

# ENCOUNTERING PROTEST AND REPRESSION IN NIGERIA: CASE OF EndSARS MOVEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The article investigates protest and repression in Nigeria from a historical and contemporary perspective. Since the pre-colonial and colonial years, Nigerian societies under these two epochs witnessed protests and repressive government acts to address the outcomes of protests. However, beyond the two periods, the post-colonial period has also witnessed a series of protests under military and democratic regimes against economic and political crises, the nation's state and bad governance. However, one of these protests which shook the political space in the Nigeria Fourth Republic was the EndSARS protest. The EndSARS protest started from a campaign against police brutality to agitations against bad governance in Nigeria. Government repressive response led to the use of firearms in an attempt to disband the protesters. The article also examines the implication of protest and government repressive response of the state of democracy. Using secondary data sources, the article presents vivid evidence of protest and government repression despite the legitimacy of the protest.

Keyword: Protest, Repression, EndSARS, governance, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

Protest is not unique to Nigeria. In recent years, massive demonstrations have emerged in global north and south countries. For instance, in September 2008, citizens of Iceland protested against the financial crisis that was hitting their state (Donatella and Alice, 2015: 40). Also, another wave of uprisings shook the Middle East and North Africa region late in 2010 when massive demonstrations hit Tunisia, and then Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain in 2011 (Donatella and Alice, 2015: 40; Mark and David, 2013: 255). The Occupy Wall Street in New York, soon followed by several other encampments in many cities across the United States and other countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, have witnessed protests directed against socio-economic and political issues, among others (Bang, 2011). Hence, the above examples show that protests occur worldwide irrespective of the country's political, economic, and social development level.

Politics in Nigeria is a force field of power involving the state, citizens, civil societies, and cooperative social movements in contradictory forms. These relations occur in the context of good governance, welfare, fundamental human rights, economic growth, and development. However, these contexts' absence has posed a significant challenge to Nigeria's existence. For

instance, Nigeria has been experiencing tensions between the component units and the centre, between the constituent units themselves, and various interests often fuel demands for good governance, separatist agitations, restructuring agendas, and other perceived structural defects. However, since these problems have occupied a perennial stream of agitations, it is frequently employed in expressing grievances and serves as an indicator of dissatisfaction against the state and its leadership.

The EndSARS protest was a massive outcry from the youths against two fundamental structural defects in Nigeria. One represents the issue of police brutality, and the second is good governance. At the initial stage of the protest, the modus operandi was directed towards calling government attention to police brutality and demanding justice for victims of police violence and extra-judicial killings. However, this protest later evolved into calling the government and power-holders attention to the perennial problem of rotten governance marred in corruption and underdevelopment. However, the protest witnessed several incidences of repression that generated controversies, such as the Lekki shooting and killing of youth, vandalism and thuggery, among several others.

Anchored on the above discourse, the article analyses the various encounters of the youth with the state as it relates to the EndSARS protest. The chapter is divided into four sections apart from the introduction and conclusion. The first segment provides a conceptual clarification on two major keywords, namely protest and repression. The second segment examines a history of protest and repression in Nigeria through the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial perspectives. The third and fourth section discusses the EndSARS protest and government responses, while the fifth section examines the implication of repression for democracy and democratic principles in Nigeria.

### **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: PROTEST AND REPRESSION**

The Random House Dictionary defines protest as an expression or declaration of objection, disapproval, or dissent, often in opposition to something a person is powerless to prevent or avoid (Random House Dictionary, 1967). In other words, it is an avenue for making grievance (s) and implications for societal well-being known. Protest participants, indeed, represented themselves through the plain language of ‘the people’ opposing political and economic elites—often referred to as corrupt, irresponsible, and ambiguous (Tilly and Sidney, 2007: 95). Globally, the instrument of protest is frequently employed in expressing grievances and as indicators of dissatisfaction. According to Boulding, he sees protests thus:

Protest arises when there is strongly felt dissatisfaction with existing programs and policies of the government or other organisations, on the part of those who think affected by these policies but who are unable to express their discontent through regular and legitimate channels and who feel unable to exercise the weight to which they think they are entitled in the decision-making process (Boulding, 1967: 50).

On the other hand, a dictionary meaning defines repression as a state of forcible subjugation.’ Repression refers to “governmental coercion to control or eliminate actual or potential political opposition” (Duff, 1976: 24-25). Also, Poe et al. sees repression as “coercive activities on the part of the government designed to induce compliance in others (Poe and Neal, 1994: 853-872).

while Goldstein considers repression to involve state actions manifested through official regulatory measures designed to discriminate grossly “against persons or organisations viewed as presenting a fundamental challenge to existing power relationships or key governmental policies (Goldstein, 1979).” Thus, repression denotes the circumstance whereby the government employs brutal, sustained force against ostensible domestic opponents and even the general populace.

Davenport sees repression as ‘actions undertaken by authorities against individuals and or groups within their territorial jurisdiction that either restrict the behaviour and beliefs of citizens through the imposition of negative sanctions (e.g., applying curfews, conducting mass arrests, and banning political organisations) or that physical damage or eliminate citizens through the violation of personal integrity (e.g., using torture, disappearances, and mass killing)’ (Davenport, 2005: 122). Some studies argue that there is frequently a tendency for the state to respond to protest with repression, ostensibly because protests, in particular, are seen as a direct threat to the political system (Skocpol, 2014; Almeida, 2011). It is assumed that protests are often a result of intense eagerness for social transformations and their perceived role in society. These protests usually encounter resistance from the state, and invariably, this resistance dramatically increases the militancy and force with which protesters push their protest, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence both on the part of the protesters and the state.

### **IS PROTEST ‘ALIEN’ IN NIGERIA’S HISTORY BEFORE EndSARS? SOME INSIGHTS**

The history of protest in Nigeria predated colonial rule. In pre-colonial societies, the citizens employed protest as a means to express their grievances against insecurity, the tyrannical and authoritarian rulers of traditional institutions, lack of welfare programmes, and taxation. Among the Yoruba ethnic group of south western Nigeria, where democratic principles were in practice before colonial rule do experience cases of protest. On this premise, town council meetings are organised to consider the opinions of the citizens and associations which could not take part in the inner-council proceedings. The mass meeting and attendance of the general public was an event that flourished in pre-colonial Nigerian societies (Fadipe, 1991: 122).

In protest and riots in colonial Nigeria, colonial economic taxation plays a decisive role. The introduction of taxation policy in colonial Nigeria led to fierce opposition from the indigenous people. It not only led to disruptions and hiccups in the existing traditional system and peaceful coexistence that was prevalent before their arrival, but it also resulted in unmitigated disharmony in the economic activities of the indigenous people. The responses came in the form of protest, agitation, and riots, culminating in losses of lives and properties. From the ‘Ijemo incident’ of 1914 to the Iseyin uprising in 1916, the Adubi war of 1918 to the Ogbomosho tax riots of 1924, the Aba Women Riot of 1929, the Egba women riot of 1949, Ago-Iwoye revolt of 1954, and Ogbomosho tax riots of 1955.’

Several other protests clamped the colonial period of Nigerian history. For instance, between 1940 and 1942, Michael Imodu's leadership of the Railway Worker Union (R.W.U.) witnessed a radical shift in the history of trade unionism. Imodu organised one of the most significant strikes in the history of Nigeria. Also, during the First World War, 1914-1918, and the Second World War, 1939-1945 witnessed local protests, especially against food price hikes. For instance, Lagos Market Women’s Association protested against the Pullen Scheme, foodstuffs regulations on

essential goods and trading items, which were hitherto dominated by women. One of the foremost leaders of this agitation was Madam Alimotu Pelewura, who was the president of the Market Women's Guild (Cheryl, 2009: 51-59). The Lagos market women's Association petitioned the Commissioner on 24 November, 1943, on twenty-six points involving about thousand three hundred and ninety (1,390) signatories, who signed on behalf of 8,000 market women. Market women riots also broke out in places like Ibibioland, Nto Edino, Ikot Abia, Odoro Ikot, and Mbuso.

Nigeria gained its independence from the British colonialist in 1960. Since independence, Nigeria has witnessed several forms of protests against government policies and programmes and perceived injustice. Between 1969 and 1970, the Agbekoya riot – was a class protest against taxation. The Western State government introduced the State Development Levy, which sparked discontent among the low-income groups, who were petty traders and market women. The Agbekoya riots was a populist movement whose leaders and members were mainly illiterate Muslims, small-scale farmers and hunters (C.E.C Beer, 1990: 263-292). The Agbekoya riots threw the heartland of old Western Nigeria into chaos, pandemonium, and disorderliness between October 1968 and November 1969. Higher educational institution student protest also occupies an important place in the annals of Nigerian protest history. As early as 1960, university students protested against the Anglo-Nigerian Defence pacts, ultimately leading to the pact's abrogation in 1962. Students have also protested against extra-judicial killings by law enforcement agencies. As early as 1971, students protested fiercely after the killing of Kunle Adepeju at the University of Ibadan. In 1978, the National Union of the Nigerian Students (NUNS), under the leadership of Segun Okeowo, led Nigerian students in confrontations with the military government on several key issues such as the funding of education, increase in tuition and accommodation fees, and the presence of soldiers in schools to enforce discipline (Abati, 2005). On 21 April, 1986, students of the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria embarked on a procession to commemorate students killed during the “Ali must go” nationwide protests of 1978 (Akintola, 2010).

The Structural Adjustment Programme protest also shook the Nigerian polity. Between 1986 and 1991 was characterised by widespread protests, much of which were directed at the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The protest saw the participation of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and students over the deplorable socio-economic condition and implication of SAP on the state. Religious and ethnic-induced protests are another form in Nigeria's history. A classic example is the “Miss World riots,” in Kaduna (northern Nigeria) in November 2002. Protest against military government and policies also featured under military rule. For example, the environmental protests against the state and the oil companies, especially in Ogoniland (the Niger Delta) during the 1990s, saw their climax in the consequent execution of Kenule Saro Wiwa in 1995 and Ogoni nine. Also, widespread outrage and mass protests swept across the country after the military Junta annulled the presidential election of 12 June, 1993. Also, over three months between July 1994 and September 1994, the oil union workers and the Nigerian Labour Congress went on strike in protest to the military regime of Sani Abacha over its arrest of M. K. O. Abiola and other leaders of the pro-democracy movement.

There has also been a massive protest against government policies and programmes. In June 2000 general strike against the increase in the cost of petroleum, and in June 2007, the Nigerian oil

unions called a nationwide general strike in protest of a government price hike on automobile fuel. This caused an immediate rise in oil and gasoline futures, pushing the international market price above \$68. In 2012, the historic eight-day general strike, mass rallies, and street protests in the country from Monday, 9 January to Monday, 16 January, 2012. The Nigeria Labour Congress led the protest against artificial scarcity of petrol, the philosophy and policy direction of the Jonathan administration's attempts to remove fuel subsidy and the security challenges on the state of industrial relations. The Fourth Republic has also witnessed ethnic-based organisations' separatist agitations protests. For instance, the Odua People's Congress, the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN), and the Ijaw Youth Council have played central roles in the cross-sectional mobilisation of protest movements in the region. Equally, the Bring Back Our Girls protest and the Bring back our Boys protest is a fundamental cases against insecurity in Nigeria.

### **A PEEP INTO REPRESSION IN NIGERIA'S PROTEST HISTORY**

As earlier stated, repression includes part of the government-designed means to induce compliance. Nigeria's state reaction to protest also dates back to the pre-colonial period. Under this period, despite the organised nature of government roles and functions, traditional leaders often reacted to protests in a repressive manner. For instance, leaders of protests in the pre-colonial period were often arrested as a means of quenching the fire of protest, while sometimes, military and police officials are used to scare citizens from protesting.

Under colonial rule, the British government also ensured that the colonies did not challenge the primary goal of colonialism. As early as 1880-1894, the British colonialist employs force to achieve their objectives. The famous gun-boat politics used in the Niger Delta and Lagos are vivid foreign military force case studies. Between 1900 and 1960, the British government responded fiercely to several protests related to the demand for self-rule under the Zikist movement and tax-related protests. For instance, despite the militant nationalism exhibited by the Zikist movement, the government acted quickly by arresting tens of the leaders and charging them with sedition, and by 1949 the colonial state government by April 1950 declared the movement unlawful (Coleman, 1958: 298-301). In a report from Northern Nigeria, it was stated that 'although the trend was small and unrepresentative, its purposes and methods are dangerous to the good governance, and such purposes and procedures will not be tolerated (Coleman, 1958: 301).

Tax-related riots also met with stiff repression from the colonial government. For instance, the 1955 tax riot in Ogbomoso witnessed the government's aggressive response. The 1955 riot participants who protested and refused to pay the tax were arraigned before the court and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment ranging from nine to fifteen months without an option of a fine. Furthermore, with the attack on the Resident Officer, D.A. Murphy, six lorry loads of reinforcements were sent from the police training school at Ikeja to contain the uprising that followed. The peasant, however, learned their lessons hard; they found that their soldiers were no match for the trained government anti-riot police contingent that was brought in to suppress the uprising (Abiodun, 2014). Indeed, the riot was quelled through the superior firepower of the anti-riot police officers. Also, during the Egba Women Riot, the leader of the riot under the Abeokuta Women's Union (A.W.U.) – Mrs. Funmilayo Kuti, was arrested and arraigned in court. Despite the fact that she pleaded not guilty, she was fined three pounds or one

month of imprisonment (Alex and Onyishi, 2020). Alemika summarised the repressive nature of British colonialists thus:

Through systematic government brutality, vandalism, and plunder on the part of the colonisers, colonial objectives were pursued (to varied degrees over the stages of colonialism in Nigeria). To prosecute, advance, and defend British imperialistic interests in Nigeria, various administrative, coercive, and surveillance organs (police, jails, courts, tribunals, “native” authorities, Residents, and District Officers) were established. (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2000).

The post-colonial period has also witnessed the repressive nature of the Nigerian state. Military dictatorships dominated the four decades between independence in 1960 and 2000. By the nature of military rule, democratic practices such as forming civil society, political parties, and protests are not considered essential aspects of governance. Military rule understanding of governance was through absolute compliance and the use of guns to silence the public. Hence protest or criticism was not a welcomed development. Between 1995 and 1998, Nigeria was rocked with clamour against human rights abuse and suppressed pro-democracy doctrines protest under the military regime of Abacha. Among the leading protest leaders against environmental injustice was Ken Saro Wiwa. The repressive nature of Abacha’s government led to the death of Ken Saro Wiwa and nine Ogoni fellows while several other activists fled the country.

The democratic government between 1999 and 2015 also employs political repression tools against cases of protest. For instance, the government police arrested 40 supporters of the independent state of Biafra on 19 April, 2000. Also, government troops killed some 200 civilians because of the violence in Benue state. During the same period, government troops were deployed to suppress violence in Lagos on 5 February, 2002. Also, in the wake of President Olusegun Obasanjo’s re-election in 2003 was greeted with a demonstration describing the election as far from free and fair. During the protest, armed police fired tear gas to disperse the anti-government demonstration in Lagos and arrest Professor Wole Soyinka (The Humanitarian, 2020). At the height of the ‘#Bringbackourgirls’ protest, the leader of the demonstration organised in Abuja – Naomi Mutah Nyadar, was also arrested. Also, during the #occupy Nigeria protest, President – Goodluck Jonathan orders the arrest of the protest leaders, including Femi Falana, Dino Melaye, Tunde Bakare, and Shehu Sani (Sahara Reporters, 2014). Also, the #Revolutionnow protest witnessed several forms of repressive response such as arrest, use of tear gas, and illegal harassment, among others.

### **FROM POLICE BRUTALITY AND ROTTEN GOVERNANCE: #ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA**

The EndSARS protest was directed toward Nigeria's main national issues, namely police brutality and rotten governance (Iwucha and Aniche, 2021; Ekoh and Onyedikachi, 2021; Ekwunife et al., 2021). The origin of the protest, which later drew global attention, began on 4 October, 2020, when a video of a Nigeria Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) officer shooting a young Nigerian man in front of the Wetland Hotel, left him by the roadside and took his Lexus S.U.V. in Ughelli, Delta State went viral through the social media (B.B.C., 2020). Between 4 October and 8 October, 2020, when the physical protest finally began, there was a massive virtual protest in which videos of police brutality were shared across social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) (Ekwunife et al. 2020). By 8 October, 2020, the virtual protesters took to the street of towns and cities, demanding the disbandment of the SARS. From the disbandment clause,

EndSARS protesters shifted their focus to perennial governance issues such as constitutional reforms, fiscal federalism, and political restructuring (Abati, 2020).

Issues around Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) did not begin with the EndSARS protest. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was a specialised unit of the Nigeria Police Force established in 1992. The specialised team is saddled with the responsibility of fighting crimes, especially with the jurisdiction of armed robbery, kidnapping, and banditry (Nnadozie, 2017). However, between 1992 and 2020, the specialised unit attracted public criticism when it began prosecuting matters related to financial crimes under the purview of the Economic and Financial Crime Commission. The specialised units were accused of extra-judicial killing of youths and students, mounting illegal roadblocks, conducting unauthorised checks and searches based on materials such as iPhone, laptop or driving exotic cars, and physical features such as wearing dreadlocks, tattered jeans, and tattoos. The unit also arrests and detains people without a warrant or trial (Kazeem, 2020). The public's reaction to these trends of events against the specialised unit has led to government efforts to restructure the unit. For instance, in 2017, SARS was banned from conducting stop and search operations following several reports of harassment. In 2018, the government also announced to overhaul of the SARS unit and investigate cases of human rights violations and abuses (Olatuni et al. 2020; Amnesty, 2021).

Given the above background, the Ughelli killing turned out to be the driving force for the protest against the SARS unit. The protest moved to the streets of major towns and cities through the social media hashtag '#ENDSARS#'. Youths organised EndSARS protests in places like Abuja, Ibadan, Osun, Benin, Ughelli, Warri, Ilorin, Ogbomosho, Owerri, Jos, Kaduna, Calabar, and Lagos with Lekki Toll Gate as the national anchor point and epicentre of the protest. The protest took an international dimension with the organisation of protest by Nigerians in the Diaspora as well as support from individuals in international circles such as Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, and António Guterres, among others, launched the protest into the global human rights concern limelight. The sharing of information and experiences on different social media as regards the unit brutality influenced the protest's massive nature.

On the issue of rotten governance, the protesters also find their voices in criticising Nigeria's perennial issue of underdevelopment. Professor Christopher Imumolen further elicited the aspect of rotten governance and underdevelopment, convener of Nigeria Peace and Sustainable Initiative (NPSI) argued in his interview with 'Will Nigeria' that the protest was beyond bringing an end to police brutality but an unending dialogue about the state of national affairs. To him, the 'END SARS' acronym means E – Employment; N – Nigeria for All; D – Digitalisation of the Economy; S – Security and Safety for All; A – Alternative Source of Power; R – Rescue of Nigeria from Poverty and S – Social welfare for all (Bode, 2020). These issues were also capped with the social media hashtag '#EndBadGovernanceInNigeriaNow', #EndCorruption, and #EndInsecurity.

#### **GOVERNMENT RESPONSE AND REPRESSION IN EndSARS PROTEST**

From 8 October, 2020, the protest continued to gain more ground and acceptance. The immediate government response was the disbandment of the SARS unit and the setting up of a new Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team to replace SARS. SWAT was also received with stiff resistance. For a while, the EndSARS social media hashtags turned into ENDSWAT, and street protests focused on rejecting another unit tagged SWAT. The protester's argument against SWAT was that members of the disbanded SARS would be drafted into the new SWAT, thereby making

no difference. The persistent nature of the protesters and the decentralised nature make it difficult for the state's government and other security outfits to address it or dialogue. Hence, rather than ending the protests, the announcement intensified public demonstrations across several states in Nigeria

The repressive response of the Nigerian state during the EndSARS protest began with the refusal of the protesters to put an end to the protest as well as their demand for political reforms, which were considered a threat to the interest of the state and the present administration. Due to the nature of repression, which often leads to the use of force, the Nigeria Police Force and Nigeria Army employed this means to take control of the protest. At the height of the demonstration, it was alleged that police violence, the suppression of dissenting voices, restrictions on civic freedoms, and military shootouts involving peaceful, innocent, and unarmed EndSARS demonstrators in Nigeria were committed by state agents without any resistance. (Cable News Network, 2020). A significant record of these repressive acts became the “Lekki Tollgate Massacre” of 20 October, 2020. Even though the verification of death at Lekki has become the storming petrel of post-EndSARS discussion, the act of brutality on the protesters cannot be contested.

Apart from the role of the Nigeria Police Force and the Nigerian Army, there were allegations that the state and politicians sponsored thugs and hoodlums that disrupted the peaceful protest. The repressive nature of the state did not go unnoticed. Several records of clampdowns and abusive brutality left many peaceful EndSARS protesters injured while some lost their lives in the process. For instance, in Ogbomoso, one Jimoh Isiaka was shot dead, with seven others injured by the NPF to control the protest process on 10 October, 2020 (Premium Times, 2020). There are also records of the NPF using violent force on protesters in Abuja, Ogbomoso, Lagos, and Portharcourt, including the deployment of tear gas, water cannons, live ammunition, arrests, and torture. (C.S.O. Police Observatory Report, 2020; George, 2020a; George, 2020b).

Iwuoha (2021) stated that the 20.10.20 Lekki Shooting by the Nigerian Army, which gained its own equally popular hashtag #LekkiMassacre, was estimated to have taken between fifteen and twenty lives. The Lekki massacre was also regarded as the height of Nigerian governmental repression. A few hours before the shooting, the streetlights and CCTV were turned off, which was viewed as a sign that the attack had been carefully thought out, practiced, and contemplated. (Adeshokan, 2020; Husted, 2020). Also, the alleged sponsored political thugs and hoodlums injured several protesters and affected the spirit of the EndSARS protest. The political thugs and hoodlums' activities ignited negative perspectives about the protest.

Beyond the state's repressive response against the protesters, there were also cases where actors such as the media faced the repressive side of the state. For instance, the National Broadcasting Commission (N.B.C.) fined Channels Television, A.I.T., and Arise T.V. 3 million Naira (nearly \$8,000) each over what was described as ‘unprofessional’ coverage of the protests. Also, the government, through the Central Bank of Nigeria, restricted some notable members of the public who participated in the protest from accessing their bank accounts. Protest red zones state government also embarked on curfew imposition, restricting movement in significant areas and forbidding any gathering that could trigger the EndSARS protest.

The post-EndSARS protest in Nigeria equally witnessed a series of repressiveness. For instance,



the Lekki Shooting of 20 October, 2020, became a thorny issue in the aftermath of the protest. There are various accounts regarding whether the men of the Nigerian Army shot Nigerian EndSARS protesters even when they were holding the Nigeria flag and singing the National Anthem. A video of the course of the Nigeria Army shooting at the peaceful protesters was recorded by an EndSARS protester named D.J. Switch. Some reports put the total number of injured protesters during the shooting at 50. Equally, Lagos State Government later reported that the shooting resulted in up to 25 injured and only two dead (Premium Times, 2020b). An investigation by Amnesty International stated that “the Nigerian army and police killed at least 12 peaceful protesters on 20 October at two locations in Lagos (Amnesty, 2020b)”. Due to the politics that characterised the critical event in the EndSARS protest, many Nigerians have chosen to remember this day and the heroes of the protest that were victims. First-year remembrance activities included a car procession at the Lekki toll gate, and both domestic and international Nigerians changed their social media profile pictures and status updates to include slogans and symbols like “Black Tuesday,” “we will never forget 20 October,,” “image of the blood-stained national flag,” (George, 2020a; (George, 2020b). The EndSARS Memorial in Lekki, tollgate witnessed the use of tear-gas by the police, who claimed the protesters violated their promise on how the remembrance will hold (Premium Times, 2020c).

The aftermath of the protest equally witnessed the establishment of judicial panels saddled with the responsibility of investigating the activities of extra-judicial killings, torture, extortion, harassment, gender-based violence, indiscriminate arrest, and abuse of power by the Nigerian Police Force and the specialised SARS unit. By 30 December, 2020, twenty-nine (29) states and the Federal Capital Territory have set up a judicial panel to hear the above allegations. However, the judicial panel, since its establishment, is still trying to bring thorny issues surrounding the protest and police brutality to justice. Judicial panels across the state also have several challenges, such as uncooperative attitudes of the actors involved, and financial issues, among others. For instance, the judicial panel of Lagos state, which was the epicentre of the protest, witnessed a series of challenges in the course of sitting. The Nigerian Army, which has been alleged to shoot a live bullet at peaceful protesters, refutes such claims. In a report of Amnesty International, the Nigerian Army not only disbanded its legal team for the Lagos State judicial panel during the process but also claims that their officers sent to the scene of protest only enforced a curfew imposed by the Lagos state government and did not shoot at peaceful protesters.

### **DEMOCRACY, REPRESSION, AND PROTEST IN NIGERIA: SOME INSIGHTS**

Subscribers to democracy and democratic principles have intensified their research to understand why democracies, especially in developing countries, result in repression in cases of threat and protest. By democracy and its principles, evidence not only suggests that democracies do not fight each other but that democracy reduces the likelihood of political repression because they ultimately guarantee fundamental human rights. Several studies have advocated this view (Patrick and Henderson, 2001; Maria and Mirjam. 2014). However, political events in Africa, such as the EndSARS protest, have forced scholars to rethink a democratic regime's choice of repression. In other words, a regime's choice of repression is often measured by the level of threat as well as the perception of the leaders on the credibility, magnitude, and implication of such threats and demands. In other words, while authoritarian regimes have been associated with repression in their effort to secure legitimacy, emerging studies now reveal that democracies, too,

cannot be entirely disassociated from repression. As put by Patrick, 'both democracies and autocracies are just as likely to repress their citizens and that the standard view that democracies repress less is essentially a function of the different type of threats they face in comparison with autocracies (Patrick and Henderson, 2001: 120).

To understand why the Nigerian government employs repression as part of its response to the EndSARS protesters, Maria's study (Maria and Mirjam 2014)—provided three possible hypotheses that may have influenced a regime's choice of repression. According to Maria, the setup of the regime, the state, and the challenge are essential for explaining repression. The setup of a regime and the state may not be able to explain why democracy employs repression as they are mostly related to authoritarian and (neo) patrimonial regimes. However, the nature of challenges and threats in democracy influence repression. Two perspectives can offer insight into why democracy can employ repressiveness and, ultimately Nigeria's use of repression. The first factor is the nature of protests, including demands and means chosen by protesters, and the second, is the strength of protests in terms of their size and popular support for the demands.

The Nigerian government's choice of repressing EndSARS is clear from the above. The protest and protesters' demands focused on two perennial issues police brutality and rotten governance. However, the nature of the protest involves Nigerian youth with full participation because it coincided with the Academic Staff Union of Universities eight (8) month strike in which university students are off-campus. The choice of repression becomes unavoidable when protesters' demands begin to articulate issues around restricting and constitutional reforms, which can have a significant impact on the government and its legitimacy. Hence Bourdeau argued in a similar perspective that 'the decision for repression is taken when the challenges threaten the respective power structures (Boudreau, 2005: 54). Another question is whether protests are extraordinary or 'business as usual (Keith and Kimber, 1983).' From the organisation of the EndSARS protest and the courage displayed by protesters at all fronts, it was crystal clear that the protest was aimed at causing a massive change which thus constitutes a threat to the democratic regime. Hence the choice of repression. Also, scholars like Davenport interrogate the interconnection between protest and the degree of mobilisation. EndSARS mobilisation was unique and also made it difficult for the government to curb. It was a large protest and failed to have a leader. It was done decentralized, making their impact felt around towns and cities they pose themselves as a real force of socio-political change.

However, given the nature of repression, it frequently harms the consolidation of democracy. For instance, the EndSARS protest crackdown impacted Nigeria's civic space and participatory democracy. Nigeria's democracy had the lowest score on the 2020 Democracy Index during the time the event took place. For instance, Nigeria's rankings for the 2020 Democracy Index included both a global ranking of 110 out of 166 and an African ranking of 20 out of 55. Nigeria was categorised as a country having a "hybrid regime" as well. Nigeria does poorly on each of the following ten (10) democracy indicators: political culture (3.75 points), political involvement (3.89 points), government functioning (3.57 points), election process and pluralism (5.17 points), and civil liberties (4.12 points) (The Economic Intelligence Unit, 2020). Given the government's oppressive approach to protest and civic liberties, such a ranking is reasonable.

Equally, the suppression and crackdown on EndSARS demonstrators not only resulted in flagrant

human rights violations but also posed a serious threat to Nigeria's democratic values. The Nigerian state's repressive activities during the protests all but eliminated the people's right to life, liberty, freedom of movement, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of self-dignity, freedom to good well-being (Abati, 2020). Nigeria is also one of the seven nations having the highest level of citizen mistrust of the government (World Economic Forum, 2018). Therefore, during the EndSARS demonstration, scenes of abuse and young unrest were caused by the Nigerian state's coercive response, which took the shape of violence against the protestors. Repression of protests threatens Nigeria's civic spaces, the rule of law, constitutionalism, peace, and security. It also impacts public opinion of the government and its leaders.

## **CONCLUSION**

The article examines the aspect of repression and its implication for democracy during the EndSARS protest in Nigeria. Protests are an avenue used by state citizens to ensure that matters lacking in good governance, sustainable livelihood, and welfare are made known to the government. In Nigerian history, the article reveals that protest and repression are not alien. The EndSARS protest in Nigeria was directed toward two significant issues, namely Police brutality and rotten governance. However, a recurring feature that characterised the protest was the government's use of repression to control the protest. The repressive government's response included the use of tear gas, unauthorised detention, shooting of protesters, attacking protesters with water tanks, excessive torture, assaults, extortion, severe injuries, state-inspired extra-judicial killings, and "fatal" shootings, which resulted in numerous deaths as well as the destruction of property and livelihoods. There were numerous instances of police brutality and violations of people's fundamental human rights during the crackdown.

Given the above repressiveness, which characterised the EndSARS protest, the article examines the interconnection between democracy and repressiveness. From available works of literature on repression, it was clear that the choice of the democratic regime of repression can be found in the nature, demands, and mobilisation of the protest. A critical look at the EndSARS protection fits into the nature of protest that often attracts a repressive response from either a democratic or authoritarian regime. In addition, the article also examines the implications of repressive response for Nigerian democracy. Government repressive response endangers civic and democratic space, endangers the rule of law, erodes public trust in a regime and its institutions, reduces public participation, and violates individual fundamental human rights. Protesters' mistrust of the government and its security institutions, the rejection of proposed police reforms to change SARS to SWAT, effort to internationalise the protest by enlisting non-state actors from around the world, and clamouring for justice for those who were killed by police endangers Nigeria's sovereignty and path to sustainable democracy.

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