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NORTH EAST NIGERIA AND THE END SARS MOVEMENT: A STUDY ON POLICE VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL MOBILISATION

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the mass protests of the End SARS Movement against police brutality in October 2020 were important from a peacebuilding and security perspective. Indeed, they have highlighted the necessity to reform the security and defence forces, including the military when they repress street demonstrations. Moreover, they have shown the challenges of political stability in a weak state that claims to be democratic while failing to regulate conflicts peacefully. In such a context, this study helps to analyse the strange paradox of a region, North East Nigeria, which was spared by the End SARS protests, except for Adamawa, yet witnessed massive human rights violations perpetrated in the name of the war on terror against Boko Haram.



OBJECTIVES

The study focuses on the so-called BYA states, i.e. Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. The key question is to understand why people in the North East did not react in the same way as other Nigerians to protest against the abuses of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Did they stay at home because they did not feel concerned by a movement which was focused on Southern cities and often led by students, artists and urban elites? Was it because they felt neglected by activists who did not react to their plight when Muslim civilians were the victims of violence at the hands of the police or the army? Unless it was because they had already been repressed so much that they did not dare occupy the streets, demonstrate against security forces, and risk being accused of complicity with Boko Haram?

METHODS

The analysis is based on both fieldwork and the data of the NigeriaWatch project based at the University of Ibadan. The quantitative study covers a period of 15 years exactly, from 1st June 2006 to 31 May 2021. In the NigeriaWatch database (Nigeria Watch), the word 'police' includes the Mopol and SARS while the 'army' category includes the Navy and the Air Force. Other government forces include Federal institutions that are allowed to use firearms: customs and prison services, the DSS (Department of Security Services), the NDLEA (National Drug Law Enforcement Agency), and the NSCDC (Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps), a body created during the Biafra War and revived in 2007 with a special permission in 2012 to carry weapons to fight against Boko Haram. In the NigeriaWatch database, paramilitary forces are recognised as governmental only when they have been officially recognised by law.

In the second part of the study, the findings are based on qualitative methods of research. A total of 20 interviews were conducted on site with stakeholders in Maiduguri, or by phone in Yola, Damaturu and Abuja. A few web-based news articles were also used to justify some of the arguments presented. The persons interviewed included human rights defenders, humanitarian personnel, journalists, activists, academics as well as religious clerics. However, no security personnel or victims of human rights violations agreed to be interviewed, even after assurances of granting them the right to remain anonymous.

FINDINGS

Quantitative analysis of the data of the NigeriaWatch project shows that police brutality and killings by various government forces, mainly the Army, are indeed concentrated in the North East. Together with parastatal militias, government forces actually killed more people than the Boko Haram insurgents between 2007 and 2019. Considering the last fifteen years, however, the specificities of the North East need further investigation. At first sight, it seems that the region does not differ much from a general pattern where security and defence forces shoot and kill people in over half of the total number of lethal incidents where they intervene. In the North East, this proportion (69.3% in Borno, 53.7% in Yobe, and 64.8%

in Adamawa) is similar to the national average (66.1%). In other words, the frequency of killings by security operatives in the so-called BYA states is not higher than in other geopolitical zones in Nigeria.

Yet government forces definitely kill more people in the North East. With 3% of the Nigerian population according to the 2006 Census, Borno alone records almost 15% of 4,620 lethal incidents where government forces killed at least one person, whatever the status of the victim, which is often unclear: civilian, armed bandit, insurgent, or protester. This pattern is quite striking when it comes to the army. During the period under study, between 2006 and 2021, Borno recorded almost 39% of a total of 1,660 lethal incidents where the military killed at least one person. Such a pattern confirms findings of the NigeriaWatch project: nationwide, the police usually kills more frequently but is responsible for less fatalities, while the military intervene less often, yet are more involved in large-scale massacres. In Nigeria, the police thus killed at least one person in various incidents that resulted in a total of 16,210 violent deaths in fifteen years, between 1st June 2006 and 31 May 2021; meanwhile, the corresponding figure was 38,366 fatalities for the army.

The good perception of SARS operations in the North East

Several reasons explain why the people of BYA states did not participate to the protests against police brutality in October 2020. There were a few demonstrations in Northern cities like Jos, Kaduna, and Abuja. At the Adamawa State University in Mubi, there was also an abortive attempt to organise End SARS protests. But the organisers could not mobilise people to go into the streets. The End SARS movement lacked true national spread and was fundamentally a Southern affair that gripped urban centres such as Ibadan, Benin City, Warri, Calabar, Enugu, and Lagos, its epicentre.

Indeed, the general perception of the Squad in the North East is quite good. Before the End SARS protests in October 2020, the average man in Maiduguri, Yola or Damaturu might not have ever heard about SARS abuses. Many people in the North East, including educated ones, did not know the acronym of the infamous police unit. To them, there was no difference between SARS and the larger Nigerian police. Actually, prior to the creation of state-level SARS in Borno, there was a similar police unit called Crack Squad which performed basically the same functions. Therefore, with the proscription of SARS in October 2020, it simply reverted to its former name.

In disparity with the predominantly negative public opinion about a police unit involved in forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in the South, what most youths in the North East knew of SARS was their being responsible for citizens' protection against the dreaded Boko Haram insurgents. The Crack Squad in Borno was also said to help solving disputes among residents, especially over issues of theft and robbery, which was the primary purpose for which this unit was set up in the early 1990s. In the same vein, the capacity to travel safely along the Maiduguri-Damaturu highway was understood as resulting from regular patrols and checks by the Squad along the road. Without SARS, many believe that Maiduguri would have been surrounded by the insurgents. At the peak of the End

SARS movement, counter ProSARS protests thus emerged in Borno and Yobe to show support for the Squad's activities.

The role of social media

It is also said that a lesser access to social media played a role. While the entire End SARS protests began as a Twitter campaign in 2017, the low-level social media penetration in the North East allegedly deterred citizens from participating to demonstrations in 2020. Together with widespread poverty levels and high illiteracy rates, this could be because most conversations on Twitter are in English. As a result, people in the North, who are predominantly Hausa speaking, prefer to use Facebook or WhatsApp (the most popular social media platform in the country), which have more options for vernacular languages.

Actually, Northerners were not completely absent from Twitter campaigns. A constituency collectively known as Arewa Twitter promotes perceived regional interests. At the peak of the End SARS protests, it was thus involved in trying to alert Nigerians about northern insecurity through hashtags such as #SecureNorthNow, #EndBandtryNow, and #EndBokoHaramNow. But its campaign highlighted the general sense of feeling among Northerners that their own challenges were more grave than that of the End SARS protesters, yet they did not get the attention they deserved on social media. Hence, the low-level social media penetration was presumably not the leading factor to explain the lack of mobilization against police brutality. If people in the region had felt strong enough connection with the End SARS protests, they could have used WhatsApp, Facebook, radio or SMS to join the demonstrations.

The North – South divide

The age-long North-South divide was very important in this regard. People from the North East complained that Southerners never bothered to exert pressure on the federal government to end the insurgency in their region, as they were to end SARS. There was also a religious undertone to this. At the inception of the Boko Haram insurgency, there was a perception in the South that the insurgency was a ploy by Northerners to destabilize the government of a non-Muslim president from the Niger Delta, Goodluck Jonathan. Another perception in the predominantly Muslim North East was that Christian Southerners were of the view that the insurgency in the region was a fight between Muslims, thus it was none of their business.

Indeed, one of the most important factors explaining why the End SARS movement did not gain any ground in the Northern part of the country was a deeply-held suspicion against a contestation whose epicentre was Lagos and whose key drivers were mainly Southerners. As a matter of fact, what started as a call for police reform gradually transformed into a call for good governance and accountability, and ultimately the resignation of President Buhari. This evolution confirmed the suspicion of Northerners who believed End SARS was but a politically motivated anti-Buhari movement aimed at regime change. Hence, for many in the North, the End SARS protest followed a hidden agenda to undermine and, eventually, topple the Federal Government. President Buhari himself re-echoed this belief during a press interview.





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Boko Haram insurgency and fears of repression

Other factors played a role. The North East region of Nigeria and especially the BYA states have been under the grip of Boko Haram's insurgency for over a decade. This context possibly deterred individuals and groups in the region from participating in the End SARS protests for two main reasons. First, ending SARS was not their priority; instead, people in BYA states were more interested in supporting the counterinsurgency efforts to obtain peace. Secondly, they feared the likelihood of a harsh repression if ever they dared occupy the streets, while reactionary forces were suspected to organise pro-SARS demonstrations.

One would understand and appreciate why people of the North East are wary of any form of dissent by examining how the insurgency itself started in 2009 as confrontation between the police and Boko Haram's then non-violent members in Maiduguri. The people of Borno consequently became sceptical of the idea of protests, not minding their best intentions, for the fear that they may degenerate into an uncontrollable chaos. Currently in 2021, Maiduguri enjoys a fragile peace and its inhabitants do not want to risk a protest that may degenerate into uncontrollable riots.

On account of the militarised nature of life in warzones, one reason for people not to participate in the End SARS protests could also have been their fear of repression by the security forces. Unlike other parts of the country, open-air demonstrations are banned in the North East since the beginning of the Boko Haram insurgency. Despite the huge presence of security forces in the region, however, the people in BYA states have on many occasions come out to protest on issues they considered vital to them. Human rights violations of SARS did not fall in this category.

Another evidence that fear did not deter people from protesting was the mobilization against Boko Haram by the residents of Maiduguri at the peak of the insurgency in 2013, when it became obvious that the security forces alone could not defeat the insurgents. The youths could no longer accept being extra-judicially killed by the army or murdered in cold blood by the rebels. Their mobilisation eventually led to the formation of vigilantes, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), as a community-led effort meant to jointly fight Boko Haram with the security and defence forces. At that point, residents successfully flushed out the insurgents out of Maiduguri.

In the same vein, thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from the suburbs did hit the streets of Maiduguri in September 2017 to protest food shortages and poor conditions of living in a camp called Gubio. Again, in 2019, IDPs from Dalori Camp were reported to have blocked Maiduguri highways, for lack of food and medicine. Moreover, despite the tense atmosphere in the region, for many years now, members of the Gire Dole Network of women whose husbands, sons and daughters were victims of arbitrary arrests and forced disappearance in the hands of soldiers have been demonstrating against the military in Maiduguri, every March 12.

Also, the post End SARS protests massive looting of Covid-19 palliative materials and food items in government and privately-owned facilities could not have happened if fear of repression by the security forces had been a key factor to deter citizens from action. This does not mean that demonstrators were not afraid of being killed by the army or the police. The fear of repression sometimes played a role, as shown by the abortive attempt to organise End SARS protests at the Adamawa State University. Students were actually afraid of being arrested and labelled as Boko Haram members or sympathisers.

CONCLUSION

The nearly complete absence of demonstrations against the police across the BYA states has thus to do with a combination of factors that include the sociocultural context, the fear of repression by security forces, the age-old North-South divide in Nigeria, and the distrustful perception of Southern protesters by people in the North East. The secondary role the police now plays in the region's security architecture has also reduced their influence and their interaction with harmless civilians. When it comes to human rights violations by government forces in the North East, people's accusing fingers are more easily pointed at the army.

However, one cannot simply conclude that there is complete absence of human rights violations by the police in BYA states. For instance, the Crack Squad has been accused of arresting rustlers only to divert and sell stolen cattle in the black market. Instead of mediating civil disputes, their men were also reported extorting money from citizens. Finally, SARS has been blamed for being deeply politicised. Together with the secret police (DSS), it is responsible for the Borno governor's personal security and it has allegedly been used to intimidate opponents. In this context, one should not dismiss the possibility that reactionary forces have been at play in the Pro SARS protests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Federal Government of Nigeria

- 1 Reform the security sector, not only in the South but also in the North East where massive human rights violations have been recorded. Changing the label of SARS is not enough in this regard.
- 2 End the impunity of police and military officers involved in human rights violations. In 2021, for instance, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Abba Kyari, was suspended following his indictment by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. But he was never tried and condemned, neither for his alleged role in a \$1 million fraud case, nor for his responsibility as former officer in charge of the SARS unit in Lagos. In the North East, the accountability of police and military officers would help to satisfy people's demand for justice and, possibly, foster reconciliation.

To the BYA State Governments

- 1 Recognise and consolidate a free public space for peaceful demonstrations against the authorities.
- 2 Stop politicising and privatising security forces for personal use.

To the international community

- 1 Continue to support local civic initiatives in the North-East.
- 2 Exert diplomatic pressure on the Federal and State Governments to pay respect to human rights and end extra-judicial killings.
- 3 Show how important a true reform of the security sector would be to stabilise the country, fight insurgent groups, get the support of grassroots communities, and restore the confidence of foreign investors.

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