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## The ghost of #EndSars looms over Nigeria's democratic authoritarianism

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In October 2020, a nationwide revolt erupted across Nigeria against the special anti-robbery squad (SARS) police unit. More than a protest against police brutality, it was a wider call for social justice from young Nigerians. One year after the protests, FLIA Fellow Uche Igwe argues that insecurity in the country has worsened, systematic police reforms remain a mirage and only few of the victims of police brutality have received justice.

It is now more than a year since nationwide protests ruptured across Nigeria against police brutality. The social movement 'End SARS' in October 2020 was an unconventional and clear expression of a need for alternative spaces of political engagement, combined with diminishing trust in the conventional setup. It had all the traits of civic temper described by scholars at the Institute of Development Studies as '**unruly politics**'. Many doubted that a mass revolt resembling the **Arab Spring** could ever happen in Nigeria; nevertheless, a determined and resilient crowd, backed by modern communications technology, broke unimaginable boundaries and created a social movement unprecedented in the nation's history.

The End SARS protests looks historic in changing the Nigerian political landscape for good. If the protesters aimed to disrupt and eventually delegitimise Nigeria's current political order, they succeeded. As a mass movement, young Nigerians were able to bring technology as a tool for social change to the forefront. Groups from diverse backgrounds and social classes could assemble using newly established virtual spaces, reconfiguring Nigeria's political terrain. It showed that real political power lies in the hands of young Nigerians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even if this is less evident to the ruling political elite.

## Same purpose, different motives

On the surface, the protests were triggered by police brutality. But in reality, the uprising resulted from the collective anger and dissatisfaction of the masses against the status quo. Yet it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the protesters were motivated by a single ideology. They were outraged for different reasons.

Unlike many other revolts, End SARS was a collectively driven protest. Although the leaderless nature of the movement gave the protesters a sense of security against manipulation, it also made them lose any opportunity for a structured conversation. The demonstrators inadvertently affirmed, however, that while protests are necessary channels to lawfully express grievances in a democracy, they are insufficient to transform a political consciousness, no matter how widespread, into political office. At the same time, the amorphous and unpredictable nature of the movement, fuelled by restless activists, contributed to its long-lasting resistance and made it stronger. Driven by a common purpose of overwhelming and delegitimising the Nigerian government, the protest achieved what many would have thought impossible.

## Spontaneity and morale

The protesters overcame cultural, ethnic, class and religious fault lines to pursue their mission, and the political momentum generated was unique as young people organised themselves, spontaneously, and raised funds from independent sources, including the diaspora community. When the government tried to block conventional channels, the protesters successfully used alternative options including blockchain technology. Days of speculation led to heightened

apprehension and helplessness, which pointed to the likelihood of End SARS leading to political upheaval. Tension across the country was palpable. Uncertainty hung in the air like the Sword of Damocles. The Nigerian government felt threatened and deployed the military, which responded with maximum force and unleashed violence on the protesters, leading to many fatalities. Bodies of many who lost their lives **littered the streets**. Some were allegedly deposited in unknown mortuaries, while others remain missing to date.

The shooting at defenceless protesters sparked national and global outrage. However, after the **shootings at the Lekki toll gate** and the unfortunate casualties, many of the protesters became frightened. Their morale was broken, and some who played vital roles faced harassment from the government. Bank accounts were blocked, forcing many to go underground or flee to safety abroad.

After **a year of denials by the government**, the judicial panel finally revealed that the shooting was indeed a **massacre**, where about 48 unarmed, helpless and defenceless campaigners were shot dead, injured or assaulted. After this disturbing revelation, many sections of the Nigerian public, including parliament, have called for the **sack of Lai Mohammed**, Buhari's Information Minister for lying to the public.

## A growing authoritarian intolerance of civil society

Since the protests there have been multiple cases of harassment towards journalists, closure of media houses and houndings of activists. The government has accused critics of various crimes, including treason and terrorism, fuelling speculation that President Buhari may be slowly **reverting to his authoritarian style** as a military ruler.

Reports indicate that **attacks on journalists have doubled** under the current administration, including arrests, detentions, threats and seizure of equipment. Last October 2020, the National Broadcasting Corporation, a government agency, **fined several media houses** for what was described as 'unprofessional coverage' of the shooting at the End SARS protesters. Eromosele Adene, one of the **prominent voices of the movement**, was arrested in Lagos and transported by road to Abuja, where he was detained for days without a court order. The ban on Twitter was a direct expression of government anger and frustration over the way social media drew global attention.

There are strong indications of efforts regionally to design policies aimed at silencing the voice of young people by restricting their freedom in the democratic arena. The global think tank Freedom House highlighted cases of rising authoritarianism across many countries in West Africa, through a **deliberate curtailing of individual liberties** and a decline in civil rights.

## A judicial committee produced limited results

Global outrage in the aftermath of the Lekki shooting took the Nigerian government unawares and forced them into official silence and, later, denial. However, as part of the response, the government announced it would **set up judicial committees**; twenty-eight states set up judicial panels, with **22 receiving 730 petitions**. They were suspected to be mere window dressing because, except for a few states, many committees did not receive the necessary funds needed for them to operate. It seemed the aim was to achieve some public relations stunt that could distract those sympathetic.

Until recently, only a **few pronouncements have been made**, and paltry compensations have been provided to some of the citizens identified as victims of police brutality. However, very little has happened to punish many of the police officers who were named as perpetrators. Despite several petitions with damning evidence of brutality against some officers, the leadership of the Nigerian police has kept mute, making observers believe that they may be offering their force official protection.

Months after the protests, there is nothing to suggest that the relationship between the police and the public has improved. It has probably worsened and spread to other security agencies.

Neither has much changed in the policy arena. The proscription of the notorious police unit was a knee jerk reaction that was not backed by any meaningful institutional reforms. After the protests, which partly resulted from frustrations about police brutality and human rights abuses, such actions are still prevalent. The perpetrators might have become subtle, yet attacks on innocent civilians have continued, leading to the widespread perception that police reforms remain a mirage. Trust between the security agencies and members of the public has almost completely broken down, which has resulted in a nationwide escalation of violence. Many police officers have been killed, and several police stations have

been razed by 'unknown gunmen'. Young people who were on the receiving side of police brutality consider perpetrating violence against security personnel as a method of revenge.

## The hovering ghost of #EndSars

The protests were conduits to express anger and discontent against the government's incompetence, human rights abuses, corruption, insecurity and policy dissonance. For some, it did not produce a tangible change, but it revealed the power of organised young people and exposed the weakness of the political elite. The shooting of protesters by the Nigerian Army has become an irreversible dent in their public image.

Many observers believe that the ghosts of #EndSARS will continue to haunt Nigeria and Nigerians, but how it will manifest in the future remains both a cause for concern and an issue for cautious speculation. With the 2023 elections around the corner, the likelihood of a similar uprising should not be ruled out. This time it could sufficiently unsettle the political elite and might even overwhelm them. They need to keep watching their backs, because it is not yet over.

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*Photo by Ayoola Salako on Unsplash.*

### About the author



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