

YOUTH REFLECTIONS ON ENDSARS PROTESTS

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Introduction

Incidents of police brutality in Nigeria are not new. In particular, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)—a unit of the Nigerian police formed in 1984 to checkmate the excesses of armed-robbery—has been notoriously brutal in recent times. In fact, between January 2017 and May 2020 alone, Amnesty International reported that it had documented 82 cases of abuse and extra-judicial killings by the Police unit.

Prompted by these events, some groups of young Nigerian activists in 2017 took to the streets to demonstrate peacefully, raising awareness and calling for the disbanding of the unit. This was one year after the human rights activist, Segun Awosanya, popularly known as Segalink kick started the EndSARS campaign on social media networking site, Twitter. That same year, 10,195 Nigerians signed a petition to disband the SARS unit which was submitted to the National Assembly.

In October 2020, the protest erupted in full glare as a result of two events. The first was a video that went viral on social media of a SARS police officer shooting a young Nigerian in front of the Wetland Hotel in Ughelli town of Delta State on Saturday, the 3th of October 2020. The video caused a mammoth public outcry, with the #EndSARS hashtag trending on Twitter. The second event was two days after, on Monday 5th October, when the Punch reported the killing of 20-year-old upcoming artiste, Daniel Chibuike, by SARS officials.

Thereafter, Nigeria's top celebrities and activists organized—across major cities in the country—one of the greatest and significant mass protests in the nation's history.

EXPERIENCES; PEACEFUL PROTESTERS, VIOLENT DISRUPTORS

The EndSARS protest brought in its wake several experiences that are both unusual and horrible. From people whom were tear-gassed at the

scene of the protest to those whom were brutally assaulted and threatened to be killed by the very SARS officials they are protesting against, stories of terrifying experiences filled-up the protest narratives.

But my personal experience during the protest is very much different from what majority of protesters experienced, and therefore, very essential that I narrate it. But before then, a brief background information is important. The SARS brutality is particularly prominent in the South-western Nigeria. In places like the North-east for example, where I am, very few people even know SARS exists; their brutality is not pronounced in the region. So when I, together with like-minded colleagues set out to organize the protest in Gombe State, it was not the brutality per se that we wanted to protest against, but a solidarity to our fellow countrymen in the other side of the country. We never knew that it was the riskiest thing we could ever do.

On Tuesday 13th of October 2020, at 8:00 o'clock am, we began a peaceful protest. We started by marching from Mile 3 Bus Stop, holding banners and placards, peacefully walking and chanting 'EndSARS, End Police Brutality'. Unknown to us, news had reached the State government that a group of hoodlums masquerading as protesters are threatening the security of the state, fanning the embers of violence.

Shortly afterwards, scores of tricycles began trooping to where we were marching, and lo and behold, they were hired thugs, commonly called Kalare Boys in local parlance. They were armed with cutlass, axes and knives of all kinds. Their sight was the most terrific scene I've ever witnessed. They started to hit the crowd, front back and center. I was sprinting for my dear life when one of the Kalare boys hit me with his machete. I felt flat on the ground. Honestly, I thought he would kill me. But I was fortunate that I was not hit with the edge of the blade,

but slapped with the side of it. Seeing me down, the 'boy' moved on to another person. They did not come to kill, but to violently disperse us. I watched with intense horror as things unfolded.

A friend of mine, Halilu, has his index finger chopped-off when he tried to shield his head with his hand from a pouncing cutlass. Blood was gushing down, but he had to stop the hemorrhage with his T-shirt. After some while, the police arrived. One might expect things to halt, but I saw the shocker of my life. The Police officers watched very calmly with-out even the slightest intention to intervene. They did not stop the violence but looked on as we were violently dispersed.

After this grotesque episode, we aborted the mission and went home, some to hospitals. Normal activities in the metropolis continued as though nothing happened. No mention of the event whatsoever in local Radio or TV Stations except for some few mentions of the event on social media. The State government has successfully silenced us through the back-door. In the end, we have ourselves to pity.

Nevertheless, we continued to show our support for the protest across the country via social media. A peaceful protest was disrupted by violent disruptors.

REFLECTIONS; ONE PROTEST, TOO MANY LESSONS

Even though our protest was not successful in Gombe State, the EndSARS protest was a massive success across the country. The collective voice which the protesters spoke with, the cult local and international followership the protest garnered and the speed with which they force a response from an otherwise silent government, all blended to not only make the protest successful but also give it a unique and significant feature in the history of post-independence Nigeria.

Upon reflection, one can see the many lessons we can take home from the protest.

Firstly, Nigerians have seen the monumental and mighty power of citizens to influence government actions in a democracy.

Democracy has placed tremendous power in the hands of citizens, and the EndSARS protest, if anything, have taught us that through organized peaceful protests, citizens have the infinite power to dictate government decisions and policies. The protest has given us a clue, a kind of model for solving the challenge of bad governance—the single most inhibiting factor that has stalled our progress.

It has taught us that if we can come together and demand from the government what is ours, we will get it; that through persistent peaceful protests, we, the citizens, can demand better governance. It has taught us that if today we demand the exorbitant cost of running the

legislature be cut-down, or that insecurity, corruption and other ills of country be addressed, we can force the Government to do so simply through persistent non-violent protests.

Secondly, we have come to know that the EndSARS protest is only a symptom of a deeper problem; much more-than just security sector reform, the protest, which was dominated by jobless youths, laid bare a

fault in our economic system and hence the need for an urgent economic reform to address unemployment. If we do not kill the monster that is unemployment among Nigerian youths, it will swallow us all.

Thirdly, the country has learnt another priceless lesson, which is, there exists a great deal of distrust between the government and the citizens as a result of perennial failure of the government to cater for the basic need of the common man. In fact, the Vice President, Professor Yemi Osinbanjo, was quick to notice that. "We must rebuild trust between the government and the governed", he said in Lagos at the aftermath of the protest. "Rebuild trust between law enforcement agents and the communities that they serve.

We need broad-based and inclusive prosperity that creates opportunities on a scale

Democracy has placed tremendous power in the hands of citizens, and the EndSARS protest, if anything, have taught us that through organized peaceful protests

commensurate with the aspirations of our population." It is as a result of this that a month after the protest, the Federal government, through the Federal Ministry of Youths and Sports, initiated a N25 billion Youth Investment Fund that will offer loans to youth businesses across the country. However, it will need much more than just this short-term economic aspirin to reform the entire country's economic structure.

Fourthly, through this protest, we have observed that bad governance has no religion or tribe, it affects all Nigerians.

The unchecked excesses of SARS officials—which is by and large a consequence of lame governance—affects everyone. A SARS official's venomous hand does not discriminate; Christians and Muslims, Yorubas, Igbos and Hausas are not spared.

And so, during the protest, Nigerians of all faith and creed came together; the usual divisive ethnic and religious lines became blurred, and they doggedly protested until they successfully demanded a reform to policing in Nigeria.

It is just that Nigerians do not take heed. But if they do, they would have surely observed that uniting, irrespective of religion or tribe, to peacefully protest against bad governance is the most effective civil model they can adopt to ensure the prosperity of the country. Is it not high time we looked beyond such trivial differences of religion and ethnicity, and come together with ferocious selflessness to demand better leadership?

Fifthly, another thing from the EndSARS protest that should not escape our reflective senses is the fact that decentralized (leader-less) social movements, even if peaceful, have an inherent flaw, which is, the probability of the movement being infiltrated by hoodlums.

We have seen that because the EndSARS protest lacked a centralized leadership, there was no leader to call off the protest even after

acceptance of their demands by the Government, and as such, criminals masqueraded under the guise of the protesters to wreck a lot of havoc to individuals and business. They broke into warehouses and food stores catering away with food items. Some burnt business enterprises, which were built from scratch, to ashes.

Others attacked and vandalized useful public items like water pipes and street lights. The key take-away from this is that future peaceful protests in the country should have some degree of leadership and organization, a kind of central fulcrum to control them.

But most importantly, the EndSARS protest has shown us the criticality of police reforms in the red-hot crucible that is Nigeria's social sphere. There is no denying that crime rates in the

country are catapulting by the day, from kidnappings and banditry to cyber-attacks and terrorism. Proper policing is essential to Nigeria's security and subsequent prosperity.

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HOW PROPER POLICE REFORMS CAN BE SUSTAINED

Implementation of police reform is one thing, and sustaining it over a long period is another. In fact, because of the many complexities associated with sustaining reforms, one can argue that it is much harder than initiating it. To begin with, majority of reform movements around the world, be it Police or whatever type of reform movements, are characterized by one thing; after the reform is made, proponents of the movement demobilize.

The momentum needed to sustain the reform in the longer term eventually withers. Therefore, the first key step to sustaining Police reform in Nigeria is to make sure that activists and proponents of this police reforms keep a keen eye on the execution of such reforms, consistently following it up, and speaking-up in

cases of default. This will keep the Government and the Police on their toes and would leave a very small room for abandoning the reforms.

Secondly, we cannot talk of sustaining police reforms without cutting-off the sturdy legs of impunity. The SARS police officers, for example, are notoriously known for their gross impunity. They kill extra judicially; maim, injure and assault without anything ever happening to them.

This is the case with majority of Police officers across the country. The new (reformed) unit formed to replace the SARS unit, the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit, are also more likely to follow suit since they are picked from the same pool of police officers that made up the SARS.

How, then, can the reform be effective and subsequently, be sustained? Simple; by enhancing external oversight in the Police sector such as forming independent police complaint authorities and human rights institutions that will ensure no Police officer trample upon the right of any Nigerian, and that he/she is penalized accordingly for any act of injustice. This will, in no small measure, wipe-off impunity in the Nigerian police. And when impunity is wiped-off, we can be rest assured that proper police reforms can be sustained. Thirdly, there should be holistic reform of the internal Police structure itself.

A lot of Police personnel in Nigeria do not understand the basic principles of policing. You cannot therefore expect such people to police properly, much less reforming the policing. Therefore, in setting up a reformed police unit, like the SWAT in Nigeria, a training curriculum that focuses on the essential principles of proper policing and of the aims and objectives of that particular unit should be developed and taught to the unit members.

They should be taught the ethics of the profession such as respect for human lives, protection of their properties and maintaining social order in the society. They should be

educated on the fact that citizens are their friends and not their subjects of attacks. This education is very vital. It will help in sustaining police reforms for a very long time.

Fourthly, there should be adequate funding of the Police by the government. It is well known that the Nigerian Police lacks the human and technical capacity to operate effectively. Without adequate funding, there would be no reform, not to talk of sustaining it. This funding should be aimed at proper recruitment and training of young recruits, in-service training of officers as well as procurement of tools and equipment for proper policing.

Central to technical development, the Police should adopt technology in detecting and investigating crime. This ensures efficiency and improves transparency hence ensuring the sustaining of the reforms. Moreover, the funds should also be used to adequately pay the officers their salaries and bonuses, so they won't compromise the ethics of the profession, as they often presently do.

Fifth, and by far the most effective, police reforms should focus on community policing and not problem-oriented policing. For starters, modern police reforms are broadly divided into two; community policing and problem-oriented policing. Problem-oriented policing, a police reform put forth by Herman Goldstein in 1979, involves, in addition to traditional incident-driven policing, identifying patterns in problems (crimes), their underlying causes and ways to curb them. This is the normal policing we know, or we adopt here in Nigeria.

Community policing on the other hand, as defined by the U.S office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), is "a policing philosophy that promotes organizational change strategies, which support the systematic use of partnerships with community and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues, such as crime, disorder, and fear of crime."

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It is a police reform that involves engaging the members of the community in the policing process and integrating them in security decision making. This is as opposed to problem-oriented police reform which allows only the police, with the exclusion of the community, to solve crime problems.

Community policing reform improves the confidence of the public towards the police and significantly reduces crime rates. It goes beyond argument that police reform that includes members of the community in the policing process is the most logical way to ensure infinite police reform sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The EndSARS protest have left so many Nigerians with experiences of different kinds that are worth sharing. And even though the stories have different shapes, they have the same color, the color of struggle, the struggle against police brutality. Each protester is now satisfied that in spite of everything, the effort expended was worthwhile.

We also have so many things to reflect upon, lessons to learn from. My reflections in this essay are not in any way exhaustive. My reflections, and of many who will write theirs, should serve as a guide, a lighthouse that will lead us to a better country, because that is what reflections are meant for—to guide.

Finally, the EndSARS protest has succeeded in its aim of forcing the Government to initiate police reform. But activists will be foolish to think that it is the end. In reality, it is just the beginning. If citizens continue to follow up on the 'project'; if the impunity of police officers will be halted and the internal police structure reformed; if the police sector is properly funded and community policing is adopted, then in the next few years we will search for police brutality in the length and breadth of Nigeria but would not find it.

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