

The Road to #EndSARS

The #EndSARS campaign became the most trending topic on twitter between 9-11 October with 28 million tweets. Something, although somewhat expected but nevertheless remarkable, happened. The proverbial camel's back broke and the rage in the virtual spaces moved in orderly fashion out onto actual streets. It is perhaps instructive to note that the social media protests started in 2017 and have slowly been gathering momentum as the ire of Nigerians grew with each new injustice meted out by the infamous Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The current protests are simply Nigerians saying **we have had enough**. With the protests going from strength to strength in an organised and remarkably efficient manner, first the Nigerian government and then the entire world have taken notice.

Every year, an estimated 3,000 young people die from insecurity in Nigeria, and sadly extrajudicial killings account for a not -insignificant portion of the deaths. There is ample anecdotal evidence that youths are profiled by SARS based on appearance and extorted, unlawfully detained, tortured and in some instances killed. The Nigerian public has come to realize that the dignity of human life and the concept of human rights are alien to this unit in the Nigerian Police Force (NPF).

While how we got here may be obvious, the pertinent questions that should be of concern to us are: Where do we go from here? Is merely disbanding SARS going to address a problem so pervasive, with its roots firmly entrenched in a corrupt system?

To fully appreciate the menace that is SARS, one must go back to its inception in 1992. It started with such promise, it was set up as an anonymous NPF unit to perform undercover operations involving crimes associated with armed robbery, kidnapping, etc. It was initially a 15-man squad and their success lay in their stealth tactics. SARS successfully tackled the problems that led to its establishment and, it was the golden child of the NPF. Cases of kidnappings were swiftly unravelled, stolen vehicles were tracked, traced and returned to their grateful owners, crime rates dropped significantly.

However, as is sadly often the case with Nigerian institutions, the decay within the unit started with the officers abusing the privilege of their anonymity; over the years the systemic abuse of power by these officers grew with extortion, harassment, torture, rape and murder taking centre stage. According to Amnesty international, SARS is indicted and responsible for human rights abuse, cruelty, degrading treatment of Nigerians in their custody and other widespread torture. A 2020 report by the organization titled 'Time to End Impunity' indicates

that between January and May of 2020 there were at least 82 documented cases of abuses and extrajudicial killings by SARS – and at least another ten Nigerian lives[1] have been lost to police brutality putting down the demonstrations.

As noted earlier, the #EndSARS campaign is one that has been on slow burn since 2017, on Saturday 3 October 2020, a video started trending on Twitter showing a SARS police officer shoot a young Nigerian in plain sight, right in front of a hotel, in Ughelli, Delta State. It was also alleged that the police officers took away the young man's vehicle. This singular event served as the turning point for the campaign. On Thursday 8 October 2020, nationwide protests on #EndSARS started in cities across the entire country. After years of angst and helplessness, with videos and pictures consistently making the rounds, showing police brutality, harassment, and extortion in Nigeria, people evidently decided enough was enough. The general sentiment being that it is one thing to have a failing economy, high unemployment rates, and so on, but to be murdered and harassed on a daily basis for the simple reason that they are young and Nigerian is quite simply unacceptable. The protests were led by young Nigerians in different cities with the active participation of activists and numerous celebrities.

We live in an era of consciousness, in the age of information and with the global reckoning the Black Lives Matter movement caused recently, people more than ever understand the power of virtual and viral protests and that collectively they have a voice. People more than ever understand the impact of protest movements on the establishment and the power of being right, that the world stands with you as nothing has more resonance than injustice. Worthy of note in this context is that the protests took place at the same time as a gubernatorial election – almost as if to say that the election, and it has been dogged by reports of vote-buying rather than 'freedom of choice', does not hold the interest of the populace.

Several reasons can be adduced for these events unfolding the way they have. Firstly, police personnel are not trained properly, lack infrastructure and equipment, and are consequently ill prepared to deal with or even understand security issues and their role and core mandate to protect the lives and property of citizens. The way policing is done calls to question a fundamental provision of the constitution, namely, the state, through its agent, the police force, is in violation of the first principle of protection of lives and property. In addition to this, the police recruitment process is deeply flawed, and this is also evidenced by the incompetence of its officers who have not managed to de-escalate peaceful protests. Police have become divorced from the people they are meant to protect. This was compounded by

the fact that the current administration sat on the new police reform bill for 18 months. There are those that contend the ruling party was happy to allow the militarization of the police force as this served its own ends in the 2019 elections. Secondly, there is the issue of an inadequate legal framework that serves to reinforce the NPF's overreach and lack of boundaries, The Police Act should be reviewed in line with international conventions and best practice. Thirdly, there is the manifest 'weaponization' of the NPF and its countless sub-organizations at the latest since the kidnapping violence in the South-South in the early years of the second decade of the century.

For real progress to be made, government must see these protests not as an attack on the administration but as a chance to take stock and re-evaluate. The NPF requires a complete reorientation. The groundwork was done, amongst others, in the form of the DiFD report authored by Dr. Oliver Owens in 2015[2]. The commissioner of Police, who is the Principal Staff Officer to the Inspector General of Police, went on record saying: "The methodological approach you [Dr Oliver Owen] adopted and effort you put in place has completely validated your findings, which are also borne out by realities on the ground...The Inspector General of Police has already started implementing your research findings particularly on Alternative Resolution of disputes." One can only wonder why seemingly nothing has happened. Paper is patient, Nigerians are no longer.

The impact the protests have had to date are unclear. On Sunday 11 October 2020, the Inspector-General of Police announced that SARS had been disbanded, but that he was establishing a new unit Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT). Many wondered whether this was not simply one four-letter name being replaced by a different four-letter word. It seemed to indicate that the administration was blind to the root causes of the protests: the perception that the NPF was habitually acting beyond the pale of the rule the law. Indeed, as numerous observers have noted, the administration is seemingly ignoring the fact that the protesters no longer wish to tolerate half measures. #EndSARS has become fluid, a representation of injustice, and much more than merely ending SARS. While in 2012, the Occupy Nigeria movement focused solely on the repeal of the abolition of the fuel subsidy, and was seen by some to have been instrumentalized by the then opposition party, there has clearly been a lot learned by Nigerians in the eight years since. #EndSARS shows that Nigerians have realised there is power in the collective and that regardless of religious or ethnic differences together they have a forceful voice. What started as 280 characters on Twitter has taken on a life of its own and the question is when the young people's attention will turn now to the underlying causes of the dire state of the country's socio-economic affairs. If it does, then the next question will be how the political establishment responds.

[1] Amnesty International figure

[2]

<https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/content/supporting-police-reform-nigeria-learning-officers-ground>