



POLICE BRUTALITY AND ENDSARS PROTESTS IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This study seeks to unravel the atrocities of the Nigeria Police Force on innocent Nigerians which led to a nationwide violent protest known as EndSARS. Survey research method was employed for this study and respondents were selected using multiple sampling techniques which include purposive, snowball and simple random sampling techniques. Primary data were collected through interview and participant observation, while secondary data were collected from extant literature. The study applied the Retributive Theory of Justice in order to explain the concept and empirical studies reviewed from other studies for conclusion and recommendations. The findings from the study showed that innocent Nigerians were killed and maimed by men of the Nigeria Police Force at any slightest provocation, without being punished by the law. The study recommends (amongst others) that the government should always ensure that erring police officers are punished to serve as a deterrent in order to reduce the menace of police brutality in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria in general.*

KEYWORDS: Police Brutality, EndSARS, Justice, Security.



INTRODUCTION

The Nigeria Police Force has been under intense public criticisms in the last four decades over corruption, brutality and its inability to effectively prevent and control crime. It is very unfortunate that members of the Nigeria Police, which was established to provide security, are now the people brutalizing the innocent and helpless Nigerians at the slightest provocation. The police have always been seen as the villains of the Nigerian Society. All who travel on Nigerian roads see it first hand as they are required to pay illegal tolls. There are illegal road blocks at which points they collect ₦500, ₦1000 and ₦2000 per truck and failure to pay these illegal tolls may result in serious brutality. Arrested persons are taken to the police station where they are asked to pay for bail. Usually there are absolutely no charges and the purpose of the arrest is simply for extortion. The arrested persons are kept there until their relatives come to pay the money (Offiong, 2003).

Police have been molesting innocent youths living a flamboyant lifestyle, labelling them as internet fraudsters (Yahoo boys); they arrest and detain them until their relatives come to pay for their release. There is no receipt for the money paid. The essence of bail is that the money will be refunded at the end of the case or used as part or full payment in case of a fine, which does not happen in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria in general as the police simply pocket the money. According to Akpan, Ekoriko, Ekanem and Otong (2024), this horrendous violation of human rights has effects on individuals, especially the youths. All these culminated into the EndSars movement in Nigeria. Adiza (2021) recalled that a certain Segun Awosanya, also known as Segalink, a human rights activist, initiated the EndSARS campaign on Twitter in 2016, in protest against police brutality.

The EndSARS movement garnered momentum online and led to the President Buhari-led administration and the police authority announcing a reform of the police unit, although nothing was done at that time. In 2017, a petition demanding the total disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was filed to Nigeria's National Assembly by 10,195 people. The call was backed by a few senators. In 2018, rapper Michael Ugochukwu Stephens, popularly known by his stage name Ruggedman, joined the fight against police brutality by releasing the tune, "Is Police Your Friend?" due to a decrease in the number of cases of brutality in the country, reorganizing the force rather than disbanding it as earlier considered. The EndSARS movement led to the Buhari administration ordering an overhaul of SARS in 2018 (Adiza, 2021).

By 2020, the atrocities of the SARS officers had reached the climax. Akerele-popoola, Azeze and Adeniyi (2021, pp. 3–5) recollect that the hashtag #EndSARS started trending on twitter on October 4, 2020 with the posting of a video showing how SARS officers killed a young Nigerian motorist in Ughelli, Delta State after shooting him, dropping his body by the roadside and driving off in the victim's SUV car (George, 2020). The trending video posted on October 3, 2020 sparked immediate reactions from Nigerians, but the claim was denied by the Nigerian government who described the occurrence as "fake" and arrested the young man who recorded and posted it (Van Dunem, 2021).

On the other hand, the Nigeria police reported that the victim in the video did not die and officers in the video were not members of the SARS team (Kabir, 2020). This aggravated the anger of Nigerians and fueled the momentum of the activism on Twitter where the video was posted. As reported by Van Dunem (2021), the post reads: "SARS just shot a young boy dead



at Ughelli, Delta State, as we speak, in front of Wetland Hotels. They left him for dead on the roadside and drove away with the deceased's Lexus Jeep. I have videos..." (Chinyelugi (@Africa Official 2), October 3, 2020). According to George (2020), the October 3rd video caused an immediate trigger that made the hashtag #EndSARS to go viral on social media platforms, which then resulted in the massive street protests in Uyo and other cities calling for the dissolution of SARS and the ending of police brutality, injustice and maltreatment. Likewise, the arrest of the young man who posted the video fueled the anger of the youths and they spread the hashtag #EndSARS nationally; this therefore launched and resulted in the physical demonstration in major cities like Lagos and Abuja (Kazeem, 2020).

Meanwhile, Vega (2020) observed that the hashtag #EndSARS indeed started as far back as 2017 when Nigerians were using it to share their experience on police extortion, harassment, torture, illegal arrest and other violating behaviours of SARS officials. It only led to street demonstrations in 2020 when youths saw the need to take their online protests to the streets in order to have greater impacts on the government's handling of the SARS unit of the Nigeria Police Force. Thus, as various reports (Kazeem, 2020; Ojewale, 2020; Oloyede & Elegba, 2019) have it, the #EndSARS protest was fueled by the government's unfulfilled promises to scrap SARS in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2019. They reported about 80 cases of maltreatment, extra-judicial killings, torture, extortions, rape and diverse manners of human right abuse and injustice perpetrated by the SARS between January 2017 and May 2020. SARS in their evil practice targeted youths wearing dreadlocks, tattoos or using expensive mobile phones or driving exotic cars, and young girls wearing expensive coloured hair were not left out as they were often profiled and harassed as prostitutes (Obia, 2020).

Therefore, the social media platform, through which organic society is formed, was credited with the sources of the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. During the protest, Nigerians took to twitter to narrate their ordeals and motivations to participate in the protest. Nigerian youths were motivated for the protest to demand for better police, government accountability and reform of certain institutions in the country (Uwazurike, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, a good number of the citizens view the Nigeria Police Force as an organization that thrives on intimidation, brutality, injustice and corruption. This perception of the Nigeria Police Force by the citizens triggered the #EndSARS protest which started trending on Twitter on October 4, 2020 with the posting of a video showing how SARS officials killed a young Nigerian motorist in Ughelli, Delta State. The movement, having been ignited, fueled and accelerated on social media, flowed into the streets with violent protests across Nigeria and even outside the country.

The cases included maltreatment, extortion, extra-judicial killing, torture, rape, corruption and diverse manners of human right abuse and injustice perpetrated by SARS across the country. The failure of the Nigerian government to disband SARS aggravated the anger of the youths across the country, forcing them to take their online protests to the streets, which ended up in violent protests across major cities in the country. The #EndSARS protest led to the Buhari administration ordering an overhaul of SARS. The violent protests led to the destruction of lives and property and the declaration of curfews across major cities like Lagos, Uyo, Port Harcourt and Abuja.



The Federal Government ordered the state governors to constitute a Judicial Panel on Police Brutality (JPOPb) to investigate incidents of police brutality in the country. In Akwa Ibom State, the panel was headed by retired Justice Ifiok Ukana. The panel sat at High Court Annex, Fulga Road, Uyo. Petitions were received by the panel and final report and recommendations were sent to the government for compensation of victims and the victims' families, but surprisingly nothing has been done up till 2023.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to investigate the atrocities of the Nigeria Police Force, particularly the disbanded SARS, while the specific objectives were:

- i. To investigate the factors that triggered the EndSARS protest in Nigeria
- ii. To investigate the socio-economic effect of the EndSARS protest in Nigeria
- iii. To make recommendations that would change the status-quo of the Nigeria Police Force.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A protest group is by definition a collective action of individuals aimed at achieving a set of common goals through influencing the decisions of a target. A social movement is a form of protest group that has, on the one hand, some degree of formal organization and, on the other hand, a higher number of members. As a result, the more members a protest group has, the closer it gets to the concept of social movement. The EndSARS protest was triggered by maltreatment, extra-judicial killings, torture, extortions, rape and diverse manners of human abuse and injustice perpetrated by SARS officials. The success of the EndSARS protest was attributed to youths; on the way, they were able to coordinate the protest across the nation and they amplified the voice of the campaign globally (Obia, 2020).

According to Asuquo and Ekanem (2023), in Nigeria, politics has remained the central factor in conflict and violence. The Nigeria Police Force and other law enforcement agencies, saddled with the responsibility of protection of lives and properties, have arguably failed in their primary responsibilities, resulting in a lack of public trust in the Nigerian judiciary (Esara, Asuquo, Ekanem & Samuel, 2023). As observed by Essien and Ekoriko (2020), productivity in organizations is tied to leadership capabilities. The leadership of the Nigeria Police Force seems to lag behind and this has caused a lot of frivolities in the system. Samuel, Asuquo, Thompson and Nya (2023) added that education is very important for the development of our society. Therefore, the police should be educated to reduce the issue of police brutality.

Udonwa, Effiong, Asuquo and Samuel (2022) argued that the effect of corruption in Nigeria has been ample. This corruption is very visible in the Nigeria Police Force. According to Esara, Asuquo and Samuel (2024), conflicts have become a common phenomenon in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria in general. Part of this conflict arises from police brutality.

Ekanem, Asuquo, Ogar and Ofuka (2023), observed that violence during elections and violence against women candidates and youths is a barrier that cannot be overemphasized. And police are fingered in some of these violence.



Asuquo and Ekanem (2023) observed that corruption has affected many countries all over the world, especially the developing countries. This is seen in the Nigeria Police Force. Concerted efforts must be made by government and leaders of different modern organizations to reduce or even eradicate this menace in our system (Ekanem & Asuquo, 2023).

The police have engaged in active criminality. They know those places that are vulnerable to crime. They engage in premeditated criminal activities by collaborating with criminals, supplying criminals with information about the whereabouts and activity of the police, and engaging in robbery themselves. They loan their weapons to criminals and get “returns” from them. Those who work in armory simply sell arms and ammunition to armed robbers. Any officer of the force who is accused of committing a crime ought to be charged accordingly and if found wanting, he or she is to be punished in accordance with the law. It is therefore not in the hands and purview of the Nigeria Police Force to use the accused person as a money making machine by extorting them. To redeem the image of the police, the then Inspector General of Police decided to unveil a new Police unit to replace the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit that was disbanded following public outcry over its alleged human rights abuses. The disbanded SARS was replaced by the Special Weapon and Tactics (SWAT) unit (Akeredolu, 2020).

Conceptual Clarification

Police Brutality: According to Uwazurike (2020), police brutality refers to a situation where a person who is alleged to have committed a crime is being tortured, beaten, wounded or even killed; this includes diverse manners of human abuse and injustice perpetrated by the Nigeria Police Force.

Protest: This refers to a collective action of individuals aimed at achieving a set of common goals through influencing the decision of a target (Obia, 2020).

Human Rights: These are categories of rights that a person is supposed to enjoy for being a citizen under the state. It is a kind of right which helps a citizen to ascertain his fundamental rights. These rights are guided and protected by the state (UNDP, 1999).

Violent Crime: Violent crime, otherwise known as crime against persons, is a type of crime carried out through the use of force and it usually attracts public attention and reaction. Such crimes include murder, grievous harm, assault, torture, suicide and so on (Ukwayi, 2005).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts the Retributive Theory of Justice propounded by Cesare Beccaria in 1964 and expanded by other scholars. For proper understanding of police brutality in Nigeria, Retributive Theory of Justice is understood as a form of justice committed on the following three principles:

- i. That those who commit certain kind of wrongful acts, paradigmatically serious crimes, morally deserve to suffer a proportionate punishment;
- ii. That it is intrinsically morally good if a legitimate punisher gives them the punishment they deserve;



- iii. That it is morally impermissible to intentionally punish the innocent or to inflict disproportionately largely punishment on wrong doers (Walen, 2016). The just deserts theory of sentencing advocates that punishment should be proportionate to the gravity of the crime committed. Proponents of the just deserts philosophy emphasize the importance of due process, determinate sentences, and the removal of judicial discretion in sentencing practice.

Hirsch (1976) argued that “a just deserts is a retributive theory of punishment.” Unlike theories that are primarily concerned with preventing future offenses, such as deterrence, rehabilitation and incapacitation, contributivist theories are only concerned with punishing crimes that have already been committed. The concept of “just deserts” seeks to preserve human dignity through punishment. This asserts that a person is a rational individual with the freewill to make a moral choice whether or not to engage in conduct known to be prohibited. Retribution under a just deserts principle treats a defendant as a dignified human being by responding to his or her conduct in a way that respects his or her choice to engage in wrongful behaviour (Hirsch, 1976).

Under this definition of retribution, crime is a conduct that disturbs the “right” relationship with the society, that is, the relationship between the offender and the police, the victim and the community. A criminal “deserves” to be punished because he or she has violated the “moral order,” and proportionality is the rope used to measure the type of punishment he or she deserves. In other words, the level of punishment must be proportional to the seriousness of the crime. Based on the law of retaliation, the punishment to be offered to an offender must be directly proportionate to the crime he or she has committed rather than the police taking laws for granted. Because punishment has been observed not to be commensurate with the crime committed, higher punishment might infringe upon the right of the alleged criminal, but not police brutality, as it contradicts the law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey research design. The study was conducted in Uyo metropolis of Akwa Ibom State where the EndSARS protest took place. Primary data were collected through interview and participant observation, while secondary data were extracted from extant literature. Respondents were selected using multiple sampling techniques, which include purposive, snowball and simple random sampling techniques.

RESULT

There were several cases of police brutality in the state and Nigeria in general prior to this violent protest in October 2020. A cross section of the respondents showed that police were maltreating and taking the lives of innocent citizens at any slightest provocation.

Mr. Ubong Etim, one of the study respondents who narrated his experience, said that he was arrested and detained in police custody for three weeks because the police labelled him as a yahoo boy (internet fraudster). He said his phone and laptop were collected from him after his parents paid a bail bond of one million naira (Interviewed 20/11/2020).



The researcher observed how three girls (Miss Glory Bassey, Miss Mercy Umoh and Miss Agnes Edet) narrated before the panel on incidents of police brutality in Akwa Ibom State, how police arrested them and detained them in their custody where they were used as sex toys. Two of them were finally impregnated and the police officers forcefully gave them pills to flush out the pregnancy. It was very unfortunate as all the officers denied these allegations.

In an interview with some journalists, the panel chairman, Justice Ifiok Ukana, assured the public that the panel was ready to discharge their duty without fear or favour. He said that police officers culpable of these crime would be dealt with in accordance to the law (Interviewed 1-11-2020).

The Police Public Relation Officer, Odiko Macdon, said that he was aware of all the allegations leveled against the police. He said that all the officers summoned by the panel would be given an opportunity to go and defend themselves and also protect the image of the organization.

The panel secretary, Barrister Idongesit Edemekong, told the researcher that the panel had received 109 petitions across the state. She said that those involved would be summoned for hearing by the panel and recommendations would be forwarded to the government for implementation (Interviewed 12-11-2020).

In an interview with Barrister Chris Ekpo, the secretary of Civil Liberty Organization, he said that the government should endeavour to publish the white paper of the panel. He confirmed that most of the cases filed against police were facts as the people concerned had tendered concrete evidence before the panel (Interviewed 5/11/2020).

Discussion of Findings

Findings in this study have shown that the atrocities of the Nigeria Police force are corruption, extra-judicial killing, extortion, involvement in cultism, involvement in kidnapping, raping of women in police detention, and torturing of innocent Nigerians. In a recent development, two police inspectors and one police corporal were dismissed. The Ogun State Police command paraded three police officers who had been subjected to an orderly room trial for alleged involvement in armed robbery in Ijebu-Ode after they were dismissed on January 3, 2024 and they would soon be charged to court. The dismissed officers were Inspector Taiwo Kolawole with force number AP/No 341113, Inspector John Ogbe with force number AP/N 309292 and Corporal Idowu Sunday, with force number AP/No 513707.

This study showed that the EndSARs protest was triggered by police brutality and other human right abuse by men of the Nigeria Police Force. The study showed that the EndSARs protest was a violent protest that led to the destruction of lives and property, civilians and police officers were killed or seriously wounded during this protest. The protest affected the socio-economic activities of the people as youths were looting and destroying government and private property. It showed that this ugly situation forced the government to declare curfews in major cities in Nigeria, including Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital. This curfew brought about untold hardship to the people as movement was restricted and businesses were closed down for so many days (Punch, January 31, 2024).

This study showed that state governors were directed by the Federal Government to constitute a Judicial Panel on police brutality to address public petitions against human rights abuse by men of the Nigeria Police Force. The study showed that the panel in Akwa Ibom State was



chaired by retired Justice Ifiok Ukana, the Panel sat at the State High Court Annex, Fulga Road, Uyo. The panel received several petitions from the public and sent final reports and recommendations to the government for compensation to be paid to victims. But, surprisingly, nothing has been done in that regard from 2020–2023.

This study showed that it was this EndSARS protest that led to total disbandment of the SARS unit in the Nigeria Police Force in 2020 by the Buhari administration (Uwazurike, 2020). This study showed that police arms and ammunition are being sold out to armed robbers and kidnappers. Or they simply loan them to armed robbers who share the booty upon return from their expedition or exploit. On August 24, 2005, the IG of Police, Sunday Ehindero, paraded nine police officers for selling arms and ammunition under their care, which violated their oath of office and their oath of allegiance (Peter-Omale, 2005).

This study showed that the judicial panel on police brutality in Akwa Ibom State received a series of petitions against the Nigeria Police Force. They were accused of rape; some girls that were arrested and detained in the police cell mentioned some police officers that raped, impregnated and forcefully gave them some pills to terminate the pregnancy which later on resulted in series of bleeding that might have resulted in death.

The study further showed that senior police officers are struggling to lead the team on illegal roadblocks, as the leader of the team is expected to make some reasonable refund to their boss. By making this refund, their boss would handover the roadblock business to the officer with the highest returns. By doing this, they have the powers to commit atrocities by extorting money from road users and refusal to comply with these officers may result in “shoot and kill,” and after the incident their boss would shield them by ensuring that the happy trigger police officer is posted to another station/command to avoid revenge and litigation by the victim’s family.

Their boss would do everything humanly possible to ensure that the case is swept under the carpet in order to protect their work.

One of the petitioners told the panel how one of the senior SARS officers forcefully used a plier to pull out his teeth. The taxi driver alleged that the police officer said that his crime was that he pointed his car headlamp into his eyes. The innocent power taxi driver narrated to the panel how he spent his hard earned money to fix up artificial teeth. Thereafter, all his efforts to get the police officers arrested proved abortive as the state police command swept the case under the carpet.

One woman, a petitioner, told the panel how the police tortured and killed her husband in their custody for a crime he never committed. She narrated how the police came and arrested her husband and accused him that his car was a stolen car, and her husband proved his innocence beyond reasonable doubt by bringing out all the necessary documents of the car, including police clearance and customs permit. They however refused to honor those documents. They took her husband to state police headquarters. The following morning, she went there with her husband’s barrister; all that the police told them was that the man died at rest, but they refused to release the corpse for autopsy till date.



CONCLUSION

The EndSARs protest led to the destruction of lives and property in Uyo and other cities in Nigeria. The protest was triggered by the unpleasant shared experiences of the youths which metamorphosed into a connective action that manifested into the physical demonstration, and which therefore launched and resulted in riot due to extortion, harassment, torture, illegal arrest and other violating behaviours of SARS officials. During the protest, Nigerians took to social media to narrate their ordeals and motivations to participate in the protest. Nigerian youths were motivated for the protest to demand for better policing, government accountability and reform of certain institutions in the country.

Police service commission should ensure that every erring officer of the organisation committing a crime be charged accordingly and if found wanting, he or she is to be punished in accordance with the law, because nobody is above the law. But in a situation where a group of lawless persons give to themselves the power of being in charge of extortion, torture, rape, ill-fated extra-judicial killing and not taking into cognizance the rule of law and the fundamental rights of the citizens, it means that the government has failed in her social contract.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings in this research work, the study made the following recommendations:

- i. The police service commission should always endeavor to punish all erring officers of the organization to serve as a deterrent to others.
- ii. There is a need for adequate training and retraining of personnel in the public relations department of the Nigeria Police Force to create room for dialogue and friendliness between police and the public.
- iii. Government should always endeavor to create a listening audience to the public to avoid violent protests in the country.
- iv. The public should always let out information against police corruption and human abuse to the media for them to channel it to appropriate authority.



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APPENDIX I



APPENDIX II



APPENDIX III

