




Protests and blood on the streets: repressive state, police brutality and #EndSARS protest in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article investigates how the Nigerian state is implicated in police brutality and clampdown on the #EndSARS protesters and its implications for democracy, development and national security. The article used primary data comprising 38 telephone interviews, 19,609 Facebook posts/reposts and 24,799 Twitter tweets/retweets, complementing it with a wide range of secondary data. From the analyses of data, it shows there is an obvious mutual trust deficit between government and the citizens. This is supported by one-third of the 36 states in Nigeria which witnessed sporadic #EndSARS protests and destruction of government establishments. Use of heavy firearms against unarmed protesters escalated the conflict from civil disobedience to a demand to a change of government. Thus, establishment of institutional mechanisms and disciplinary measures that control the excesses of security agents during civil protests is imperative to protect civil and human rights of protesters.

Keywords Repressive state · Police brutality · #EndSARS protest · Political reforms · Nigeria Police Force

Introduction

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is the principal law enforcement agency in Nigeria (see Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution). The Force has staff deployment across the 36 states of the country and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The command and control of the NPF is under the Inspector General of Police in accordance with Section 215(2) of the 1999 Constitution, and Section 6 of the Police Act, 1990. It is

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predicated on the regimental nature of the Force and conducted through the chain of Command along the Force badges of ranks. The major duties of the NPF are prevention and detection of crime, apprehension of offenders, preservation of law and order and protection of lives and property (Nigerian Police Force, 2021).

The Force is divided into 12 operational Zonal Commands (usually comprising between two and four State Commands) and 37 State Commands including the FCT (usually comprising Area Commands which further comprises Divisions). While the zone is headed by an Assistant Inspector General of Police, the State Command is headed by a Commissioner of Police, the Area Command by an Assistant Commissioner of Police and the Division by a any officer in the Superintendent cadre (Nigerian Police Force, 2021). The Department of Training plans for and coordinates the training, retraining of officers and manpower development of the Force personnel through its 28 training schools and centers across Nigeria.

However, international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have documented numerous cases of police brutality in Nigeria, such as extrajudicial execution, organ harvesting, torture, rape, physical assault, harassment, extortion, excessive use of force, abduction, unlawful arrest, illegal detention, and all forms of human rights abuses (Campbell, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2000). Nigerians have, on many occasions, narrated their brutal experiences in the hands of police officers and other security agents, including the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS).

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was a specialized unit of the NPF set up in 1992 to fight all forms of violent crimes, such as armed robbery, kidnapping, banditry, etc. (Nnadozie, 2017). It was established as a result of the growing number of robberies and theft which constituted the largest category of crimes in the early 1990s. For instance, crime data increased from 244,354 in 1991 to 289,156 in 1993. The formation of the SARS in 1992 contributed to significant crime reduction in the period from 289,156 in 1993 to 241,091 in 1994, and 167,492 in 1999 (Cleen, 2019; Cleen, 2003, cited in UK Essays 2018).

However, over time, SARS began to overstep the bounds of its duties by arresting those who are alleged to be involved in non-violent crimes such as financial and economic fraud, which is under the purvey of the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC). It has also been reported that SARS officers mount illegal roadblocks, conduct unauthorised checks and searches, arrest and detain people without warrant or trial, rape women, and extort young Nigerians for driving exotic cars (Kazeem, 2020). In a special report published in June 2020, Amnesty International noted that people in SARS custody were 'subjected to a variety of methods of torture including hanging, mock execution, beating, punching and kicking, burning with cigarettes, waterboarding, near-asphyxiation with plastic bags, forcing detainees to assume stressful bodily positions and sexual violence' (Amnesty International, 2020, n.p.).

The 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria began on October 4, 2020, after a SARS police officer reportedly shot a young Nigerian man in front of the Wetland Hotel in Ughelli, Delta State. The video of the incident trended on social media, leading to nationwide protests within a few days (Abati, 2020). Even though #EndSARS began to trend on social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp,



etc.) on October 4, 2020 (as a form of virtual protest), it was not until October 8, 2020 that nationwide street protests began across Nigerian cities, eventually assuming a global dimension as the protest rapidly spread to other cities across the world, including London and New York (Abati, 2020; Adeshokan, 2020; George, 2020a, b). Although these protests were taking place simultaneously across all major cities in Nigeria, the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos was considered a major national anchor point and epicentre of the #EndSARS protest.

It is instructive to note that both the Nigerian state and its police force are implicated in police brutality in Nigeria. The Nigeria state established the security forces to primarily protect the interests of the ruling elites (Watts, 2007). The state thus became 'an instrument of private and sectional interests' (Williams 1976:43), and could not maintain appropriate conditions for civil rights protection. Essentially, the colonial regime bequeathed the Nigerian state its authoritarian and repressive character (Mkhize and Madumi, 2016; Plaut, 2016; Kalu, 2018). The colonial state in Nigeria lacked legitimacy and set up colonial police because it needed brutal force to enforce rules and orders that would maintain firm control of the local natives. However, the colonial rules have not changed in post-colonial state in Nigeria. The Nigerian state through its coercive authorities such as the military and police force enforce rules and orders that serve the interests of the ruling elites rather than the people. Section 45 (1)(d) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), for example, required law enforcement officers to subjectively arrest without warrant, confiscate and demolish properties, and obtain information from any person or organisation without any restraint.

The aim of this article is to examine how the Nigerian state is implicated in police brutality and clampdown on the #EndSARS protesters in Nigeria and its implications for democracy, development and national security. It interrogates the mutual trust deficit between the government and citizens in escalating the #EndSARS protests from civil disobedience to a demand to a change of government. Theoretically, our major contribution is to explain why civil protests such as the #EndSARS protests provide an exploitable opportunity for yet increased state brutality and repression rather than broaden the civic space by achieving expected greater civic freedom, political reforms, and good governance.

Literature review

Conceptualising the repressive state in Africa

There has been a long history of police brutality in Nigeria and other African states (Tamuno, 1970; Alemika and Chukwuma, 2000; Abati, 2020). However, Abati (2020) argues that the prevalence of police brutality in Africa is a function of political leadership failure rather than colonial legacy.

Ihonvbere (2003) maintains that the post-independent states in Africa serve more as weapons of police brutality, intimidation, murder, crime against humanity, repression and excessive abuse than agents for the protection of the citizens and the facilitation of development. Ake (1981) sees the state as a specific modality of class



domination. The essential feature of the state form of domination is that the system of institutional mechanisms of domination is autonomized and becomes largely independent of the social classes including the hegemonic class. Generally, the salient features of African state are namely; intense ethnic conflict, the single-party system, the high incidence of efficiency norms in political competition, the recurrence of military coups, political repression, and the poor performance at economic development (Ake, 1981).

Similarly, Buyse (2018) observes that the state increasingly shrinks the civic spaces in order to protect the interests of the dominant and ruling class. This is achieved by emboldening and strengthening the powers of the state's repressive apparatuses, such as the police and the military, to crassly violate human rights and commit crimes against humanity (Buyse, 2018; Margulies, 2018; Iwuoha, 2020). The effect of this is that public distrust of the state and its law enforcement institutions tends to be commonplace (Cole, 1999; Malena, 2015; Clark, 2016).

Theorising the repressive state, shrinking civic spaces, and police brutality in Nigeria The repressive state victimises its citizens by the use of intimidation and open violence. It adopts routine surveillance and the exercise of force to subjugate the masses and abolish the machinery of citizens' collective organisation in order to instil intense fear among the people (Heywood, 2007). Such states impose arbitrary regulations and encourage police brutality and the criminalisation of public gatherings to shrink the civic spaces (Van Kesteren, 2019; Ezeibe et al., 2020). Although repression is often associated with the authoritarian, repressive dispositions can manifest in both authoritarian and democratic states, especially in low and middle-income countries (Centre for Global Challenges, 2018). The repressive state asserts both coercive and ideological modalities to deepen its repressiveness. While the coercive modality includes the military, police and prisons, the ideological apparatus includes the courts and the legislature. The coercive and ideological apparatuses of the state largely employ, respectively, violent and non-violent social orders in order to protect the ruling class and ensure their domination over the masses (Ake, 1981; Althusser, 1970; Margulies, 2018; Aniche, 2018a; Iwuoha, 2020).

After Nigeria's political independence, the postcolonial institutions of justice, especially the police, retained their colonial character as agents of the state against unionists, students and political opponents (Ake, 1981; Cole, 1999). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other related charters mean very little to the desperate power elite, who rely on corruption and repression to maintain their hold on political power (Ihonvbere, 2001). The state increasingly shrinks the civil spaces in order to protect the interests of the dominant class while simultaneously emboldening and deepening the powers of its repressive apparatuses, such as the police and the military, to crassly violate human rights (Buyse, 2018). The thinning and shrinking of the civic spaces involve the restriction of freedom of speech, access to information, association and organisation (Malena, 2015).

Although civil and political rights improved in May 1999 (after the long years of military rule), gross human rights infringements remain a major security threat in Nigeria (Bappah, 2016). This is because the Nigerian police were not originally set up to protect or serve the people. It was rather set up to protect and serve the state for the purpose of exploitation and expropriation of resources (Kalu, 2017). In light



of this, there is an ever-increasing distrust between the state and the police on the one hand and the people on the other hand. Owing to this increasing distrust as well as the corrupt and state-backed authoritarian character of the Nigerian police, they often consider and treat Nigerian youths as criminals until proven innocent rather than the other way round as provided by Nigerian laws. In addition, given that all the institutions and agencies of the Nigerian state, including the police, have not become autonomous of the regime, regime security or survival is often mistaken for national security (Afen, 2014). Therefore, the primary purpose of the police is essentially to protect the regime rather than the people. In an attempt to protect the regime and its interests, the police and military forces often deploy excessive and brutal force to repress the people.

In Nigeria, the state also uses its legal and regulatory tools to legitimise repression, formal violation and the restriction of human rights. Section 45 (1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) provides, *inter alia*, that Nothing in Sects. 37, 38, 39, 40 and 41 of this Constitution shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society (a) in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality or public health; or (b) for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom of other persons. These regulatory instruments justified excessive restrictions on human rights, as it: (d) required law enforcement officers to subjectively arrest without warrant, confiscate and demolish properties, and obtain information from any person or organisation without any restraint. The newly introduced 16 Covid-19 ad hoc laws further emboldened the state and its actors with authoritarian bents to continue their onslaught with minimal, if any, pushback. This is akin to the approach of the Chinese police, which has relatively little oversight, giving them tremendous power to do whatever they want. This unchecked power has led to several reports of human rights abuses (Wang and Madson, 2013; Wang, 2020).

Methodology

The primary data for the study were collected between October 11 and December 5, 2020. Purposive sampling was adopted, because of the need to capture states that had massive protests, to select four states and the Federal Capital Territory—Lagos, Edo, Rivers and Oyo states and Abuja. These states recorded over three million daily turnout of protesters for the period under study. The states include Lagos, Edo, Rivers, Oyo, and Abuja (the capital of Nigeria). The respondents were drawn from the Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Army, state government executive members, human rights groups and ENDSARS protesters. These category of persons are considered to be directly involved in either handling or participating in the EndSARS protest. Convenience/pre-designed availability research design were used to capture respondents who were conveniently or accidentally available to participate in the study. The criteria for the selection of respondents were an affirmative response to preliminary Short Message Services (SMS), cognate experience with the subject and willingness to participate in the study. A total of 38 telephone interviews were conducted across the sampled states, involving five deputy superintendents of police, three majors and



two captains in the Nigerian Army, three commissioners and five special assistants to governors, five leaders of rights-based NGOs, and fifteen active participants in the EndSARS protests. Seven telephone interviews were conducted in each of the sampled states to generate data on the implications of state repression of and clamp-down on the EndSARS protests on democracy, development and national security. It was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews due to the Covid-19 restrictions and the need to maintain safety measures.

Fifteen active participants of EndSARS protests granted the researchers permission to follow them on their social media platforms (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) to assess the trend and other dimensions of the protests. A preliminary reading of a sample from Facebook posts/tweets in the 15 accounts revealed that each contained one of the following terms with hashtags: #EndSARS, #EndCorruption, #EndBadGovernance and #EndInsecurity, or related hashtags.

These terms were then used to programmatically filter the sample down to about 19,609 Facebook posts/reposts and 24,799 tweets/retweets made within the 17-day #EndSARS protest period, October 4–October 20, 2020 (see Table 1). The posts/tweets were then read and filtered manually, with a coder eliminating duplicates. This means that the authors sorted/counted the posts/tweets to observe the frequency of each of the four major hashtags (i.e. #EndSARS, #EndCorruption, #EndBadGovernance and #EndInsecurity).

Manual coding was done using a codebook to guide the coding process (Guest et al., 2011). A single independent coder coded the posts/tweets for each of the variables/key themes and categories (Smedley and Coulson, 2021) in the codebook. In some cases, the coding was a matter of numbering each post/tweet, tallying, recording the frequencies and taking simple percentages. Meanwhile, as expected, a large number of posts/tweets to be tallied or sorted posed some difficulty to the coder. However, the coder overcame this challenge using the Find Function in Microsoft Word, which automatically captured the frequencies (i.e. the number of appearances) of each of the search items (i.e. variables/key themes) shown on the Facebook/Twitter pages. Once the primary coder had finished coding, the secondary coder reviewed the codes to assess the connection between the raw text and codes (Guest et al., 2011; Solymosi et al., 2020). Then a feedback discussion between the two coders was used to revise definitions and recode where necessary (Guest et al. 2011; Solymosi et al. 2020). We focused on social media (Facebook and Twitter) partly because of the relative ease of accessing publicly available data and partly because Facebook and Twitter are particularly useful platforms for widely circulating and sharing information (Kim et al., 2016). There may be not too much of a difference in sharing behaviour between those who use Facebook and those on Twitter (Juncu and Glorney, 2019). More importantly, #EndSARS protests were mainly organised and coordinated via social media (Husted, 2020).

The study also used secondary sources of data on state repression and use of brutal force on EndSARS protesters, which were sourced from Amnesty International reports, CNN documentary on Lekki shooting, CSO Police Reform Observatory report, other publications and websites that reported on the EndSARS protests. This study adopted the qualitative descriptive method to analyse and validate qualitative data. The final manuscript was subjected to member check by the authors to enhance





Table 1 Social media posts/tweets of #EndSARS protesters by categories, October 4, 2020 and October 20, 2020

Leaders of #EndSARS Protests	Facebook			Twitter						
	Posts/reposts	#EndSARS	#EndCorruption	#EndBadGovernance	#EndInsecurity	Tweets/retweets	#EndSARS	#EndCorruption	#EndBadGovernance	#EndInsecurity
Activist 1	1,294	402	289	472	131	2,026	596	478	655	297
Activist 2	1,016	462	186	258	110	1,157	422	244	321	170
Activist 3	1,027	418	286	222	101	1,805	610	486	428	281
Activist 4	1,225	385	290	370	180	2,022	594	477	583	365
Activist 5	1,491	620	302	431	138	1,890	718	409	535	228
Activist 6	1,373	351	390	465	167	2,073	561	480	675	357
Activist 7	1,154	265	195	480	214	1,731	415	337	625	354
Activist 8	1,436	330	406	510	190	1,907	630	506	480	291
Activist 9	1,275	364	316	412	183	1,409	674	358	212	165
Activist 10	1,407	422	260	581	144	1,331	722	210	261	138
Activist 11	1,437	394	378	495	170	1,409	694	278	266	171
Activist 12	1,147	310	236	470	131	1,344	568	216	370	190
Activist 13	1,505	482	278	576	169	1,402	678	261	344	119
Activist 14	1,648	470	342	655	181	1,643	770	281	451	141
Activist 15	1,174	349	230	491	104	1,650	812	242	470	126
Total	19,609	6,024 (30.7%)	4,384 (22.4%)	6,888 (35.1%)	2,313 (11.8%)	24,799	9,464 (38.2%)	5,263 (21.2%)	6,676 (26.9%)	3,393 (13.7%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2020

the accuracy of interpretations of responses (Koelsch, 2013; Ezeibe et al., 2019; Iwuoha et al., 2020).

Results

Escalation of #EndSARS protests from civil disobedience to a demand for change of government: the government–protesters’ mutual trust deficit

The 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria began on October 4, 2020. Many Nigerian youths dared the government-mandated COVID-19 containment measures and public health consequences of the breach of COVID-19 protocols (Iwuoha et al. 2020) to organise peaceful #EndSARS protests against police brutality and impunity. About 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag #EndSARS accumulated on Twitter alone in the first week of the protest (Kazeem, 2020).

The #EndSARS protests ultimately grew beyond police brutality as protesters began to agitate for far-reaching political and constitutional reforms to ensure good governance, fiscal federalism, and political restructuring (Abati, 2020). The protesting youths demanded a presidential address from their ‘absentee’ president (Adeshokan, 2020). But the Presidency waited and delayed until it became a belated presidential address that did very little to assuage the anger of the people. A video emerged online showing President Buhari chuckle as the Lagos State Governor Sanwo-Olu talked about his state’s compensation fund for victims. The President’s actions met a lot of negative criticism from Nigerians (Odesola, 2020).

Meanwhile, as conditions for ending the protest, the protesters on 11 October 2020 released a list of five main demands to the Nigerian government:

- The immediate release of all arrested protesters;
- Justice for all those who died through police brutality and appropriate compensation to their families;
- An independent body to investigate and prosecute all reports or complaints of police brutality within ten days;
- Independent psychological evaluation and retraining of disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed;
- Adequate increase in the salaries of officers of the NPF as appropriate incentives for carrying out their constitutional duties of protecting lives and properties (George, 2020a, b).

The immediate response by the Inspector General of Police (IGP) was to ban SARS and other special police units from patrolling and mounting roadblocks, and directed that SARS officials should henceforth wear their uniforms. The Nigerian government eventually responded by setting up the Presidential Panel on Police Reforms which approved the five demands by announcing the following measures:

- Disbandment of SARS, redeploying and issuing directives to operatives to report to Force Headquarters for debriefing, psychological and medical examination



just as the government has through the Police Service Commission (PSC) reportedly recommended 37 former members of the disbanded the Squad for dismissal from service;

- Setting up of a new Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team to replace SARS;
- Encouraging state governments and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) authority to set up judicial panels of inquiry to adopt public hearings in looking into allegations of police brutality with the aim of prosecuting erring police officers and compensating victims and families of victims;
- Expediting the passing into law the bill to reform the police currently under the floor of the National Assembly (NASS);
- Efforts at improving the general welfare and funding of NPF (Nairametrics, 2020).

In spite of government responses to the demands of the protesters in the form of police reforms, the protest increased in terms of intensity, demands, and spread. This suggests, first, that there is a trust deficit between the government and protesters; and, second, that the protest was beyond police brutality (Abati, 2020). The fact that there were remote, underlying or antecedent causes of the October 2020 #EndSARS protest was implicated by the refusal of the Nigerian youths to end the protests even after the Nigerian government claimed to have met all their demands. For example, the protesters wanted immediate actions on the implementation of the demands citing the previous three cases where the government failed to implement and enforce its proclamations disbanding SARS. This is an indication of the trust deficit between the government and the governed. A major uniqueness of the #EndSARS protest is the decentralised structure of the movement, making it very difficult for the government to infiltrate, compromise, and negotiate with the protesters because it has no single leader (Abati, 2020).

Evidence showed that the major hashtags that trended in the social media, traditional media, and placards at protest venues were rather focused on ending bad governance, corruption, and insecurity in Nigeria. Table 1 shows the new dimensions of the #EndSARS protests as contained on the social media platforms.

Table 1 shows 19,609 Facebook posts/reposts and 24,799 tweets/retweets made within the period. Facebook posts/reposts on #EndBadGovernance had 35.1 per cent, showing that it attracted the highest social media traffic than other categories, including the #EndSARS, which had only 30.7 per cent. Other Facebook categories such as #EndCorruption, #EndBadGovernance and #EndInsecurity altogether recorded about 69.7 per cent. Tweets/retweets on #EndSARS scored highest with 38.2 per cent, while other tweets/retweets altogether accounted for the remaining 61.8 per cent. This implies that the protesters generally had major demands on democratic governance and good leadership than on police reforms. In other words, protesters believed that #EndSARS is a gateway to achieving democratic governance and good leadership in the country. This also explains why the protesters refused to discontinue protests despite the government's promise of reforming the Nigerian police, including the disbandment of SARS on 11 October 2020.

Rather than soothe, placate and disperse the protesters, the disbandment of SARS and police reforms led to new dimensions and demands for good governance



expressed with other trendy hashtags such as #EndBadGovernance, #EndCorruption, and #EndInsecurity. In fact, the #EndSARS hashtag only trended predominantly on social media within the first 10 days of the protests. It was observed that the posts/tweets possess the following major attributes, which made them highly significant in promoting greater appeals among the protesters and their supporters:

- i. **Viral:** Posts/tweets that go viral are used by protesters to make and achieve key demands on the state.
- ii. **Timely:** Posts/tweets sent on the day of a key event (e.g. protest, music festival, riot) have stronger effects and results (Stefanone et al. 2015; Xu and Zhang, 2018).
- iii. **Use of Hashtag:** Posts/tweets with the use of hashtags increase reposts/retweets (Suh et al. 2010; Jenders et al. 2013; Stefanone et al. 2015, Van de Velde et al. 2015).
- iv. **Sentiment:** Posts/tweets with strong sentiments increase reposts/retweetability (Fernandez et al. 2014; Stefanone et al. 2015; Kim et al. 2016)
- v. **Sharing:** Posts/tweets that explicitly asked to be shared attract more attention and reposts/retweets (Lopez, 2014).

That the protesters eventually demanded wider political and constitutional reforms is perhaps an admittance of the fact that the police cannot be isolated from the entire polity because it is only a microcosm of the entire society. Police brutality is, therefore, a reflection of the systemic problems and challenges of the entire Nigerian state.

How the Nigerian state is implicated in police brutality and clampdown on the #EndSARS protesters

In accordance with Section 215(2) of the 1999 Constitution, Section 6 of the Police Act, 1990 laws provide that ‘the Force shall be commanded by the Inspector-General of Police.’ This simply means that orders, directives and instructions to clampdown on #EndSARS protesters emanated from the Inspector-General of Police, through the chain of Command, to all officers deployed during the protests. Disobedience or failure to carry out such instruction, directive or order, attracts punitive sanctions. The police essentially enforced brutal force to hold down the protesters in a bid to protect the interests of the state and maintain the rule of the regime in power.

Hence, the #EndSARS Protesters’ demands for wider political reforms generally attracted state repression and clampdown instead of leading to positive change. It was reported that during the protests, acts of police brutality, stifling of voices of dissent, clampdowns on civic freedoms, and military shootouts at peaceful, innocent and unarmed #EndSARS protesters with live bullets were perpetrated by agents of the Nigerian state without any pushback (CNN, 2020; CSO Police Reform Observatory, 2020). Hoodlums and thugs said to be sponsored by state actors infiltrated the protests to disrupt and disperse protesters in many states, including Lagos, Edo, Abuja, Oyo, Abia, etc. (Abati, 2020).



Table 2 State Clampdown on Unarmed Protesters, October 9–October 22, 2020

Date	Location	Incident	Violations on Rights/Casualty	Perpetrator
9 October 2020	Federal Capital Territory, Abuja	Protesters stormed the headquarters of Nigeria Police Force but were dispersed	Use of tear gas on protesters	Nigerian Police Force
10 October 2020	Ogbomosho, Oyo state	EndSARS protests turned violent	A young man known as Jimoh Isiaka shot dead and other 7 protesters injured	Nigerian Police Force
10 October 2020	Abuja	The co-convenor of Bring Back Our Girls, Aisha Yesufu, Rinu Oduala, and other protesters were reportedly manhandled	Use of tear gas on protesters	Nigerian Police Force
11 October 2020	Ogbomosho, Oyo state	EndSARS protests turned violent	Three more protesters were shot dead	Nigerian Police Force
12 October 2020	Surulere, Lagos	EndSARS protests turned violent	A bystander watching the protest was shot dead. Other 4 protesters were injured. Police arrested and detained peaceful Protesters	Nigerian Police Force
13 October 2020	National Assembly, Abuja	The protest was taken to the National Assembly	Protesters were harassed and stopped by soldiers who violently resisted their movement and injured many of them	Nigerian Army
13 October 2020	National Assembly, Abuja	The protest was taken to the National Assembly	ARISE TV news crew who were recording the fracas at the entry of the National Assembly were attacked. Ferdinand Duruoha was one of the crew members who were assaulted while Francis Ogbonna a cameraman was attacked and injured	Nigerian Army, and Nigerian Police Force



Table 2 (continued)

Date	Location	Incident	Violations on Rights/Casualty	Perpetrator
13 October 2020	Ogun State	Fifteen #EndSARS protestors were arrested	Three of the protesters; Adeniji Sodiq, Mutairu Faruq and Olatoye Joseph, who were arrested at the palace of the king of Owu on Friday, 9 October 2020 were charged for murder by the Police	Nigerian Police Force
14 October 2020	Lagos	EndSARS protests turned violent	Protesters were attacked with cutlasses, sticks and charms	Hoodlums and thugs hired by the politicians
14 October 2020	Berger roundabout, Abuja	EndSARS protests turned violent	Protesters were attacked by people with cutlasses and cudgels at. Cars were destroyed and many protestors were injured	Hoodlums and thugs hired by the politicians
15 October 2020	near the state secretariat in Alausa, Lagos	People conveyed by Lagos state buses attacked protestors	Protesters harassed and injured	People conveyed by Lagos state buses
16 October 2020	Edo State House of Assembly	Protesters attacked with stones and bullets by a suspected thug who claimed that the protestors disturbed their daily businesses	Two protestors were killed and many were injured in the attack	Hoodlums
20 October 2020	Ios city biggest market, Terminus	EndSARS protests turned violent	Thugs burned cars, hauled shops and attacked unarmed #EndSARS protestors	Thugs



Table 2 (continued)

Date	Location	Incident	Violations on Rights/Casualty	Perpetrator
20 October 2020	Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos	Live round of bullets were shot at innocent and unarmed protesters who crouched on the ground, holding hands together and singing the Nigerian National Anthem A clip of the shooting videoed was released by a brave Nigerian youth, DJ Switch, and also the CNN documentary on the incident	More than 15 people killed. Over 50 other people were injured	Nigerian Army
21 October 2020	Nationwide	Intense crackdown on angry protesters following the massacre of the previous day	7 more people killed	Nigerian Police Force
22 October 2020	Oyigbo, Port Harcourt	Armed men began shooting at protesters. The attackers began breaking into homes, murdering those inside, and afterwards, torching down properties	Open fire on protesters, breaking into homes, murdering those inside, and afterwards, torching down properties	State actors

Source: Authors' compilation, 2020



Table 2 highlights the reported state repression, clampdowns and abusive brutality on peaceful #EndSARS protesters through its actors—Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Army and sponsored hoodlums.

Table 2 shows that between 10th and 21st October 2020, some 29 protesters were reportedly killed by the Nigerian Army and the Nigerian Police Force while containing the rapidly growing #EndSARS protests. Many protesters were also seriously injured across the states. Moreover, hoodlums and thugs were hired by politicians to infiltrate the protests, and this further escalated the crisis, leading to arson, destruction of people's property, as well as perpetration of acts of assault and harassment of peaceful protesters.

Hence, amidst the raging #EndSARS protests, the Nigerian government, through security agencies, further consolidated its repressive character in the following ways:

- The reported use of tear gas, water cannons, live bullets, and other forms of brutal force by the police (George, 2020a, b; CSO Police Reform Observatory, 2020).
- The reported sponsorship and recruitment of political thugs and hoodlums to infiltrate and discredit the peaceful protests to make it appear violent so as to fulfil the rules of engagement as a *causus belli* or justification to use force (Abati, 2020; George, 2020a, b).
- The imposition of twenty-four-hour curfews by various state governments.
- The fining of Channels Television, AIT, and Arise TV 3 million Naira (nearly \$8,000) each by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) over their 'unprofessional' coverage of the protests. The government even considered closing down the internet and social media.
- The 20.10.20 Lekki Shooting by the Nigerian Army was estimated to have claimed between fifteen and twenty lives, which received its own equally widely used hashtag #LekkiMassacre. The disconnection of the CCTV and streetlights few hours before the shooting was regarded as an indication that it was well planned, rehearsed and meditated (Adeshokan, 2020; CSO Police Reform Observatory, 2020; Husted, 2020).

This suggests that the repressive Nigerian state murdered its unarmed flag-waving citizens. As a backlash, many Nigerians at home and abroad replaced their social media status and profile pictures with slogans and symbols such as 'Black Tuesday', 'we will never forget 20.10.20', 'image of the blood-stained national flag', etc. (George, 2020a, b). Following the Lekki 'Massacre' the protest turned violent when it was finally hijacked by hoodlums who unleashed mayhem on the protesters and the general public. There were massive looting, arson, and wanton destructions of public and private properties. Several police stations were burnt down, and many security agents (especially the police) were killed. The discovery or looting of palliative warehouses where palliative and relief materials were hoarded was perhaps a further indication of the people's distrust of the governments at all levels in Nigeria.



Implications of state repression and clampdown on #EndSARS protesters for democracy, development and national security

The state repression and clampdown on peaceful, unarmed protesters has serious implications for democracy, development and national security in Nigeria. Table 3 shows the subjective views of the respondents on the implications of Nigerian state repression and clampdown of EndSARS protests for democracy, development and national security.

Table 3 indicates that the majority of respondents affirmed that state repression and clampdown of EndSARS protests impacted negatively on Nigeria's democracy. Some 36 respondents representing 94.7 per cent of all respondents confirmed that the state clampdown on EndSARS protesters eroded public trust in state institutions; 28 respondents representing 73.6 per cent believed that it violated human rights and threatened democracy; 36 respondents representing 94.7 per cent agreed that it shrunk the civic space; 31 respondents representing 81.5 per cent noted that it undermined constitutionalism, the rule of law and due process; while 23 respondents representing 60.5 per cent observed that it eroded democratic consolidation and good governance.

Furthermore, the majority of the respondents concurred that state repression and clampdown of EndSARS protests undermined Nigeria's development. A total of 19 respondents representing 50 per cent revealed that state repression/clampdown on EndSARS protesters scared away foreign investors; 34 respondents representing 89.4 per cent stated that it shrunk economic opportunities; 25 respondents representing 65.7 per cent viewed that it led to wanton destruction of public properties and livelihoods; 31 respondents representing 81.5 per cent believed that it shrunk economic activities; while 19 respondents representing 50 per cent stated that it increased hardship and poverty.

On the other hand, 36 respondents representing 94.7 per cent agreed that state repression/clampdown on EndSARS protesters facilitated the breakdown of law and order or a state of anarchy; 23 respondents representing 60.5 per cent insisted that it created opportunities for the emergence of armed groups; 36 respondents representing 94.7 per cent thought that it provided opportunities for the looting of citizens' properties and criminality; 35 respondents representing 92.1 per cent noted that it increased public distrust of law enforcement agencies; while 17 respondents representing 44.7 per cent revealed that it contributed to the proliferation of SALW in the country.

Discussion

The result shows that the protesters had other more critical and broader demands transcending the concerns of #ENDSARS and police reforms. This is why the disbandment of SARS and police reforms did not soothe, placate or disperse the protesters but instead spiralled a new dimension and demand for good governance expressed with other trendy hashtags such as #EndBadGovernance, #EndCorruption, and #EndInsecurity. The #EndSARS hashtag only trended predominantly on



Table 3 Summary of the subjective views of respondents to implications of state repression and clampdown of EndSARS protests on democracy, development and national security

Category	Remarks (R)	Frequency of (R)
Democracy	State clampdown on EndSARS protesters erodes public trust on state institutions	94.7
	It violates human rights and threatens democracy	73.6
	Shrinks the civic spaces	94.7
	It undermines constitutionalism, rule of law and due process	81.5
Development	It undermines democratic consolidation and erodes good governance	60.5
	State repression/clampdown on EndSARS protesters scares away foreign investors	50
	It shrinks economic opportunities	89.4
	Leads to wanton destruction of public properties and livelihoods	65.7
	Shrinks economic activities	81.5
National Security	Increases hardship and poverty	50
	State repression/clampdown on EndSARS protesters facilitates breakdown of law and order, or a state of anarchy	94.7
	Creates opportunities for the emergence of armed groups	60.5
	Provides opportunities for looting of citizen's properties and criminality	94.7
	Increases public distrust of law enforcement agencies	92.1
Contributes to proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW)	44.7	

Source: Fieldwork (2020)



social media within the first 10 days of the protests, but demands to end bad governance, corruption and insecurity were strongly canvassed and more popularly endorsed than #ENDSARS among many Nigerians on social media throughout the protest period and even beyond. The protesters essentially used the protests for #EndSARS and police reforms only as a necessary means to demanding improved democratic governance and good leadership in the country. Hence, while the massive street or physical protests were going on, there were also vehement and heavy-traffic protests conducted on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, through which many Nigerians vented out their grievances against the state and its poor democratic governance. Feminist Coalition, Kokun Foundation, Assata Collective, the Reach Nigeria, Connected Development, Flutterwave Inc., FinTech, Mentally Aware NG, EndSARS Legal Aid, the Food Coven, Anonymous, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), National Association of Seadogs (NAS), AI, and HRW were some of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or non-state actors (NSAs) that actively mobilised all-round support for the protesters as well as demanding wider constitutional and political reforms (Adeshokan, 2020).

It is therefore not surprising that Nigeria lamentably competes at the bottom of global Democracy Index rankings. The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2020 Democracy Index,¹ for example, shows that Nigeria is classified as a 'hybrid regime'² and globally ranked 110 out of 166 countries in the 2020 Democracy Index. For each 10-point democracy indicator, Nigeria scores so poorly, as follows: electoral process and pluralism (5.17 points), functioning of government (3.57 points), political participation (3.89 points), political culture (3.75 points), and civil liberties (4.12 points).³ This poor democratic atmosphere generally creates a difficult habitat for good governance and full democracy, thus lowering public trust and confidence in the state and its leadership as well as increasing popular dissatisfaction and negative perceptions of democracy.

Again, the protesters' demand for wider political reforms did not lead to positive change but attracted state repression and clampdown on protesters through its actors—Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Army and sponsored hoodlums who infiltrated the protests. Deleterious instruments of warfare such as tear gas, water cannons, live bullets, and other forms of brutal force were reportedly used on unarmed protesters (George, 2020a, b; CSO Police Reform Observatory, 2020). The frontal confrontation on #EndSARS protesters by state forces attracted retaliatory attacks

¹ The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index provides a snapshot of the state of democracy worldwide in 165 independent states and two territories. The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. Based on its scores on a range of indicators within these categories, each country is then itself classified as one of four types of regime: 'full democracy', 'flawed democracy', 'hybrid regime', or 'authoritarian regime'.

² In hybrid regimes (largely non-democratic), serious weaknesses are prevalent—functioning of government, civil liberty and security. Corruption tends to be widespread, and the rule of law is weak. Civil society is weak. Typically, there is the harassment of and pressure on journalists to act according to the will of the government, while the judiciary is often not independent.

³ See The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, 2020.



from the civilians. The Inspector General of Police in Nigeria notes that civilians attacked over 20 police stations and 50 police personnel during the #EndSARS protests in the country. Altogether, these further escalated the crisis, reportedly leading to dangerous acts of assaults, extortion, excessive torture, severe injuries, state-inspired extrajudicial killings and 'fatal' shootings, causing numerous deaths, arson, and the destruction of property and livelihoods. Even agencies of state such as the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) tried to use various forms of intimidation, including freezing the accounts of alleged EndSARS financial sponsors, including Feminist Coalition, Kokun Foundation, Assata Collective, the Reach Nigeria, Connected Development, Flutterwave Inc., FinTech, and a number of individuals (CSO Police Reform Observatory, 2020).

Notably, state repression and clampdown on #EndSARS protesters induced gross violation of human rights and remains a major threat to democratic ethos in Nigeria. The people's right to life, liberty, freedom of movement, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of self-dignity, freedom to good wellbeing, etc. were all cut short by the Nigerian state's repressive actions during the protests (Abati, 2020).

In the past, there have been state-backed extrajudicial killings in Odi in Bayelsa State and Zaki Biam in Benue State in 1999 and 2001. The security agencies, while executing the instructions of the regime in power, have also been involved in the crackdown, arbitrary arrests, detentions and extrajudicial killings of members of separatist organisations such as Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Southeast Nigeria and members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) led by Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky between 2017 and 2018 (Amnesty International, 2018). More recently, the police murdered 18 people in mid-April 2020 within the first two weeks of implementing lockdown policies when only 12 people had actually died of COVID-19 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020; Iwuoha and Aniche, 2020; Aniche et al. 2021; Iwuoha et al. 2021). The major implication of the involvement of security agencies in human rights violations in Nigeria is low public trust. Significantly, corruption and human rights violations are the major reasons for citizens' distrust of the government (Clark, 2016; Iwuoha, 2019; Ezeibe et al., 2020).

Nigeria ranks among the top seven countries with the highest level of citizen distrust of government institutions (World Economic Forum, 2018). Hence, the repressive character of the Nigerian state expressed in the form of police brutality, with the accompanying poor human development indices (HDIs), combine to create the conditions for the incessant civil rights movements and youth restiveness, including the #EndSARS protest.

Hence, a vehement people's movement against the state as a result of eroding and low public trust of the state institutions in Nigeria underlies the protests to end SARS and police brutality. The social contract between the people and the state collapsed as a result of the latter's proven track record of bad leadership, poor governance, corruption and lack of accountability, as well as its consistent use of public resources to encourage police brutality and repression. This indicates the extreme level of state intolerance against freedom of expression, gathering, movement and right to life. Police brutality against the citizens has apparently taken over as the key driver of shrinking civic space in Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 2000). Thus, state actors are rapidly exploiting the #EndSARS



protest to further stifle dissent, clamp down on civic freedoms, and push through restrictive measures under the pretext of maintaining public safety and enforcing COVID-19 lockdown measures.

Beyond Nigeria, the records of police brutality against the media and peaceful protesters over bad governance across Africa are replete and dotted with evidence of gross human rights abuses, thus showing that the powers of law enforcement institutions in Africa had been radically overstretched beyond context and enforced in ways that hurt civic freedoms. In the #ENDSARS protests, for instance, security forces sometimes brazenly used horsewhips and weapons to enforce discipline and compliance with lockdown directives (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2020).

State repression and clampdown on civil liberties have far-reaching implications for democracy, development and national security in Nigeria. It depicts a high degree of human rights breaches. It contracts the civic spaces, endangers democracy and the rule of law, erodes constitutionalism, jeopardises national security, disrupts peace and people's wellbeing. It also flightens foreign investors, dwindles economic opportunities, worsens hardship and poverty among citizens. Consequently, it triggers the emergence of armed groups and proliferation of SALW, breakdown of law and order, state of anarchy, looting and criminality, etc. Generally, the brutal and coercive use of force to crack down on unarmed protesters results in public distrust of the state and its institutions. This finding reflects Ake's (1981) and Althusser's (1970) argument that African states are dominantly repressive states regardless of their democratic status.

Fundamentally, the repressive character of the Nigerian state can be associated with its colonial history (Mkhize and Madumi, 2016). During colonial rule, the colonial state exhibited a predatory character, with the natives as its preys. The state widens the powers of its repressive architecture, which reduces the civic space so as to protect the interests of the ruling elite (Buyse, 2018). The state thus serves more as a weapon of intimidation and maltreatment than as an agent of the protection of the citizenry and facilitation of development (Ihonvbere, 2003).

The result of repressive responses from security forces in Nigeria against #EndSARS protesters is the erosion of the confidence of the Nigerian people, including those in the Diaspora. The #EndSARS protest was internationalised with massive turnouts recorded in Ontario on 12 October 2020; Germany, 23 October 2020; Dublin, 11 October 2020; London, 11 October 2020; New York, 11 October 2020; Michigan, 18 October 2020; Hungary, 22 October 2020; Ohio, 25 October 2020, etc. (New York Times, 2020). As indicated in Table 3, these developments seriously undermine Nigeria's democracy, development and national security.

Thus civil rights protests in low democratic states in Africa do not generally achieve their goals. The consistent development of the repressive character of the state in emerging democracies in Africa (which is essentially useful for the control of political power amidst intolerable bad leadership, governance crisis, and corruption that characterise African democratic rule) is consequent upon two factors: First, the state's ability to rapidly promote or enforce a crackdown on civil rights movements, stifle dissent, and perpetrate extrajudicial killings against its innocent citizens. Second, its ability to promote or institutionalise impunity and reckless disregard for human life and rights, and the rule of law as well as low level of



professionalism and noncompliance to rules of engagement among its security officials and institutions.

Conclusion

This article assesses the role of the Nigerian state in the #EndSARS protest and police brutality in Nigeria. It observed that instead of achieving greater civic freedom, political reforms and good governance, civil rights movements such as the #EndSARS protest tend to provide an exploitable opportunity for yet increased state brutality and repression. The mutual trust deficit between the government and #EndSARS protesters escalated the protest and further deepened the repressive character of the Nigerian state. The protesters' distrust of the state and its security institutions led to their outright rejection of the government's proposed police reforms and the consequent new demands for wider political and constitutional reforms. This negatively constructed government's perception of the #EndSARS protest as a confrontational and revolutionary movement for regime change. It facilitated the government's distrust of the people too and led to state repression, clampdown and excessive use of military force against peaceful protesters, thus further escalating the conflict.

The state military and police force enforced clampdown on civic freedoms and are believed to be responsible for the fatal shootings at unarmed peaceful #EndSARS protesters, especially that of Lekki Toll Gate on 20/10/2020. These acts can be interpreted as excessive torture, assaults, extortion, severe injuries, state-inspired extrajudicial killings and 'fatal' shootings, causing numerous deaths and the destruction of property and livelihoods. The CBN also barred the accounts of alleged EndSARS financiers.

These have negative consequences for democracy, development and national security in Nigeria. This results in the deficiency of citizens' trust in the state and its security institutions, and sometimes citizen's open confrontation and attacks on security operatives. The consistent development of the repressive character of the Nigerian state is consequent and implicated upon two factors: First, its ability to rapidly exploit every opportunity, such as civil rights movement, to stifle dissent and clampdown on innocent citizens. Second, its ability to promote impunity and reckless disregard for human life as well as a low level of professional and noncompliance to rules of engagement among its security officials and the security institutions.

This study suggests that mainstreaming the oversight of the law enforcement agencies and establishing institutional mechanisms that control their excesses during the civil rights movement might help to control the excesses of the repressive state by keeping the security agents in check, thus preserving the civic spaces, promoting peace, democracy, development and effectively managing state-civil relations without violating human rights in Nigeria. To transform the current distrustful state-citizen relations (informed by the repressive character of the state) and the overall dysfunctional socioeconomic conditions in Nigeria, holistic, far-reaching and fundamental political reforms that transcend police reform are required.



Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, I, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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