

Youth Uprising and Revolts in Nigeria: An Evaluation of the #EndSARS Nationwide Protests

**Johnson, Alalibo
Sinikiem**

*Department of Political Science,
Faculty of Social Sciences
Niger Delta University
Amassoma, Bayelsa State,
Nigeria*

Article DOI:

10.48028/iiprds/ijsrhlir.v6.i1.04

Keywords:

Youth uprising,
Revolts, Nigeria, An
evaluation,
EndSARS and
nation-wide
protests.

Corresponding Author:

Johnson, Alalibo Sinikiem

Abstract

In civilized societies like the United States, Canada, Switzerland etc. civil unrests and protests are recognized channels through which citizens express their opinions and feelings about government policies and programmes. Available records show that the situation is different in Africa. This study, therefore, examined youth uprising and revolts in Nigeria: An evaluation of the #EndSARS nationwide protests. The paper argued that prolonged neglect and exclusion of the people (youths) from the governance process accounted for the distrust and disenchantment that sparked-off the nation-wide protests against the Nigerian state (government). Data for the study were curled from secondary sources while the analysis was based on the qualitative method. In terms of context, the study adopted the basic human needs theory as its theoretical framework in order to explain the reasons for youth uprisings and revolts in Nigeria. Findings from the study revealed that failure on the part of government at all levels to address the plight of citizens including the inhuman treatment meted out to youths by the police and other security agencies accounted for the youth's mobilization and revolt across the country. However, political and economic reforms that will provide justice for all citizens especially aggrieved citizens and victims of state repression within the shortest possible time will help to restore trust and confidence between the government and the citizens (people).

Background to the Study

Poor governance and weak institutions no doubt accounts for mal-administration and gross inefficiency in most public institutions and agencies across Africa hence, effective service delivery, respect for rule of law, due process and constitutionalism remains a major challenge in most African states. This explains why corruption and abuse of citizens' rights and privileges have become a culture in Nigeria and Africa. In most cases, anti-corruption agencies and institutions that ought to be neutral and unbiased in its operations have been compromised for political reasons. Thus, the ordinary citizens are either abandoned or excluded from the affairs of the state. The outcome of this anomaly is anarchy, frustration and distrust which in turn promote aggressive behaviour, violence and conflict at various levels. This explains why Gurr (1994), cautioned that minorities and vulnerable groups must be included and considered in any policy formulation and implementation process. In his words: If the rights of minorities are not respected and their feelings are not taking into consideration in the process of policy formulation and implementation, the rate of conflict and insecurity may increase in Africa in the 21st century. This is clearly the situation in Nigeria where successive governments have ignored and excluded the youths in the policy formulation and implementation process hence, creating bad blood and distrust within the system. It will be recalled that refusal on the part of the Nigerian state to address issues of neglect, poor governance, unemployment, absence of basic social amenities including police/military brutality prompted Nigerian youths to mobilize themselves via the social media and also carry out a nation-wide protests under the aegis of #EndSARS protest which later became an international movement. It is in the light of this background that this study examined the issues that prompted the #EndSARS protests and its implications for the nation (Nigeria).

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks guide and give direction to a study hence, its importance cannot be over emphasized. This study, therefore, relied on the basic human needs theory in order to explain the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Advocates of this theory maintain that when individuals, groups and communities are denied of basic needs and requirements conflict and disagreement becomes inevitable. According to Burton (1997), the needs of all individuals and groups must be accommodated in any decision-making process if peace and harmony is to prevail. In the words of Burton (1990), when individuals and groups are denied of their basic needs of identity, security, freedom etc.... deterrence cannot deter and coercive methods are not effective to modify behaviour when people and groups are compelled to act due to their desires. Within the context of this study, youth uprising and revolts occur in different parts of Nigeria due to neglect and abandonment of the people by the state (government) in the area of governance and the provision of social amenities including justice and equity. Basic human needs theory helps conflict scholars and analysts to identify the needs, emotions and aspirations of groups and individuals before negotiation and settlement is agreed upon so that the outcome can be acceptable by all the parties. Proponents of the human need's theory include Burton (1997), Sites (1973), Muslow (1943), and Galtung (1990).

Conceptual Analysis

It is instructive to note that conceptual formation and analysis provides the foundation for empirical research exercise hence this section of the study examined key concepts that bothers on good governance and leadership in Nigeria. Achebe (1984), identified leadership as the major problem responsible for conflict across Africa. According to him, the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. Akinyanju (2000), also posited that conflict and unrest persist in Africa because leaders fail to adhere to democratic principles and norms. According to him, genuine democracy implies equal material capacity to reach and mobilize the people. He reiterated that political democracy cannot be achieved without economic democracy and that democratization results as a reaction to monocratic authoritarianism, personal regimes and the perceived gains of democracy. Thus, he gave the following as the general features of monocratic centralized regimes: Political exclusion, denials, resource concentration at the center, concentration of constitutional and extra-constitutional powers in the lands of a few persons. In his words:

Monocratic regimes like we have run in Nigeria for the better part of the existence of country have produced disastrous effects; gross deprivation, pervasive corruption, economic decline, political violence and infrastructural decay. When it is then perceived that democratization fosters development and provides the basis for negotiations and bargaining in the polity, societies struggle to democratize. Democratization is very rarely voluntarily allowed. It is achieved as a result of pressure. The pressure could be internal or external but usually a combination of both. In Nigeria, the internal pressure to democratize had been against colonial or indigenous authoritarianism (Akinyanju, 2000, 3).

Gurr (1994), agreed with the above position when he cautioned that if the rights of minorities are not respected and their feelings taking into consideration in the process of policy formulation and implementation, the rate of conflict and insecurity may increase in Africa in the 21st century. He reiterated that for effective consensus building process to translate into good governance and leadership in any political system, there must be territorial constitutional integration as well as minimum consensus. In the same vein, Jega (2007), maintained that for leaders and followers to experience good governance and effective leadership there must be transparency and accountability by public office holders in discharging their duties. In his words: A democratic political culture developed over time creates the basis for sustainable processes of good governance in democratic countries including Nigeria (Jega, 2007, 158). In the words of Eskor Toyo, democracy refers to the extent to which actual political power to determine their social destiny belongs to the vast majority of citizens who constitute the people distinct from a ruling oligarchy or class. This definition of democracy is in agreement with Abraham Lincoln's popular definition: Government of the people by the people and for the people. Thus, scholars have argued that no democracy can function without the people (citizens) hence, Ola Oni (1999) reaffirmed this position when he stated thus: democracy has been

variously defined as a political and economic arrangement of society such that the interest of the majority of people determine the management and direction of society benefiting the majority of the people. Why democracy is yet to benefit the majority of citizens in Africa remains a paradox which this paper attempts to address. However, while appraising the impact of democratic leadership on development and good governance at any level, Awa (1973) argued that whether it is situational, traditional or charismatic styles of leadership, scholars and researchers are unanimous that good leadership is necessary and crucial for the survival, growth and development of any society.

Demands of #EndSARS Protesters

The first set of demands made by the #EndSARS protesters includes:

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 they should adequately be compensated for protecting lives and property of the citizens

Source: <https://www.thecable.ng/full-list-the-demands-of-endsars-protesters>

In a newspaper report captioned Nigeria: #EndSARS–23 Key Demands Nigerian Youths Want from Government, published in the Vanguard Newspaper of 11th October 2020, Nigerian youths under the aegis of #EndSARS presented a second set of demands to the federal government.

Below is the list of the second set of demands:

1. End SARS
2. Sack security chiefs
3. Improve security
4. Full deregulation of the oil and gas sector to allow more investments for job creation
5. Immediate passage of PIB
6. Full deregulation of the power sector to allow investment capital flow to generate, transmit and distribute more power and create jobs
7. Should hands-off petroleum pricing to enable free-market determination of pricing
8. Close our northern borders to stop the free entry of Fulani herdsmen and bandits
9. Inclusive government for all tribes and regions of Nigeria with 50 percent youths in charge of governance
10. Allocate more funds to the education sector to provide better teaching tools and to pay better salaries to end ASUU strikes

11. Change our academic curriculum to reflect modern-day realities
12. All politicians should be placed on minimum wage to attract genuine public servants
13. Migrate to 100 per cent electoral reforms with electronic voting tied to our BVN and GSM
14. Return Nigeria to regional governance structure or restructure the country and embrace true federalism. States autonomy must be paramount.
15. Disband the bi-cameral legislature and adopt uni-cameral
16. Immediately reform Nigeria Police Force and let every state or region create its own police service
17. No more budget for running private affairs of elected and appointed public servants
18. Enthroned university education as a minimum qualification for public office holders at all levels of government from the president to local government and ward chairpersons
19. Strip ex-governors and all elected and appointed public servants of all benefits after office.
20. Increase salaries of our doctors, nurses, teachers, police, military officers, and civil servants
21. Government should hands-off ownership and management of businesses at all levels.
22. Name and shame looters and make criminal offenders, and looters face trial in their home states and villages to shame them and their families
23. Stop foreign medical trips for public servants. Let them be treated here in Nigeria. When last did you hear an American President or a British Prime Minister visit Nigeria for medical tourism?

Source: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202010190081.html>

The figures below clearly explain the level of distrust existing between the people and the government in Nigeria.

Figure 1: A protester stands atop a police structure in Ikeja, capital of Lagos state



Source: <https://www.thecable.ng/full-list-the-demands-of-endsars-protesters>

Figure 2: Shows people stripping large pallets of sacks of supplies from a government warehouse Kaduna and carrying them away



Source: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8884767/Thousands-anti-government-protesters-loot-aid-warehouse-Nigeria.html>

Figure 3: People carry bags of food on their heads during a mass Looting of a warehouse in Abuja



Source: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8884767/Thousands-anti-government-protesters-loot-aid-warehouse-Nigeria.html>

The effective mobilization of the youths during the protests clearly shows that the social media helped to create awareness among the youths from different locations and states in the country and across the world. It is also an effective tool for mobilization and sensitization of people and the government hence, no reasonable government will undermine the power of the social media in this digital age. In specific and general terms, the data also shows that there is a wide communication gap and distrust between the government and the ordinary citizens of Nigeria as reflected in the attacks on public buildings and infrastructure across the country. The initial five demands presented to the federal government by the protesting youths also revealed that institutional weakness, massive corruption, indiscipline and lack of public accountability remains a serious challenge in Nigeria. The discovery of palliative materials and food items meant for less privileged Nigerians in government and private warehouses across the country as reflected in the data above further shows that corruption and misappropriation of public funds and resources is not limited to politicians and political elites alone. This is because the management and control of government warehouses and stores are in the hands of top civil servants, directors and heads of government agencies, ministries and departments etc. Above all, the #EndSARS protests and demands is also a call for the reconstruction and repositioning of the Nigerian state. Specifically, the protesters also demanded for police reforms that will lead to improved welfare for the officers and men of the Nigerian police force. The figures above also show that public accountability and transparency is lacking in leadership and governance structure of Nigeria.

Conclusion

Conflict especially internal conflicts arising from maladministration and corruption on the part of political leaders (elites) are now a common feature of African politics. In countries like Mali, Central African Republic, Somalia etc. inefficiency and failure on the part of the state and its officials to address fundamental socio-economic issues accounts

for the high rate of violence and insecurity across the African sub-region. In the case of Nigeria, #EndSARS nationwide protest exposed the wide gap existing between the government and the people. The study revealed that most government policies are formulated but are never implemented especially when it comes to the welfare of the police, public servants and the ordinary citizens as reflected in the data presented in the study. The invasion of warehouses and the palliative items discovered further shows that public accountability and transparency is lacking in the process of governance in Nigeria. The shooting of protesters at the Lekki toll plaza in Lagos by men of the Nigerian army also shows that government's response to citizens' demands (civil protest) is usually based on force which is a clear violation of the Nigerian constitution and other regional and global human rights protocols and conventions. Following the gaps observed in the study, the following recommendations were proffered in order to improve the state (government) and citizens' relations in the country (Nigeria).

Recommendations

The following recommendations will no doubt help to bridge the gap between the citizens and the state (government) in Nigeria:

1. In European countries young people between the age of 20 to 35 are allowed to contest for any elective position of their choice hence, Emmanuel Macron of France was elected president at the age of 30. In the case of Nigeria, voting age is from 18 and above while the age limit to contest for the post of president is 45 and above. This is great injustice and the ploy to exclude Nigerian youths from the political process. Therefore, the National Assembly should commence the process of electoral and political reforms that will reduce the age for citizens to contest for any elective position to be 18 years and above.
2. Judges and officials involved in the ongoing judicial panels investigating various cases of human rights abuses across the country should give all victims and their witnesses free hand to present and defend their cases. All forms of interference from state governors and the political class should be resisted to avoid miscarriage of justice.
3. The state and federal government should realize that political power is derived from the people (citizens) through the electoral process (ballot box) hence; the government must review its conflict resolution approaches and strategies especially when it concerns civil disobedience and protests by the citizens (youths). This is important because post-#EndSARS protest events shows that use of military force can be counterproductive as the international community and the International Criminal Court (ICC) is investigating the Lekki Toll Plaza shootings of 20th October 2020.
4. Public institutions and agencies involved in the diversion and hoarding of palliatives meant for the citizens should be identified and sanctioned accordingly to serve as a deterrent to others.

5. Children of victims of police brutality and all forms of violations by the state at all levels (local, state and federal) should be identified and placed on scholarship from the least to the highest level. This is necessary because several victims of human right abuses are suffering and living below poverty line in different parts of the country.
6. Immediate arrest and prosecution of corrupt public servants especially members of the defunct Special Anti-robbery Squad (SARS) who carried out several acts of human rights abuses including the unlawful killing of innocent citizens in different parts of the country. Such prompt actions by the federal government will promote trust and confidence which is currently lacking in the relationship between the citizens and the state (government).
7. Payment of adequate compensation to victims of police/government brutality and insensitivity. Such payments should be extended to families and spouses of victims across the country. This should be done without further delay.

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