been the worst hit. SARS soon developed loopholes in administration and became a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police force with a long record of abuses, ranging from human rights violation to illegal 'stops and searches', illegal 'arrests and detention', extrajudicial killings with hashtags immortalizing the victims, sexual harassment of women. SARS has been accused of brutalising young male Nigerians, degrading treatment of Nigerians in their custody, mock executions, threats of execution, hanging, physical assault, widespread torture, abuse, and extortions. This prompted the calls from Nigerian youths for the disbandment of the squad.

SARS officers allegedly profiled young Nigerians, mostly males, based on fashion choices, tattoos and hairstyles. They were also known to mount illegal roadblocks, conduct unwarranted checks and searches, arrest and detain without warrant or trial, rape women, and extort money from young Nigerians especially those who drive exotic vehicles and those seen using laptops and iPhones. "iPhone no be gun," became a mantra on every young adult's lips. Nigerians took to social media to express their grievances through stories and video evidence of how

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officers of SARS engaged in their misdeeds. Young adults urged one another to "soro soke" which loosely translates to "speak up." As far back as 2016, a human rights activist, Segun Awosanya popularly known as Segalink dared to call for purge of the police force of its brutality by beginning the EndSARS campaign on Twitter. This prompted the police authority to announce reform of the police unit but nothing tangible was achieved at the time. The ENDSARS protest first surfaced in 2017 as a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #ENDSARS to demand the disbanding of the unit by the Nigerian government.

In 2018, Nigerian rapper Michael Ugochukwu Stephens professionally known Ruggedman joined the campaign to end police brutality by releasing a single titled, "Is Police Your Friend?" In 2017, a petition signed by 10,195 people was submitted to the Nigerian National Assembly calling for a total disbandment of SARS. A few Senators backed the call for total disbandment of the unit, while consideration was given to reforming the force, rather than full

disbandment due to the number of cases falling. Later, the then Inspector General of Nigeria Police Force Ibrahim K. Idris in response to the campaign ordered the reform of the squad.

After experiencing a revitalisation in October 2020, End SARS became a decentralised social movement, and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria following more revelations of the abuses of the unit, when a video showing a SARS officer shooting a young Nigerian in front of Wetland Hotel, Ughelli, Delta State trended on the Internet.

The trending video caused public outcry on social media, especially on Twitter, with the #ENDSARS hashtag trending on Twitter. Another report surfaced of SARS officers killing a 20-year-old upcoming musician named Daniel Chibuikwe, popularly called "Sleek" in his neighborhood.

All these sparked agitations as protesters demonstrated a common bond of humanity, resulting in nationwide protests on ENDSARS after weeks of outrage and anger, with videos and pictures showing police brutality, harassment and extortion in Nigeria. The protests were championed by young Nigerians in different cities alongside many activists and celebrities like Aisha Yesufu, Folarin Falana, DJ Switch and a host of others who decided to lend their voices to the movement. Nigeria Police Force disrupted the protests in some cities, throwing teargas, using water cannons and shooting at unarmed peaceful protesters as seen in Abuja and Osun. This led to the death of Jimoh Isiaq in Ogbomoso, Oyo State.

The End SARS protests did not lose its vitality as some had expected, as young people in different parts of Nigeria refused to be intimidated by intensifying their calls for reforms and accountability in police operation, mass demonstrations occurred throughout the major cities of Nigeria, accompanied by vociferous outrage on social media platforms.

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About 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag were accumulated on Twitter alone. The campaigners moved from social media using the #EndSARS hashtag to organise peaceful protests in Abuja, Lagos, Ibadan, Osun, Benin, Ughelli, Warri, Ilorin, Ogbomosho, Owerri, Jos, Kaduna, Calabar and other Nigerian cities and states, threatening to continue if the government refused to disband the force. Protests took the form of demonstrations, online activism, civil disobedience, and marches.

The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) froze the accounts of notable participants in the protest. Protesters banking with Access Bank plc, Fidelity Bank Nigeria, First Bank of Nigeria, Guaranty Trust Bank, United Bank for Africa, and Zenith Bank had all accounts linked to them placed under "post no debit".

Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International accused the SARS officials of regularly detaining young male Nigerians illegally and extorting money from their relatives. International protests were staged by Nigerians in diaspora who also lent their voices by organising solidarity protests and demonstrations.

The protest is notable because it was led by a demographic that is made of entirely young Nigerians. The movement was a fraction of a bigger story of crashed expectations, it expanded to include demands for good and accountable governance. The protesters who were reeling from the aftermath of police brutality made a list of demands to be met by the Federal Government of Nigeria.

The demands which were signed by 'A Nigerian Youth' demanded for the immediate release of all arrested during the protests as well as justice and compensation for all who died through police brutality in Nigeria. Protesters also demanded that an independent body be set up within 10 days to investigate and prosecute all reports of police misconduct.

The protestors requested for the psychological evaluation and retraining of SARS operatives before they are deployed to any other police unit. Lastly, they asked for adequate increase in the salaries for officers of the Nigerian police. In response to the public outcry on police brutality, the Inspector-General of Nigeria Police banned SARS, Special Tactical Squad (STS), Intelligence Response Team (IRT), Anti-Cultism Squad and other tactical units from mounting of roadblocks, checkpoints, stop-and-search and other routine and patrols.

Similar bans had been announced multiple times over the previous four years, causing citizens of Nigeria to question whether the bans would actually be upheld. There were further reports of SARS officers involved in killings across the country. As this was the fourth time that the Nigerian government had announced a similar

ban on SARS activity, protesters insisted that the notorious police unit be entirely disbanded and wide-ranging reform of the force to follow.

The squad was disbanded following the protest and judicial panels were set up across the country to address and compensate victims of police brutality. This feat was achieved, thanks to the protest and activism of young individuals in the country.

This victory came at a high cost. Some protesters were both badly beaten by the protest when protesters were massacred at the Lekki tollgate following civil disobedience of a curfew order. The protest was hijacked by hoodlums who vandalized government properties leaving the country in ruins. In some cases, police officers were gruesomely murdered by protesters. This resulted in low morale among police officers which in turn, adversely affected the maintenance of law and order.

YOUTH, NIGERIA AND THE FUTURE.

It is clear that Nigeria's next generation is confronted with a real existential threat, and this means that Nigerian youths will be instrumental in heralding the rebirth of the country. The notion that youth are inexperienced and incapable of making change has been quashed but the fact that the END SARS protest was effectively administered by young adults with the provision of legal, medical and security services, demonstrating their organising and leadership skills.

Taking a clue from how a youth led group, Feminist Coalition (FEMCO), against all odds, successfully disbursed donated funds running into 30 million naira to providing legal, feeding, and medical aid during the EndSars protest. This alone has proved Nigeria's leadership wrong in their denial of the vibrancy of the youths. If such accountability, transparency, and pragmatism were included in the governance of Nigeria,

there would not be any need for this essay today.

The squad's demoralization is understandable and should bring about adequate remuneration for officers to ensure accountability, restore efficiency and avoid oppression by "booming" internet fraudsters that officers of the squad face in discharging their duties.

The solution to the problem has to go beyond police reform. The government must also do more to address youth unemployment. Youths, over time, have lost their faith in government for job creation and instead, some have created jobs for themselves by acquiring skills in ICT, and

entrepreneurship. The government needs to support these entrepreneurial initiatives.

Aside from creating a better livelihood for them, innovation and skills will allow the country to join the fast train of development in the world. Despite the un-enabling labour environment, Nigeria youths are making giant strides towards advancing themselves and the

economy. Youth-led establishments like Jobberman, Paystack, Piggyvest, etc. have created employment for several youths in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. People's employment births payment of taxes which in turn strengthens our economy.

In the light of this shift, vibrant and intelligent youths must also be allowed space to participate in politics, occupy political offices, and leverage on their ideas in running the country. There is a need for more policies and laws on inclusion, policies that facilitate the inclusion of youths in developmental and political processes must be enacted.

Across all States in Nigeria, there should be a re-assessment of the legal frameworks for youth participation in government, promotion of civic education in our schools, and lowering of the minimum age of eligibility to vote and be elected to public offices. While it would not be out of place to say that bad governance is not

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an exclusive reserve of any age group - as some young individuals already occupying political offices in Nigeria are nothing to write home about - we should also recognize the fact that there are many exceptionally vibrant youths spread across Nigeria.

How else would we raise that healthy nation we desire and achieve our millennium goals? Only by equipping our youths to tackle challenges that may come their way. It is high time young adults in Nigeria put our fragments together by getting involved in legislative processes, sponsoring bills aimed at public interest and existence of bills like a "Too old to run bill" to prevent the boomer's generation from dominating power and enable active participation of youths. There are many examples of youth leadership in politics that we can learn from. One example is Finland's which has one of the youngest prime ministers in the world, a woman currently leads a coalition government led by five women

Closer to home, as I write, Adewale Adeyemo "Wally", a Nigerian-American attorney has just been named as the first black to serve as the US Deputy Secretary of Treasury in the Biden administration. Would he have been availed such opportunity back home, without knowing anybody? To enable youths to create a future for Nigeria, we need a Nigeria where the son and daughter of a nobody can become somebody without knowing anybody.

Nigerian society must awaken Nigerian morals and values in the youths and shun moral decadence. Young adults must understand that innovation and hard work are essential to meet ends needs and must abort the idea of the existence of a quick road to affluence. Also, NGOs and other civil society actors must step up their game in facilitating access to education, technical, vocational, and leadership training for youths.

It is commendable that the organizers of this essay contest that is, Francis Ibhawoh Foundation is committed to supporting education, youth empowerment, community development and developing the capacity of individuals and communities to build a healthy and thriving democracy to unleash and

contribute their full potential to national development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the population of the youths puts Nigeria at a great advantage. This advantage must be greatly utilized in creating the better country we all desire. The youths must see the power they possess and use it to path a good future and sustainable legacy for ourselves and generations coming after us.

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