



## **Social Media Influence And The Endsars Protests**

**Adekunle Ajisebiyawo, PhD**

*Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Igbinedion University Okada.*

### ***Abstract***

*This paper examines the “#EndSARS” protest movement and the role played by use of social media sites such as Facebook and twitter for coordination and mass. The #EndSars protest is led purely by youths, fuelled by social media, and organized without a formal leadership structure. In the previous years of the political history of Nigeria, the ongoing protests are the sort of environment that would have inspired a military coup. The #5for5 demands of the #EndSars protest resulted in an immediate concession from the government, however the implementation of their demands remains to be seen. The style of the #EndSars protest may inspire copycat youth-led, social media-fuelled, and leaderless protests across West Africa, ushering in a new type of protests in the region. The paper concluded that with the increasing use and spread of the internet in the country the platform of social media will increasingly be used to put pressure on government to address more public issues.*

**Keywords:** *Protest, #EndSARS, Social Media, Nigeria, Activism, Youth, Information*

## **Introduction**

At the start of October 2020, just few days after the Nation’s 60<sup>th</sup> independence anniversary, thousands of young people across Nigeria and

abroad took to the streets to call for the dissolution of Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), an infamous police unit accused of extortion, extrajudicial killings, rape and torture for two weeks. This was far from the first time Nigerians had made such a demand. It was, however, by far, the first time their calls garnered such widespread support and international media coverage – thanks, largely, to the prominent role of social media in spreading the word. Peaceful protests against police brutality began on October 8 after a video allegedly showing a SARS operative killing a man was widely shared online. The #EndSARS hashtag swiftly started trending, boosted in part by Nigerian celebrities and high-profile personalities with large followings. As the hashtag also spread beyond the country’s borders, a number of Nigerian Twitter users announced they would help cover the phone bills of others so they could afford to keep tweeting and maintain momentum.

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was founded in late 1992 by former police commissioner Simeon Danladi Midenda when Col. Rindam of the Nigerian Army was killed by police officers at a checkpoint in Lagos in September 1992, later leading to the arrest of three officers. When the information reached the army, soldiers were dispatched into the streets of Lagos in search of any police officer. The Nigerian police withdrew from checkpoints, security areas, and other points of interest for criminals; some police officers were said to have resigned while others fled for their lives. Due to the absence of police for two weeks, the crime rate increased and SARS was formed with only 15 officers operating in the shadows without knowledge of the army while monitoring police radio chatters. Due to the existence of three already established anti-robbery squads that were operational at that time, Midenda needed to distinguish his squad from the already existing teams. Midenda named his team *Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)*. After months of dialogue the Nigerian Army and the Nigeria Police Force came to an understanding and official police duties began again in Lagos. The SARS unit was officially commissioned in Lagos following a ceasefire by the army after settlement and was one of the 14 units in the Force Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department, which was established to detain, investigate, and prosecute people involved in crimes like armed robbery, kidnapping, and other violent crimes.

Members of the unit were allowed to carry guns, drive unmarked cars and operate without badges or uniform. They became known for their violent

harassment of innocent young Nigerians. They also forced young Nigerians to withdraw money from ATMS and make transfers under duress. There are numerous examples of people who have been raped, harassed, flogged, extorted, injured or killed by the unit. In 2016 a campaign was launched calling for the Special Anti-Robbery Squad to be disbanded. It became widespread and drew some attention. Within three years the unit had been reformed, overhauled, decentralised and disbanded about three or four times. But without success (Agbalajobi, 2020).

Then in early October the first protests started against the infamous police squad. Mostly young Nigerians gathered in the front of the House of Assembly in Lagos State to demand the end of the unit. Within days thousands of protesters had gathered in 100 cities around the world, with the #EndSARS trending globally (Agbalajobi, 2020). The protest goes beyond the narrow confines of ending police brutality and metamorphoses into a full-scale cross-examination of the governance process with incisive questions being asked about the workings of the system. In the course of the #EndSARS protests, Nigerians gave vent to their frustrations at the insensitivity of their leaders. Anxieties over the issue of police brutality have unleashed broader popular anger over corruption and social inequality. It's the result of pent-up anger over the dehumanising policies of government, maladministration, injustice, hunger as well as high energy and fuel prices. The cumulative effect of these roll into one. Across the country from the business capital Lagos to the administrative capital, Abuja, most of the major cities such as Port Harcourt, Kano, Kaduna, Ibadan and Calabar to mention but a few were embroiled in an orgy of rage.

While the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigeria's media regulator, released a set of guidelines, stipulating that outlets—which “have a duty to promote the corporate existence of Nigeria”—should not “embarrass individuals, organizations, government, or cause disaffection, incite to panic or rift in the society at large”, the Social media became the main source of updates and information. Protest support and or solidarity in these times have been made easy, easier if you want; thanks largely to the internet and social media – most especially the micro blogging site, Twitter. The days when protests were largely localised continues to fade out as hashtags transcend boundaries with some going global as was the case with the #EndSars street protests that rocked Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria. Twitter became the standout medium

through which thousands of people were mobilized locally and abroad to join in the calls to #EndSars – on and offline. The fact that top global celebrities, football clubs, sportsmen and women, politicians and activists joined the call was a testament to the reach that Twitter gave the protest.

Therefore, the internet in this era of globalisation plays a vital role in shaping political attitudes, promoting political involvements and influences mass action globally. The social media is defined as “the new information network and information technology, using a form of communication utilizing interactive and user- produced content, and interpersonal relationships are created and maintained. (Sanatokeskus et al, 2010 cited in Fasunwon, 2019). Social media therefore promotes interaction and public participation over various issues of human concerns. Therefore, the unhindered interactive nature of social media has given vast opportunities to the public to engage in interactions over several issues that relates to Nigeria.

As a result of these evolution in strategy of social protest in Nigeria following successes in use of social media in the “Arab spring” that resulted in regime change in some of the most authoritarian regimes, many in the status quo express “moral panic of the social media” raising concerns that the regime may block, censor or regulate the use of the social media platform for such activism. These concerns are not restricted to Nigeria and the developing world but include the developed world. Institute of Security Studies (2012: 2) states that;

*The UK government experienced jitters over social media following violent riots that rocked the country in mid-2011, prompting Prime Minister David Cameron to propose blocking the use of social media during future occurrences of riots and civil unrest. The proposal was widely criticized in the UK as threatening the right to freedom of speech and expression.*

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Against this background, this paper examines the impact of the social media use in “#EndSARS Protest” and its potentials and implication for social activism aimed at socio-political change in Nigeria in general. This study would, reveal

that the opportunities created by social media have given the users of social media, largely, the power to affect the political and social aspects of Nigeria.

### **History of Social Protests in Nigeria**

The practice of social protest in Nigeria is embedded in the pro-independent movement of the colonial era. It is these engagements that have later transmuted into early political parties and its leaders becoming in the new post-independence, political elites. According to Mochizuki (2009: 208);

*The youth movements of the African colonies emerged and grew within the era of nationalism. Starting from the early resistance and protest movements directed against colonial authorities, nationalist thought and activity developed throughout the twentieth century and up to the independence era... They focused on mobilizing racial awareness and national consciousness, especially in the cities. The youth were the most vibrant agents in colonial politics. In many West African countries, youth action led the independence movement. Such movements included students and intellectuals, both of which categories advocated social change and development.*

Organized labour in Nigeria has historically been in the vanguard of social protest against unfavourable government policies (Tar, 2009). The reaction of the Nigerian state to these protests, especially during the days of military dictatorship is characterized by violent repression (HRW, 1995) and police brutality often leading to deaths of protesters, imprisonment of protest leaders, labour leaders and proscription of labour movements and youth groups such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). Aborishade (2012: 4) a civil rights activist explain the strategies used by the Nigerian state in repression of social protest. He states;

*Policing of protests by the state in Nigeria is done largely by relying on physical and non-physical violent control strategy. The former strategy involves using direct physical force on protesters, including the employment of poisonous tear-gas, harassment, arrest, detention, torture and all kinds of inhuman*

*treatment. The non-physical strategy involves the use of draconian laws, rules and regulations which hinder the free exercise of universally recognized fundamental rights of assembly and action.*

Social protest was also given energy by social activist and civil society organizations who steered mass action against military dictatorship in the 1990s. Undeniably, social and human rights activist like the late Gani Fawehinmi, Beko Ransome-Kuti and Femi Falana under the auspices of civil society organizations such as Campaign for Democracy (CD), during the military autocracies of General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha, led mass protest and suffered all forms of deprivations and imprisonment during this era. Similarly, the late Afrobeat superstar, Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti used protest music about social ills, corruption and military oppression to keep protest and resistance in people's conscience.

In the real sense, online activism in Nigeria can be traced back to 2009 when former Nigerian Rapper eLDee took to Twitter to express his discontent about erratic power supply in Nigeria. (Oloyede and Elegba, 2019). This came after his friend could not have a surgery done due to power outage. He canvassed four other young Nigerians, Sheile Ojei, Amara Nwakpa, Seyi Kuyinu and Nigerian singer, Banky W to join in public discussion of poor power situation in the country (Odewale, 2014). During their online conversation, the phrase "Light Up Nigeria" came up and within few minutes, it became a trending hashtag on Twitter. The hashtag quickly became an avenue for average Nigerians to express their displeasure about the situation. Odewale (2014, p.1) asserts that;

*Until Light Up Nigeria, there had been no recorded example of a campaign of this magnitude started online and, largely, remaining online. Therefore, LUN serves as the pioneer case of a digitally motivated campaign in Nigeria. Of course, there were online discussions around political developments in the country, there was the outrage about the video of military officers molesting an innocent woman. But such discussions were mainly held on Facebook at a time when Twitter was not popular.*

With the success of the “Light Up Nigeria” campaign as the first recorded online campaign, other online campaigns began. After “Light Up Nigeria” #EnoughIsEnough campaign where youths demanded for a free, fair and credible election in 2011 general election. The #OccupyNigeria protest movement in 2012 and its use of social media is yet another innovation in social protest in Nigeria (Hari, 2014). It was a collective protest used to challenge the removal of subsidy on Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) and subsequently increasing the price of PMS from 65 naira to 140 naira. This came after the Arab Spring between 2010 and 2011 and the Global Occupy social protest. Just like these movements, #OccupyNigeria drew international attention through online mobilization and eventual physical occupation of the street by Nigerians (Egbunike, 2015). The protest was characterized by mass demonstration, civil disobedience, strike actions and social media activism using Twitter and Facebook. Mejias (2016) noted that the effects of microblogging are presumably visible in developing forms of public discourse and collaboration. The use of microblogs and social media services to connect with millions of Nigerians on the removal of subsidy were utilised by the organisers, since the mainstream media has marginalized them and taken sides with the government. The protest was successful as it made the government revert the price of PMS from 140 naira to 97 naira. #OccupyNigeria symbolizes a clear indication of the future of social advocacy and global movements in Nigeria. With the success of #OccupyNigeria campaign, online social campaign especially Twitter hashtags became a potent tool for activism as seen in the case of #BringBackOurGirls campaign, which was created to make the public aware about the abduction of hundreds of young girls in Chibok, a town in Borno state, Northern Nigeria.

The campaign caught the attention of international community and it subsequently seeks international help to rescue the girls, although it has proved abortive. The #BringBackOurGirls hashtag campaign has transformed into #BBOG, #ChibokGirls, and #TheChibokGirls hashtags all with the same goal. #BBOG has also gained scholarly attention. Ofori-Parku and Moscato (2018) explored how the Nigerian media, British and American media framed the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. Other scholars that have contributed to the discourse of #BringBackOurGirls explored it in terms of; online communities supporting real-world transformation and change (Olson, 2016), social

mobilization (Olutokunbo, Suandi, Cephas and Abu-Samah, 2015), gender representation (Berents, 2016) and feminist appropriations (Maxfield, 2016). Other hashtags that were created on Twitter, which were used to create awareness and make public demands includes #IStandWithNigeria, #BeingFemaleInNigeria, #OpenNASS, #ABSURape, #StopBokoHaram more recently the #PoliceReform and #Endsars campaign. There are three distinct observations from all the hashtag campaigns; firstly, it creates awareness about public issues. Secondly, it demands for a solution from the government and lastly, it sets the agenda for the public. Majority of these hashtags that have been successful, has also been impacted by offline engagement and participation. According to Olson (2016, pp. 773-774):

*Online and offline activism are symbiotic, each strengthening and growing the other. This powerful connection of networked protest and activism drove #BringBackOurGirls onto the international political agenda. While the Chibok school girls still have not been returned to their families, #BringBackOurGirls has given Nigerian activists political clout and a voice in national affairs. Internationally, it has focused attention on the ways that women and girls are the target of Boko Haram's war tactics. The #BringBackOurGirls movement's enduring presence shows that online communities galvanized by a cause have the power to transform the public agenda in a way that can change people's lived realities.*

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Social Media**

The term “Social Media” has been defined in different ways by its users. For instance, Kaplan (2010) defines social media as “a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. It includes web-based and mobile based technologies that are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue among individuals, organizations, and communities. Typical examples of social media platforms include websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and the interactive options on these websites, such as the “retweeting” option on Twitter. These instruments are referred to as media because they are tools which can also be used for the



storage and dissemination of information. However, unlike the traditional media like Television and Radio, most of the social media tools allow their users to interact as “re-tweeting” on Twitter and “comment” options on Facebook illustrate.

Looking at social media from a more practical point of view, Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) define social media as a “read-write Web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content”. One thing that is common in the definitions of social media reviewed in this work is the view that it is based on user-generated participation. The opportunity to enjoy user-to-user interaction distinguishes social media from the traditional media which is characterized by top-down news dissemination arrangement (Clark and Aufderheide, 2009). Another attribute of the social media which distinguishes it from the traditional media is the choice it accords its users. Choice enables people to access the information they like to learn about through the social media, eliminating the gatekeeper role of traditional media. On one hand, the choice offered by social media reduces the shared experience that viewers of particular traditional media channels usually have; on the other hand, it creates a network of individuals with like interests and similar preferences.

Hari (2014) noted that the concept of social media generally refers to internet or web based tools, applications and services that enable users to engage with each another generate content, share and search for information online. What makes these media social is its interactive and collaborative nature, that is, they are built in ways that that empowers internet users to share content and communicate with one another in real time. New technological advancement in recent times has led to the development of various social media platforms. According to Institute of Security Studies (2012:2), these platforms can be classified in six major classes. These are:

- Collaborative projects (e.g Wikipedia).
- Blogs and micro-blogs (e.g Twitter).
- Video content communities (e.g Youtube).
- Social networking sites (e,g Facebook, Google+).
- Virtual games world (e.g World of war craft).
- Picture sharing sites (e.g Flickr, Instagram).

Recently, the adoption and engagement with some of these platforms by people in Africa and Nigeria in particular has been widespread, especially via mobile telephony. Facebook for instance, has been broadly adopted as a communicative tool across much of the continent (Bohler-Muller and Merwe, 2011; How Nigerians use, 2013). Facebook is indeed the most visited website and the most used social media in Africa. That is not to say that access to a mobile phone necessarily translate to mobile internet and social media use but it highlights the growing profile of mobile internet use on the continent for social connectivity and interaction (Hari, 2014).

### **#EndSARS Protests:**

This refers to the protest movement that began in 2017 in Nigeria as a response to police brutality particularly from SARS, a unit of the police force in the country. However, the movement only revived in early October, after a video emerged of police officers thought to be members of the SARS unit, allegedly killing an unarmed young man. Nigerians in most of the country's major cities embarked on mass demonstrations and online social activism to express their outrage on police brutality and by extension end bad governance in the country. Even with the presence of Covid-19 pandemic and existing security challenges, the protest had the tacit approval of most of the citizenry. The country was soaked in a protest mood.

In some parts of the country and among online activist protesters adopted the slogan of “#EndSARS” to align with the global “#Blacklivesmatter” movement emphasizing its position on the ending of police brutality and that of the Hong Kong protest which has been on for more than a year with no central leadership. By drawing inspiration from the Black Lives Matter protest and the Hong Kong experience, it tapped the widespread sense of being the downtrodden that have been ignored, the 99% who form the basis of society (Calhoun, 2013) that have been disregarded by government who chose to ignore not only the harassment of the youth by the police but also the deep social inequality in the Nigerian society. The unprecedented use of social media platforms such as Twitter, blackberry messenger and Facebook by protesters has become a prominent feature of this protest.

### **Methodology**

The study engaged the qualitative approach. Inferences were made from extant literatures drawn from relevant information in textbooks, journals, newspapers,

and other internet articles on the subject matter. The mode of analytical presentation appears in themes that reveals the areas, nature, and outcomes of protests in Nigeria through the engagement of the social media. Thus, the scope of the study would be restricted to the mobilisations on social media against the police brutality of men of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (#EndSars) in Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is the Agenda Setting Theory. According to Zhu and Blood (1997), the agenda theory “is the process whereby the media leads the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues”. This is because the action of the media is towards influencing people’s perception of what is important, acceptable, or desirable. Attention is drawn to certain aspects of reality and away from others, thus influencing people in terms of what to think.

Folarin (1998) in his own view notes that “Agenda setting implies that the media predetermines what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society”. In Folarin’s submission, the media through its educative and enlightenment functions brings to light different issues of importance in the society

Agenda setting does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what people actually think but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what people are thinking about. Furthermore the Agenda Setting Theory has been viewed in different ways. McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (1997) make the distinction between the first and second levels of agenda setting. The first level agenda setting deals with objects on the media and public agenda. This is the traditional domain of agenda setting research in which the media are seen as influencing what issues are included on the public agenda. On the other hand, the second level of agenda setting looks at attributes of these objects. At this level, the media not only suggest what the public should think about but also influence how people should think about the issue.

According to Folarin (1998), the elements involved in agenda setting include:

- i. The quality or frequency of reporting
- ii. Prominence given to the reports – through headline, display, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, films, graphics or tuning on radio and television

- iii. The degree of conflict generated in the reports; and
- iv. Cumulative media specific effects overtime.

The media, most especially social media, through the above elements can colour events by using them in a particular way or refusing to use them at all. These significantly shaped the conduct and the outcome of the EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

### **#EndSARS Protests in Nigeria: An Overview**

The history of police brutality in Nigeria could be traced back to the colonial period. As at that time, the desire to promote the economic and political agenda of the colonizers was the reason for the creation of the police force (HWR, 2005). In many communities where colonial rules were resisted, the police engaged in brutal attacks to suppress their resistance. The force was first created for the Lagos Colony in 1861 and other constabularies were created in what was then called Northern and Southern protectorate. The use of violence to suppress the people by the police from the beginning as created a disconnection between the people and the force; this has defined law enforcement practice in Nigeria since that period.

As HRW (2005) noted, the same basic structure was retained after Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960. By this time, public perceptions of the police were firmly grounded in their experience of the use of the police force to extend colonial domination, for example, in the suppression of demonstrations from the late 1920s, workers strikes in the 1940s and communal violence from the 1950s. Post-independence, successive military regimes used the police to enforce authoritarian rule, further entrenching a culture of violence and inhibiting the development of democratic institutions, founded on the rule of law.

With this disconnection, the ordinary citizen feels and perceives that the police force has been disloyal to their primary duty of protecting lives and properties but rather they attack citizens for economic gain. Reports by international and local non-government organizations show that the relationship between the police and the citizen they are meant to protect is characterized by brutality, unlawful arrest and exploitation. There are local reports on incidence where officers of the police force compelled motorists to stop at checkpoints and then threaten and sometimes shoot at those who refuse to pay bribe for as 50 naira.

Thus, an average Nigerian has a negative perception as well as low confidence in the police force (Oloyede and Elega, 2019).

### **The Social Media and the #EndSARS Protests**

The successes of the Tunisia and Egyptian mobilisation in Africa have influenced the entire continent. Given the domino effect of the internet on its users, and the idea that what works in a political system could be replicated in another to get almost the same results, Nigerians have also employed the strategy of mobilisation of people through the social media in order to create awareness, and effect political change in the country (Fasunwon, 2019). Thus, in recent years, Nigerians are keenly involved in the politics of their country through the use of social media. Nigerians use social network sites mainly Twitter, to engage with government agencies as well as question governments' policies and choices. With the use of social media, activists are not only interacting with fellow citizens but also with policy makers. In that sense, McQuail (2010) argued that public agenda is greatly being swayed by public issues communicated through social media.

The internet allows for a quasi-instantaneous transmission of information at low cost and free from the typical barriers that confine access to the traditional media. The evolution of the new media during the last decade has made it easy to transmit messages in different formats (text, sound, and image). Furthermore, online communication transcends geographical borders permitting the formation of transnational communities based on shared language, culture, or interests. Due to its network-like and non-hierarchical structure, the internet has been considered as the ideal means of communication for social movements and subaltern groups challenging established power structures (Wim, Loader, Nixon and Rucht. 2004). In Western democracies, it was expected to eradicate the democratic deficits of corporate-dominated media systems, influenced by consumer-culture and intertwined with powerful elites. As for authoritarian systems, the World Wide Web promised not only to undermine the state's control on information circulation but also to open up new communication channels for suppressed opposition groups and dissidents (Ferdinand 2000).

As noted early, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was formed in Lagos State in 1992, a period when infamous armed robbers such as Shina Rambo were in absolute control of the state (Midenda, 2017). It was created as a faceless police unit that executes covert operations against armed robbers. Two

decades after its creation, the unit had spread across the various states of the country (Oloyede and Elega, 2019). While the unit spread across the nation, there was however no proper structure which accounted for some of its lawless features. The present report of police brutality on social media, particularly, the use of the #Endsars on Twitter has brought unrestricted attention to it. Over the years, several Nigerians, particularly, the pop stars in the country have expressed their worries, fears and incidents of police brutality. So we cannot say that the online campaign about the police brutality is new. Same also, the Nigerian movie industry, Nollywood has represented cases of brutality and corruption within the Nigerian police force in their productions (Oloyede and Elega, 2019).

Many Nigerians, having been exposed to vicious arrests, extortion and extra judiciary killings, launched a social media campaign using the hashtag #EndSARS on Twitter to put an end to police brutality (Oloyede and Elega, 2019). The #EndSARS campaign began with the publication of a petition by convener Segun Awosanya. It was signed by 10,195 Nigerians and submitted to the Nigerian National Assembly to scrap the police unit. The #EndSARS Twitter campaign started on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 2017, when a videotape of police officers attached to the unit shot and killed a man surfaced online. The campaign became a trending subject on Twitter with over 400,000 Tweets in twelve hours. Nigerians using 280 characters, described their awful and traumatic experiences with SARS, the feared unit of the police set up to fight banditry. There have been isolated cases of police brutality prior to the campaign across the country. But, it was during the #EndSARS movement that the harm caused by such viciousness was opened. The convener of the #EndSARS movement also revealed the extent of decay within the police unit. The campaign further showed that the police has no distinguishable structure with no organised system of operation. The officers of the unit act based on self-will with little or no regards for fundamental human rights for citizens, especially helpless youth (Oloyede and Elega, 2019). In response, since around 2006, the government has [promised reforms](#) at least five different times and made what some have called ‘cosmetic attempts’ in that direction (Ruppel and Arowobusoye, 2020).

However, in early October this year, [graphic images](#) appeared on social media of SARS brutalizing young people in various parts of Nigeria. Nigerian youths became fed up and moved their certainly peaceful online protests to the streets

of major cities in Nigeria, particularly in Lagos, Abuja, and in several other States across the Nigerian Federation. With the use of social media and the graphic images young people organized their protests and especially tech savvy youths used social media to gather money for the protests in the form of Bit Coins, US dollars, the Nigerian Naira and other forms of donations (Ruppel and Arowobusoye, 2020). The youths were heavily organised, started gathering international support from the international media, international figures, sports and music personalities, institutions and international celebrities of Nigerian and non-Nigerian descent, international organisations and various critical and prominent segments of the Nigerian population, which finally got the attention of the government (Ruppel and Arowobusoye, 2020).

The #Endsars protest launched a [#5for5](#) demand, asking for:

1. Immediate release of all arrested protesters.
2. Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families.
3. Setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct (within 10 days).
4. In line with the new Police Act, psychological evaluation and retraining (to be confirmed by an independent body) of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed.
5. Increase police salary so that they are adequately compensated for protecting lives and property of citizens.

In various parts of the country, hundreds of thousands of Nigerian youths were literally on the streets, demonstrating. Faced with the huge demonstrations across the nation, the government had to respond to this overwhelming march of people power. SARS was thus disbanded after a few days of protest. The government decided to set up a new team, purportedly not including former SARS officers, which is called the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), presently in training. Whether this new arrangement will result in a positive change, as a restructuring and reorientation of the policing system towards an improved security sector and governance reform can only be known when the new police unit becomes operational. Despite the announcement of the dismantling of SARS on 11 October (or its renaming as SWAT) only gave more confidence to the protesters and the demonstrations continued to grow.

What started as the demand to #EndSARS, to dismantle the notorious police Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), later widened into opposition to all forms of intimidation by the security forces and even calls for President Buhari to resign (Wayne 2020). Placards held by the protesters included #end unemployment, #end commercialization of education, #end hunger, #end lack of free medical care, #end bad roads, #end hunger, #end fuel price increase, #end increase in electricity tariff, and so on. Above all, the movement began to acquire a political character as the battle cry of the protesters included #Buhari (the head of the central government) must go! (Abrisade, 2020).

Nigeria is an oil rich state, but the bulk of the populace are awfully poor. The National Bureau of Statistics had earlier this year, published their survey that indicated that 40% of households existed on a monthly income of less than ₦18, 000. The minimum wage was increased last year to ₦30, 000 a month, but in many states, this has yet to be implemented, yet Nigeria has one of the highest paid lawmakers in the world who have severally been seen sleeping during sittings, receive outlandish remunerations like hardship allowance that run into millions of naira, it was quite reckless and callous for them to take a very long time to deliberate in the house before they increased the minimum wage to ₦30,000, which is only about 0.01% of their monthly allowances (Ugonna, 2020). As Wayne (2020) noted, Nigeria is one of the most unequal countries in the world with the richest person being richer than anyone else in Africa or Britain. As a result, corruption is rampant, including regular payment of bribes at police roadblocks.

Earlier in the year increment in the prices of fuel and electricity were announced, in spite of the huge economic effect of lockdowns linked with Covid-19. The main trade union centres, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) declared a general strike from 28 September, however, this was called off at the last minute after meetings with the government and a pact with some minor sweeteners for the trade union leaders (Wayne, 2020). ASUU, the university lecturer's union, have been on strike for the last seven months with all the public universities closed. The health workers organised a two-week national 'warning' strike earlier in September with many more local strikes (Wayne, 2020).

In the past, anti-military dictatorship struggles had involved mass protests, but in terms of the number of people mobilized on the streets, those struggles now pale into insignificance (Anorisade, 2020). The struggles against military



dictatorship tested the will and conviction of relatively few protesters. Aided by the influence of social media, the spread and numbers of protesters involved in the #endsars movement have announced a new and glorious phase in mass struggles in Nigeria (Aborisade, 2020).

The #EndSARS protests embarked on a sympathy feast as we saw governors and ex-lawmakers tried to align with the protesters, in a bid to not get ‘dragged’ and trolled on social media by young Nigerians. The governor of Rivers State, Nyesom Wike, in a tweet shared 24 hours before the protest banned peaceful protests in his state but was later seen addressing the protesters on the atrocities of SARS, after he was called out by Nigerian youths in numerous tweets, for interfering with the citizens’ power to carry out their constitutional rights (Ugonna, 2020). The governor of Lagos state, Jide Sanwo-Olu, was also made to take faster action after he was equally ‘dragged’ on Twitter for not taking any tangible action regarding the deaths which occurred at the Surulere protests. This led to his meeting with the president in less than 24 hours to inform him of the demands of the #EndSARS protesters (Ugonna, 2020).

Social media has provided the youth with the platform to demand accountability from their government officials without fear or intimidation, granted them the liberty to express their opinions, garner support and even plan an entire protest without having to have met each other in person (Ugonna, 2020). The position in the call for a leader for the #EndSARS protest was simple; *we are all leaders and the government is accountable to us, the taxpayers who fund this country’s existence. We also do not practice classism in this new era so no one is superior to the other* (Ugonna, 2020).

### **The Challenges Associated with the EndSARS Protests**

In spite of the huge potentials of the new social media for setting agenda for the society, they equally have their challenges. No doubt, the new social media platforms can be misused in disseminating unfiltered/unverified information and rumours which are inimical to a society’s survival. The increasing use of social media and other online tools has indeed led to greater privacy challenges. This is to say that with the great potentials of the internet and other digital social media platforms, is included the challenges of monitoring and regulation. Obviously, the new social media require some sort of regulation if our society is not to degenerate into a state of anarchy (Ekwe, 2011).

Social media despite its numerous advantages in fostering politics, democracy and good governance is also a very volatile platform to trend politics. A viral video of immoral conduct or lurid sex photo can instantly infect a career, dooming it to untimely termination. Anonymity of sources makes it difficult for strict regulation, monitoring and prosecution of illicit acts. This makes it a vulnerable instrument for perpetuating fraudulent acts. It also promotes piracy. This is partly because the question of copyright and intellectual property are more complex and difficult to define and even more difficult to regulate online. Similarly, images and sounds can be digitally manipulated, so truth and reality are difficult to ascertain. Social media is addictive in nature, making work/life balance hard to achieve. With the new technologies, users get more than they bargain for because of their information overload and social network overload. There is also the problem of continuous partial attention which removes social media users from the real world.

Another challenge is the issue of relatively low penetration and access in the country. Writing on penetration of new media in Africa Osuala in Adibe and Odoemelam (2011) notes that:

*The diffusion of new technologies in Africa is still at a snail speed such that the gap between the information rich developed countries and African countries continue to increase everyday..... Africa has 13% of world population but only 2% of the world telephone lines and 1% internet connectivity. Consequently, most African countries have not been able to reap the abundant benefits of the global information revolution in many areas of life.*

Again, in many parts of Nigeria where social media (such as, twitter, Facebook) is in use, it is still mainly an urban affair and mostly elitist. Perhaps, the most worrisome of it all is the problem of weak or absent regulation of the technology. Kidafa, Odoemelam and Elechi (2011) observe that “regulating traditional media in the face of issues like obscenity, copyright, right to privacy, was upheaval (sic), but have become more difficult with the emergence of social media”. How to effect censorship without being seen as abridging rights and derailing democracy is a dilemma for the politicians and government officials.

The EndSARS protest like many other protests was in no doubt fuelled by Nigeria's rising profile in internet penetration and smartphone access. The technology was an efficient vehicle for the rapid transmission of information about planned events and political developments, thereby facilitating the organization of protest activity. But technology is what it is – technology - depending on how you use it. The figurative case of a knife in the hand of a murderer producing different results compared to a knife in the hand of a surgeon. Later on in the life of the protests, it began to suffer by the very tool that made it.

During the #EndSARS protest, more than 28 million social media posts bearing the #EndSARS hashtag was recorded on Twitter alone. Analytics show that only a small quota of this outstanding figure was used to mobilize demonstrations, garner local, diasporic, foreign backing, and sympathy for the movement. The majority of postings, shares, tweets, and retweets were proliferated fake contents inserted to fuel an already edgy state of affairs. Before the hoodlums that we see today came offline, they already existed online.

Misrepresentation of happenings during the #EndSARS protest was in full-blown circulation with a deliberate goal to scale up fear and anger. Fake stories and accompanying imagery of alleged state action against its citizens trended on social media particularly in Lekki which some has termed “Lekki Shooting” or “Lekki Massacre”. The obvious intent was to arouse a sense of fear and anger, encourage Nigerians to think intuitively by “liking”, retweeting, sharing content that painted instituted authority as villains thereby distorting the mutual trust needed to restore peace. These images were later found to have originated from theatre scenes, automobile accidents, past events (even beyond the shores of Nigeria). Many have come to debunk concocted stories. Many will in the coming days. Sadly, the deed had already be done, fire instead of water was unleashed.

The protests brought home the dangers of fake news in the social media. Nobel Laureate Winner, Professor Wole Soyinka had warned several months back that fake news through the social media is like the bomb that can destroy the world and it is sure that the bomb will come from Nigeria. Thus, the minister of youth and sports, Sunday Dare said that;

*“What happened during the protests has been reviewed to a certain extent. We have seen debunking of several of the stories of deaths that came up (Channels Television, 2020).*

There is no denying that there were fatal incidences as a fall-out of the #EndSARS protest. However, misinformation on social media fanned by violent, hate-mongering, and communally insensitive posts from influencers and supposed leaders is now undermining the movements’ public image and its ability to attract large and diverse segments of society. The surge of fake news has the power to harm the credibility of the #EndSARS protest and may eventually be the death of it. As Oduyemi (2020) noted, real leaders of the revolution must be truth-seekers and not lie peddlers. Real revolutions come from a place of truth. For if the foundation is based on lies, it will surely sink. It won’t be long before the skirt is uncovered and the true sex revealed. As he argued, even if it has to be a fire, let it refine the stories before posting. If it has to be water, let it not drown us (Oduyemi, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The two and a half week-long #EndSARS protests in Nigeria against police brutality garnered attention and raised awareness far beyond the country’s borders thanks to a savvy, well-planned out campaign boosted by Nigerian and global celebrities. But none of this would have been possible without the sheer reach and immediacy of major social media platforms. The peaceful protest started online using the #EndSars hashtag before spreading quickly to thousands of people joining protests on the streets of Nigeria’s big cities and then London, Toronto, Houston, and elsewhere, again thanks to social media.

When the #EndSARS protest started to gain so much drive on the social media, many Nigerian expressed confidence that the battle will be the “tipping point” of the war not only against police impunity but also bad governance and the beginning of a birth of social and political engagement. Many hailed the protest as a success even though the implementation of their demands remains to be seen.. There is a common agreement that use of the social media in the protest has brought about a level of organisation and cohesion among Nigerians that is unparalleled. As Nigerians are gradually becoming social media savvy, the

prospects of the platform becoming a hub of social and political activism is bright. The #EndSARS protest may well be a template for other several concerns that affect the country. Given that concepts of democracy are closely knotted to the ability of citizens to express their feelings and to the aptitude to organize shared action; social media will continue to offer more prospects for conversation and partnership amongst the citizenry. This will not only create a better public sphere but also a vibrant democracy. While the use of social media is still a novelty in the country, conversation of public issues will possibly in the future be shaped by the social media.

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