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#EndSARS Youth Protests in Nigeria: Lessons and Opportunities for Regional Stability*

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Introduction

In recent years, entrenched practices of state institutions and actors have elicited confrontation from the public. This is especially true of the youth, who have rebelled against the high-handedness of security and law enforcement agencies. In some contexts, this has led to the overthrow of long-term autocratic regimes. A notable signpost of this is the Arab Spring, triggered by Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian youth street vendor, who set himself ablaze in protest against police seizure of his vegetables for failure to obtain a permit in December 2010.¹ This degenerated into a series of violent nationwide protests against corruption, economic mismanagement, and arbitrary rule that eventually toppled the country's longtime ruler, Ben Ali, in 2011. The geopolitical contagion effect of this was evident in the pro-democracy protests in other Arab countries. In the case of Libya, the protest resulted in the fall of longtime ruler, Muammar Gaddafi; while in Syria, the status quo remains despite more than a decade of internal conflict and deep state fragility.

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As with the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the United States, Nigeria's #EndSARS youth protests against brutality perpetrated by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) have garnered global attention. This was largely due to the use of social media and digital activism to mobilize young people in major cities in Nigeria. While this led to dissolution of SARS by the Nigerian government, as initially demanded by the protesters, the violent protests snowballed into demands for broader social and economic reforms.

Inasmuch as SARS brutality was a proximate trigger of the nationwide protests, a constellation of growing poverty, unemployment, and shrinking space for inclusive participation of youth in government policy making was its essential context. The increasing discontent evident amongst Nigeria's youth during the #EndSARS protests reflects a simmering trend in other West African states, which has implications for regional security. Notable in recent years were youth-led protests in Burkina Faso that ousted President Blaise Compaoré, following his move to amend the national constitution to extend his 27-year rule, in 2014;² and the widespread public discontent against corruption, economic mismanagement, and a worsening security crisis in Mali that triggered youth-led violent protests in 2020 and culminated in the military coup d'état that ended the government of elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta.

This paper assesses the lessons the #EndSARS protests offer to other West African countries and highlights potential opportunities for addressing youth grievances in order to mitigate threats to regional stability. The paper first presents an overview of the protests in Nigeria. Secondly, it highlights the link between the causes of the #EndSARS protests and regional dynamics. The last section examines ways to enhance regional stability.

Overview of the #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria

The #EndSARS protests were an expression of frustrations of young people against years of brutality perpetrated by the SARS. The protests erupted following the so-called "Lekki toll gate massacre," which led directly to the death of some 12 protesters and allegedly nearly 40 others due to clashes with the police.³ Unfortunately, suspected hoodlums also exploited the protests and looted a number of shops and malls and raided several warehouses across the country housing COVID-19 relief materials.⁴

The protesters initially made a five-point demand: immediate release of all arrested protesters; justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families; the creation of an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all police misconduct within 10 days; a psychological evaluation and retraining (to be confirmed by an independent body) of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed; and an increase in police salaries so that they are adequately compensated for protecting the lives and property of citizens.⁵

Aside from the proximate causes, protests in Nigeria have arisen from worsening economic conditions exacerbated by the fall in oil revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led to rising poverty prices and higher costs of living, as well as massive youth unemployment.⁶ Over 70 percent of the country's population is under 30 years of age.⁷ As of the second quarter of 2020, unemployment in Nigeria stood at 21.7 million overall, with youth comprising 13.9 million of that figure.⁸ The socioeconomic deprivation among youth in the country was depicted by a protester on a placard that read, "...Youth need funds and good jobs to take care of our families and welfare...We are not lazy."⁹

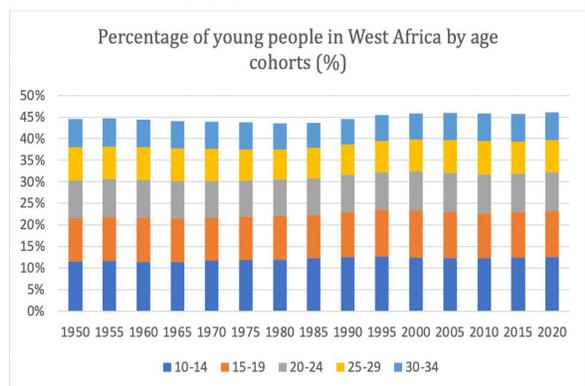
This has been amplified by a lack of access to quality education, poor healthcare, institutionalized corruption, profligacy among political elite and public servants, marginalization, and a lack of effective



civic engagement with the youth. Given the country's long history of keeping the youth at the periphery of power,¹⁰ young people have resorted to mass protests as a vehicle to express their frustrations. For instance, after years of demands for a significant reduction in the qualification age for many elected officers, it was only in 2018 after a similar campaign—Not Too Young to Run movement—that President Buhari signed the Age Reduction Bill.¹¹ In this regard, #EndSARS was seen as a call for social justice.

Furthermore, the use of digital technology, especially social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp facilitated engagement and mobilization of young people for the #EndSARS protests. Twitter influencers and celebrities like Rinu Oduala, comedian Debo Adebayo (Mr Macaroni), Folarin Falana (Falz), Runtown, and Paul Okoye, among others, led the transformation of the protests from digital platforms to physical locations.¹³ Additionally, influencers like Feyikemi Abudu and the Feminist Coalition also raised funds through their social media accounts,¹⁴ while Flutterwave, a technology company, created a crowd funding platform¹⁵ to mobilize resources to take care of medical bills of injured protesters. The Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, also added his voice in condemnation of the violent attacks against the protesters.

Similarly, the protests attracted international support from Nigerian diaspora populations in Ghana, the United States, Germany, the U.K., and Canada.



The killings at the Lekki Toll Bridge further elicited international condemnation from notable international personalities including then presidential candidate Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, and Pope Francis.¹⁶ The then Secretary of State of the United States, Michael Pompeo, also condemned the Nigerian security forces for the “excessive use of force.”¹⁷ Similarly, the voices of global celebrities including Beyonce, Nicki Minaj, and Rhianna, among others, also contributed to providing the impetus for the

protesters and pressuring the Nigerian government to stop the use of disproportionate force to quell the protests.

On October 9, 2020, President Muhammad Buhari committed to disbanding SARS, reforming the police service, and granting the five-point demands of the protesters.¹⁸ Thereafter, the Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, announced the government's decision to disband SARS and replace it with the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team, as well as to release all arrested protesters.¹⁹ Judicial panels were also set up across the states to investigate SARS abuses and compensate the victims. However, the authorities continued to target supporters of the protests by freezing their bank accounts and fining news agencies that disseminated videos of the #EndSARS protests and related shootings.²⁰

Linking the #EndSARS Youth Protests to Regional Dynamics

While the #EndSARS youth protests in Nigeria have galvanized unprecedented international attention, similar protests are occurring in other West African states.²¹ In 2020, a total of 577 incidents of protests and demonstrations were recorded in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Ghana, The Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo, among others.²² Most of the violent protests were led by young people and centered around elections and demands for improvement in socio-economic conditions in communities. Nigeria alone recorded 173, including 89 incidents linked to the #EndSARS demonstrations which accounted for



the highest death toll of 155.²³ In Côte d'Ivoire, more than 55 people were killed and 282 injured during and after the presidential elections in October 2020.²⁴ Similarly, about 30 fatalities were recorded in Guinea's post-election violent protests, while Ghana recorded five fatalities during its elections in 2020.²⁵ Also, in August 2021, under the hashtag #FixtheCountry, young Ghanaians leveraged social media to mobilize physical protests against poor governance in tackling socio-economic challenges including unemployment, the high cost of living, and the poor living conditions facing the youth in the country. Although some of these instances reveal patterns of mobilization of young people by political actors, they also reflect the frustrations of the youth due to the lack of opportunities, leading to acute trust deficits.

The use of technology and social media as tools for mobilization of youth is evident across the region.²⁶ In fact, increasing patronage of social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, has created influential networks for social change, citizen empowerment, awareness creation, and the amplification of citizen voices in governance.²⁷ At the same time, social media has created space for the spread of fake news and extremist views, which are precursors of violent youth protests.

Despite recent growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in most states in the region,²⁸ the economic dividends have not generated sustainable employment for West Africa's predominantly youth populations, of which 64 percent are under age 24.²⁹ Ominously, the socioeconomic dislocation of youth is further exacerbated by the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economies of West African states, particularly in the informal sector that engages most young people. The cumulative effect of this is mirrored in recurrent violent confrontations between the state and young people, as evident in social unrest, perpetration of organized crime, conflicts and rising terrorism, and waning social cohesion.

Another structural cause of the youth protests in Nigeria that features prominently in other states in the region is the lack of youth participation in decision-making processes. Although the youth remain numerically dominant in West Africa, their participation is largely limited to voting, with limited capacity (in terms of resources, age limits, and other constitutional provisions and qualification) to stand for office.³⁰ As in Nigeria, young people in most West African states continue to be exploited by the political elite as pawns in political struggles, including protests and agitations for reforms and regime change.³¹ The search for relevance in national affairs through inclusive participation in governance has resulted in intergenerational conflict between the youth and the political elite. This often manifests in recurrent violent youth protests against the status quo.

Conclusion

Through the #EndSARS protests, young people in Nigeria have been able to express their discontent against widespread human rights violations perpetrated by SARS and the broader socio-economic challenges facing the youth in the country. While the Nigerian government has responded to the immediate demand for disbandment of SARS, it has yet to address the structural conditions that continue to generate youth-related protests and violence in the country. Nevertheless, the protest is a vivid reflection of a simmering trend in other countries in West Africa, where violent confrontations between states and young people are becoming more common. The #EndSARS protests offer lessons and opportunities for addressing youth grievances across other countries, where potential risks to national and regional stability are numerous.



Policy Options and Recommendations

1. For National Governments:

- a. While the youth bulge in the region could potentially yield demographic dividends, a combination of youth bulges and abysmal economic performance can be explosive. Beyond providing a stable economy to harness the demographic dividend of the youth bulge in the region, national governments must increase access to quality education and healthcare, and create sustainable employment opportunities for young people to break the cycle of poverty and strengthen their resilience.
- b. Governments should leverage social media as a space for youth activism and inclusive participation in governance. As of 2018, West Africa had an 86 percent mobile phone penetration rate and a 26 percent mobile internet penetration rate; Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria comprised about 70 percent of these internet users.³² The rapid scale up in internet access and use by the youth offers opportunities for governments to engage young people and broaden the space for civil engagement using virtual tools. Social media is, however, also a breeding ground for misinformation and the perpetuation of crime.

2. For ECOWAS, African Union, and International Partners:

- a. Develop appropriate anti-cyber-crime capacities: Over-emphasis on militant approaches to curbing cyber fraud can destabilize national security and undermine the rights of citizens. Most of the atrocities perpetuated by the SARS unit were linked to prejudicial profiling of the youth. In particular, technology workers were signaled out as cyber-criminals, which is indeed a significant problem amongst youth in Nigeria. Given the upsurge of these crimes in other countries in the region, coupled with growing unemployment, it is crucial for regional governments, the African Union and international actors to strengthen and build the capacities of their security agencies to diagnose and fight cyber-crime.
- b. Harness youth agency in decision-making processes and peacebuilding. The need for West African governments and regional and international partners to formulate and implement existing policies that serve to amplify youth voices in national and regional representations is imperative. The #EndSARS protests have rekindled conversations around young people as critical agents in the peace and security dynamics of West Africa. This speaks to the need for states to build capacity and empower young people, and harness their creativity, knowledge, and innovation so they can play a central role in conflict prevention and sustaining peace in communities across states.

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The 2021 SVNP Joint Research Award Competition

To mark the SVNP's 10th anniversary and as part of its mission to strengthen collaboration among members and share African knowledge about peacebuilding and state-building, SVNP established a competition for co-authored research papers analyzing key existing or emerging issues in peacebuilding in Africa, highlighting issues and lessons learned, and offering concrete actions that African and international policymakers can take to advance peacebuilding on the continent. This publication and the paper "Lessons from Street Protests as a Peacemaking Process" by Dr. Arsene Brice Bado and Mr. Philippe Gueu, were declared co-winners of the 2021 SVNP Joint Research Award.

The SVNP papers are available to download online on the Wilson Center Africa Program's website:
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