

## Youths as Vanguard of Change in Nigeria: The #EndSARs Protests in Focus

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### **Abstract**

*In every society, youths symbolize change and development. Their strength, inventiveness, dynamism and innovativeness are valuable resources which, if properly utilized can reposition a nation on the threshold of social, economic and political transformation. In spite of these tremendous assets, Nigerian youths have been contending with myriads of challenges such as poverty, unemployment, insecurity, drug abuse, political exclusion etc. Consequently, young people who navigate these challenges by engaging in income generating activities with little or no support from the government unfortunately became victims of extortion and oppression by the Nigerian Police. The failure of the State to check the excesses of its institutions eventually triggered decades of bottled up anger and frustration by Nigerian youths resulting in what became known as the famous #EndSARs protests. The protests blossomed on October 8, 2020 in Lagos and spread to other cities in Nigeria following weeks of outrage and frustration over recordings and pictures of police abuse, intimidation and extortion. The protesters eventually presented a list of five demands to reform the Nigerian Police. Using secondary data, findings from the study revealed that being part of a globalized world, Nigerian youths have now become more conscious of the conditions that enslave them, hence their resolve to adopt non-violent means to dismantle the structures of injustice, oppression, domination and exploitation in their environment. The paper recommends that both the federal and state governments should create more job opportunities and regularly interact with the citizens to understand and respond appropriately to the challenges confronting them.*

**Keywords:** Change; Critical theory; #EndSARS, Police; Protests; Youths

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### **Introduction**

In every society, youths are the symbol of change and development. Their strength, inventiveness, dynamism and innovativeness are valuable resources which, if properly utilized can reposition a nation on the threshold of social, economic and political transformation. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015), if youths are given the opportunity to thrive, they can be a positive force for development. Similarly, the United Nations Youth Strategy (2030) also emphasized that youths have the resilience and innovative solutions to drive social progress and inspire political change in urban and rural settings. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2009, p.1) described youths as the “greatest asset that every nation can have...Not only are they

legitimately regarded as the future leaders, they are potentially and actually the greatest investment for a country's development".

Beside the critical role that youths play in promoting socio-economic development, the demographic composition of youths all over the world has also changed significantly. The United Nations Youth Strategy (2030) revealed that there are 1.8 billion youths in the world today. Out of this number, 90% of them are living in developing countries. Similarly, the African Youth Charter (2009) states that youth constitute 40% of the population of the African continent. In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (2012) National Baseline Youth Survey reported that the population of youths (15 – 35 years) in Nigeria is estimated to be 64 million.

Consequently, looking at the increasing population of youths as well as their strategic position in promoting socio- development, one would have expected that youth empowerment would form the bedrock of development efforts at all levels of governance in Nigeria. Unfortunately, this has not been the case as youth development has been relegated to the back seat by Nigerian leaders. As rightly observed by Ake (1996), the basic issue in Africa was not that development had failed, but rather that development was not on the political agenda of the successors to the colonial masters. Decades of bad governance and corruption orchestrated by the Nigerian political class have left made Nigerian youths not to only to lose confidence in the leaders but are also contending with catalogues of existential challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, insecurity, drug abuse, political exclusion, etc.

In a bid to overcome these conditions which Ake (1996:1) described as the greatest impediments to Africa's development, Nigerian youths who have been involved in income generating activities often with little or no support from the government have unfortunately become victims of exploitation, oppression and subjection by agents of the state. One of such institutional state actors, the Nigerian Police, which is supposed to protect the lives and property of Nigerian youths, has become notorious for subverting and abusing young people's rights without any noticeable intervention by the Nigerian State. The failure of the State to check the excesses of its institutions eventually triggered decades of bottled up anger and frustration by the country's youths resulting in what became known as the now famous #EndSARs protests. The protests were not unexpected because as observed by Sharp (2010, p.14), nonviolent struggle is the most powerful tool at the disposal of those seeking freedom from dictatorships, as well as from governments known for corruption and avarice, marginalization, unpleasant policies, economic inequities, human insecurity and violence.

The protests which became full-fledged on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, 2020 in Lagos and later spread to other cities in Nigeria followed weeks of outrage and frustration over human rights violation, intimidation, torture, extortion, extra-judicial killings among other abuses by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a special unit of the Nigerian Police Force. The #EndSARs protests grounded economic and social activities in Nigeria. Initially, the government did not pay much attention to the collective actions of the youths which it narrowly conceived as something that would disappear as a vapour. However, after weeks of protests, the protesters presented five demands to the government that were meant to bring some reforms within the Nigeria Police Force. The demands were anchored on the need to release arrested protesters, justice for victims of police brutality, prosecution of police officers involved in human rights abuses, retraining of ex-SARS members and an increase in police remuneration. It was obvious from the collective actions of the #EndSARS protesters that they were incensed and irked by decades of police brutality and were therefore, determined to face the

consequences of their action as far their objectives were achieved. It is against this background that this research examined the role of youths as vanguards of change in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

The concepts of youths and change have been defined in this section for the purpose of clarity.

#### **Youths**

There is lack of consensus among international organizations and nations across the globe as to who a youth is. The United Nations (1981) defines youths as young people between the ages of 15-24 years. The African Youth Charter (2006) defines youths or young people to include persons between the ages of 15 and 35 years. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2001) categorized youths as young people between 18 and 35 years. It can be deduced from the plethora of definitions above that while the demographic categorization of youths may vary, youths are generally adventurous and possess the energy, innovation and creativity to bring about change in the society.

#### **Change**

Change is the only permanent thing on earth. Change, according to Doda (2002), is the alteration or modification of the social structure, social institutions, social organizations, and patterns of social behavior in a specific society or social system on a wide scale. Similarly, Zgourides & Zgourides (2000) noted that any alteration in behavior patterns, cultural values, and customs throughout time is referred to as social change. Sociologists define "significant" change as changes that have far-reaching societal implications (Zgourides & Zgourides, 2000). It is obvious that the only permanent thing in life is change. The #EndSARS protests showed that though the older generation in Nigeria may have dropped the ball on the spirit of activism witnessed during the military rule, the current generation of young people who now live in a globalized world were in no mode to condone the continued abuse of their rights by agents of the state, hence their demand for change and reform of the Nigerian police force.

#### **History of Special Anti-Robbery Squad in Nigeria**

The history and modus operandi of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARs) is intractably linked with the general history of the Nigerian police. The nature and character of post-colonial Nigeria police, according to Alemika (1988) is a product of what was left to us during the colonial period. Colonial police were notorious for their ruthlessness, cruelty, incivility, and lack of responsibility when it came to persons who were thought to be resisting colonial policy (Alemika, 1988). Therefore, after independence, the post-colonial police continued with the pre-colonial police mode of operation in which police officers are more interested and preoccupied with protecting and defending a few powerful wealthy individuals in charge of the county's political and economic system through coercion and violence (Alemika, 1988). As a result, the nature of policing in Nigeria was modeled after suppression and intimidation of perceived opposition elements and dissenting voices demanding for a better way of life for the citizenry (Alemika, 1988).

Therefore, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad which is one of the units within the Nigeria Police was created in 1992 by then Police Commissioner of Lagos State, Simeon Danladi Midenda. SARS was only active in Lagos for a decade but by 2002, it had spread to all the 36 states of the federation as well as Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (News 24, 2020). The original purpose of creating this special unit was to tackle the rising cases of armed robbery, murder, kidnapping and other forms of crime in the commercial city of Lagos state. Over the years, it is obvious that SARs has deviated from its original mandate. It has become notorious for human right abuses of all kinds on members

of the Nigerian public. According to the Amnesty International (2020), between January 2017 and May 2020, the SARS committed acts of extortion, torture, and ill treatment against the Nigerian public.

As a result of the unwholesome activities of the SARS operatives and the inability of the Police leadership to tackle the cases of corruption, torture, harassment and other forms of human right abuses perpetrated by the SARs, there have been unwavering campaigns on the social media and other platforms against the unprofessional conduct of officers of the SARS. In response to public outcry against its acts of brutality, the Police authorities promised that the SARS would be reformed and professionalized. For instance, the Amnesty International (2017) stated that in August 2015, the leadership of the Nigerian police declared that, in order to address accusations of SARS personnel violating human rights, they would implement changes that would reform the police. But as it later became obvious such promise was a ruse and a decoy by the police authorities in Nigeria to merely calm frayed nerves.

Consequently, collective accusations against the unscrupulous activities the SARS came to a boiling point on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, 2020 in Lagos and later to other cities in Nigeria following weeks of outrage and frustration over recordings and pictures of police abuse, intimidation and extortion. The peaceful protests which were later hijacked by hoodlums virtually paralyzed economic and social activities and attracted local and global attention.

### **Challenges of Youths in Nigeria**

This section of the paper seeks to establish a nexus between the #EndSARs protests and the social evils that decades of corruption and misgovernance by the ruling class in Nigeria have imposed on the Nigerian youths.

#### **Poverty**

Poverty is one of the major social and economic problems in Nigeria. Poverty is widespread and prevalent in Nigeria. According to the World Poverty Clock (2021), an organization that tracks progress towards ending extreme poverty, 86,802,955 or 41 percent of Nigerians are living in poverty. Similarly, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2019), an entity that compiles socioeconomic statistics on all aspects of development in Nigeria, confirmed that 43 percent of Nigerians, or 83 million people, live below the poverty line of 137, 430 Naira (\$381.75) a year. These figures support the argument that poverty is endemic and prevalent in Nigeria. But more worrisome is the fact that disaggregated data by age indicates that youths between the ages of 15 and 34 years suffer disproportionately from poverty and inequality in Nigeria than other age categories (Tade, 2021). The implication of the high rate of poverty among the youths is that most of them may not have shelter and could possibly be living in overcrowded houses in slums; cannot afford three square meals a day; cannot clothe themselves; do not have access to medical and educational services among others. The brazen denial of youths access to essential services is tantamount to the proverbial question of “Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?” A country with so much wealth cannot subject its youths to such deplorable human condition and expect peace. Therefore, poverty was one of the drivers of the recent #EndSARs protests that grounded all the key sectors of the Nigerian economy.

#### **Unemployment**

Unemployment has become one of the leading challenges confronting Nigerian youths. Every year, hundreds of youths are churned out of Nigerian Universities, colleges of education and Polytechnics

without any hope of securing paid employment. In addition, the number of secondary school leavers and those without any formal education has also been increasing exponentially. Over the decades, the unemployment curve has been rising steadily in Nigeria without any concrete policy on the part of government to halt the appalling trend. The number of unemployed people in Nigeria rose from 27.1% in the second quarter of 2020 to 33.3% in the fourth segment of 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, 2021). Meanwhile, the number of unemployed youths in Nigeria between 15 and 34 years rose to 42.5% in the fourth quarter of 2020 (NBS, 2021). Consequently, because an idle man is the devil's workshop, many unemployed youths in Nigeria were easily swayed into the EndSARs protests. In other words, the high rate of unemployment in Nigeria amplified the #EndSARs protests. Though there is lack of empirical data regarding the link between unemployment and protests, this study aligns itself with the conclusion of the International Labour Organization (2020) which insisted that unemployment was one among the key drivers of unrest in the Arab world.

### **Drug Abuse**

Drug abuse is one of the major health and social problems confronting youths in Nigeria. Many youths have been involved in abusing behavior-altering drugs ranging from cannabis, heroin to cocaine with serious consequences on their physical, mental and psychological health. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018), there is a high rate of drug abuse among youths in Nigeria between 25 and 39 years. Most of the criminal activities in our society today such as armed robbery, kidnapping, insurgency, banditry, militancy, political thuggery etc. are believed to be perpetrated under the influence of hard drugs. Therefore, since Nigerian youths are suffering from the twin problem of poverty and unemployment, the only available option is to take to drugs as a way of escaping the hardship the Nigerian society has visited on them.

### **Illiteracy**

The role of education as a veritable tool in empowering youths as agents of change in any nation cannot be over emphasized. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2018) defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, with the aid of printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. It is on record that many youths are struggling to fit into the ever-changing labour market due to lack of basic skills such as literacy. Globally, the UNESCO (2017) states that 750 million people worldwide do not have basic literacy skills and that out of this number, two-thirds are women and 102 million of them are youths aged 15-24.

In spite of the huge deficit in literacy in the country, the Nigerian government has over the years paid lip service to its educational system. In the past two decades, the Nigerian government has not been able to allocate up to 15% of her annual budget to the educational sector which is way below the 26% bench mark recommended by the UNESCO. The neglect of the educational sector has severe consequences on youth development in Nigeria. For instance, the United Nations Children Educational Fund (UNICEF, 2018) states that more than 10.5 million Nigerian children are out of school. These children who have been denied education have become the Achilles' hill of the Nigerian society as many of them are being recruited by the Boko Haram insurgents and other criminal gangs to wage war against the Nigerian State.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The paper adopted the Critical theory to explain the role of youths as vanguards of change in Nigeria. The theory has its roots in the ideas of the Frankfurt School, particularly in the thoughts of Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas (Harney, 2014, Scott, 2015

& Fucks, 2015). The basic assumption of the critical theory is that it seeks to unveil existing forms of dominance and oppression and proposing alternative possibilities that emancipate individuals who were previously marginalized and silenced (Harney, 2014). As noted by Horkheimer cited in Harney (2014), the theory is called critical theory because it seeks to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.

Therefore, the EndSARs protests was a movement spearheaded by Nigerian youths to demand an end to torture, brutality, extortion, extra-judicial killings and other forms of abuses by the SARS. Since its formation in 1992, the SARS have been accused of abuses and attempts at reforming the SARS in the past did not yield the desired results. It was therefore through the EndSARs protests that years of oppression and maltreatment of members of the Nigerian public by the SARs was dismantled. Critical theory also posits that it is not enough to identify the source of oppression and domination in the society but solutions to the problem must also be clearly outlined, In line with this tradition, the EndSARs protesters did not only demand the cessation of the SARs but also outlined the strategies that could lead to the reform of the entire Nigeria Police. The EndSARS protesters requested for the training of ex-SARS officials and an improvement in the welfare of the operatives of the Nigerian police in general.

#### **Youths as Vanguard of Change in Nigeria: The #EndSARS Protests In Focus**

Youths have the positive energy to become agents of change in any society. The progress of any society is dependent on how it treats its youths. In other words, youth empowerment and development is a sine qua non to societal transformation. It is the youths that are the future of any society. They possess the skills, energy, and innovativeness needed to drive change in the society. Therefore, if the youths occupy a marginal position in the development agenda of any society, such a society may not be able to make the rapid progress that it desires. It is in the light of the above that this paper examines the #EndSARS Protests by Nigerian youths to ascertain whether or not they have been able to bring about the desired social change in Nigeria.

First, there is no doubt that one of the immediate gains of the #EndSARS protests by Nigerian youths was that it brought about policy change. This is in consonance with the observations made by Silva (2015) that protests have the capacity to influence policy outcomes. Similarly, Amenta and Caren (2004) cited in Hofstedt (2008) also emphasized that one of the significant outcomes of social movements such as the EndSARS protests is that they bring about changes in public policy. Though the SARS was created as a unit within the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) under the Force Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department in 1992 to investigate and prosecute those involved in crimes associated with armed robbery, kidnapping and other crimes associated with firearms (West African Network for Peace Building, WANEP, 2020), they, however, deviated from their original mandate and ended up as monsters to the society. However, the protests by the Nigerian youths against human right abuses led to the dissolution the SARS. This was announced on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October, 2020 by the Presidency. This is a clear indication that the #EndSARS protests by Nigerian youths contributed significantly in policy change because the cessation of the SARS was one of the major demands of the protesters. This of course was a victory not only for the Nigerian youths but also for the whole of the Nigerian populace.

Secondly, beyond the direct impact of the #EndSARS protests on policy change, the protests also had indirect impact on the lives of the youths. Though the primary objective of the #EndSARS protests was against human right abuses by the Nigerian police however, the government reasoned that the army of unemployed youths in Nigeria had exacerbated the protests. This coheres with the

position of Hofstede (2008). In response, the Federal governments set up the Youth Investment Fund with N75 billion to be accessed by youths at a 5% interest rate. This represents a major paradigm shift in the way the government engages the youths. It was the first time that the government exclusively set aside funds in response to the demands of Nigerian youths. In other words, but for the #EndSARS protests, the Nigerian government would probably have not thought of a creative way to empower its army of despondent youths.

Thirdly, the #EndSARS protests led to civic engagement of the Nigerian youths by the political class ostensibly to listen to their grievances. As observed by the Chatham House (2020), civic engagement must become a norm in democratic governance and not a danger to them. This is significant because the antecedent of the post-colonial state in Nigeria is that it is good at harassing and intimidating protesters. The Nigerian State views protesters as destabilizing elements in the society that must be suppressed, subdued and dealt with ruthlessly. This was not the case during the #EndSARS protests. Though at the beginning of the protests, some of the protesters were arrested and detained. But later, security agencies began to utilize civil ways of engaging with members of the public. More importantly, judicial panels were set up in all the 36 States of the Federation and the FCT, as fallout of the demands by the #EndSARS protesters to listen to cases of human right abuses against the Nigerian Police. This demonstrated a more civil way of engaging members of the public in a democratic setting compared to the use of coercive force which has become one of the major hallmarks of the post-colonial state in Nigeria.

Fourthly, the #EndSARS protests ignited the spirit of unity among Nigerian youths irrespective of their ethnic or religious affiliations. Since independence, religious and ethnic differences have been the major sources of attrition in Nigeria. Ethnic or religious crisis have been recurrent in Nigeria leading to the loss of innocent lives and property. However, the #EndSARS protests overcame these primordial sentiments. As observed by Zgourides & Zgourides (2000), individuals and groups of people - for example, civil rights campaigners and other visionaries - may be able to effect significant changes in social policy and structures when they transcend customary boundaries. That was what youths across all the 36 States of the federation and FCT did. They overcame primordial sentiments to resist injustice and exploitation by the SARS. Similarly, Duerksen (2021) claimed that the nationwide #EndSARS protests organized by young people overcame the country's religious, ethnic, and political barriers and sought an end to police abuses, especially the dissolution of the discredited Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (FSARS).

Lastly, the EndSARS protests demonstrated that youths in Nigeria have the capacity to produce social capital/social networking. Fukuyama (2000, p.3) defined social capital as an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals. According to Fukuyama (2000), social capital produces traditional virtues such as trust, honesty, keeping to commitment and reliable performance of duties. The virtues of social capital were clearly on display during the EndSARS protests. This was rightly captured by Falana (2020), a leading human right activist in Nigeria when he stated that he had taken part in many protests against military and civilian dictatorial regimes in Nigeria but had never witnessed the level of commitment and determination exhibited by Nigerians in the ongoing #EndSARS protests. Members of the EndSARS protests provided vehicles to aid the movement of youths from one location to another. Others cooked food with their personal resources for the group. There were also medical doctors among the #EndSARS protesters who treated young people who sustained injury in the course of the protests. As a matter of fact, youths who organized the #EndSARS protest created a platform online to raise money in order to buy prosthetic for a young lady called Miss Jane Obiene who came out to join the protesters with one limb in Abuja. According

to Adediran and Okafor (2020) and Oyeleke (2020), the youths contributed N4, 119,570.00 to purchase a prosthetic for Miss Jane who has been unemployed since 2013 as a result of her disability. The actions of the #EndSARS volunteers underscored the view of Diani, cited in Hofstede (2008) who asserted that the formation of social capital is critical to the study of social movements as it helps to explain their emergence and mobilization efforts. Besides, as succinctly observed by Putnam, cited in Siisänen (2000), most of the social problems in Nigeria today such as police brutality, unemployment, poverty, drug abuse have persisted as a result of the decline in social capital. The #EndSARS protests clearly showed how the youths leveraged on social capital with the aid of social media to dismantle the SARS which was a symbol of oppression and exploitation.

### **Conclusion**

Apparent from the foregoing discussions is the fact that youths in Nigeria like their counterparts in other parts of the world, can be veritable instruments for change. The #EndSARS movement clearly showed how the youths were able to mobilize and fund their activities to achieve their lofty goals.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the foregoing, the paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Experience has shown that after protests, most of the agitations of social movements are not honored by people who are supposed to implement such demands. This paper recommends that since the #EndSARS protesters made five demands to the government, conscious efforts must be made by young people in collaboration with other civil society organizations in Nigeria to ensure that their demands are fully implemented.
2. The EndSARS protests underscored the fact that there is a lacuna between those in positions of authority and members of the Nigerian public. Complaints against the dreaded SARS is not new but it seemed successive governments in Nigeria did not take any concrete action to address the issue of human rights abuses until the #EndSARS protesters brought it to the front burner of national discourse. Therefore, governments at all levels in Nigeria must be proactive in addressing the challenges confronting their citizens.
3. It is also interesting to note that after government had announced the disbandment of the SARS, Nigerian youths refused to vacate the streets. The reason was because past governments had made similar pronouncements but the SARS continued to exist. This means there is the case of trust deficit between the leaders and the led. Conscious and deliberate attempts must be made by levels of government in Nigeria to rebuild, earn and sustain the trust of the people.
4. Nigerian leaders must place youth empowerment and development on the front burner of their development agenda. If youths are really the leaders of tomorrow, Nigerian youth do not need to protest before their needs are addressed. Government at all levels must put in place workable programmes to address the challenges facing Nigerian youths.
5. Institutions of government such as the National Human Rights Commission must be alive to the performance of their constitutional duties. If the Commission had done its jobs assiduously by investigating and prosecuting individuals involved in human rights abuses, the #EndSARS protests would probably not have been necessary. Therefore, relevant government agencies whose duty it is to address these issues must wake up and be alive to their responsibilities.



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