

North East Nigeria and the End SARS Movement: A study on police violence and social mobilisation



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RESEARCH REPORT

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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ACRONYMS

ASUU	Academic Staff Union of Universities
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BYA	Borno, Yobe and Adamawa
CJTF	Civilian Joint Task Force
CSP	Chief Superintendent of Police
DSS	Department of Security Services
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
NSCDC	Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps
RFI	Radio France International
RRS	Rapid Response Squad
SARS	Special Anti-Robbery Squad
VOA	Voice of America

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INTRODUCTION

The research question and the design of the study

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.

The key question of the study is thus 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?

The study focuses on the so-called BYA states, i.e. Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. It is divided in two main parts. First, the study analyses the data of the NigeriaWatch project (Nigeria Watch) based at the University of Ibadan. Quantitative research shows that police brutality and killings by various government forces, mainly the Army, are indeed concentrated in the North East. In the second part, the study investigates the reasons explaining why the people of the BYA states did not participate in the End SARS Movement, except for a few in Adamawa. The analysis is based on fieldwork in Maiduguri and relies on qualitative interviews with activists, academics, journalists, and humanitarian personnel. More information on the methodology can be found in the annex.

I. Police brutality and extrajudicial killings in North East Nigeria (2006-2021)

In 2020, protests against SARS occurred in a general context of police brutality and high level of distrust. Studies have shown, for instance, that over 40% of the members of the public agree that the Nigeria Police does not have the capacity to ensure maintenance of law and order.¹ Almost three out of four add that they do not feel safe to report any case to the force due to fear of being wrongly charged if they do not pay money. In the same vein, it is believed that corruption involves the loss of many lives. Indeed, it distracts the police from doing their job and arresting criminals after receiving gratification. Moreover, it incites some officers to kill people who resist extortion and refuse to pay bribes, as with SARS. Finally, it erodes the capacity to maintain law and order because citizens are reluctant to report criminal cases to the police.

This pattern of government repression, racket and violence is well established, whether in civilian or military regimes.² Instead of fighting a foreign enemy at the borders, the Nigerian Army, for instance, is mainly used to quell riots, combat local insurgencies and maintain law and order. Some authors even claim that, since the end of the military regime in 1999, soldiers are more often involved in internal security operations due to the liberalisation of the political space.³ Thus, massacres, extrajudicial killings and extortions by the police or the military are not specific to the North East or the government of President Muhammadu Buhari. They happen very frequently on a daily basis.

¹ Respondents also think that bad governance and political interference are responsible for corruption within the force, more than low levels of professionalism and poor or irregular salaries. See Enweremadu, David [2019], "Understanding Police Corruption and Its Effect on Internal Security in Nigeria", in Oshita, Oshita, Ikenna Mike Alumona & Freedom Onuoha (eds.) [2019], *Internal Security Management in Nigeria: Perspectives, Challenges and Lessons*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, pp.343-5.

² Protests against security forces also are not new in Nigeria, especially on campus. In 1983, for instance, six students were killed during an Anti-Police-Brutality Rally. Cf. Eguavoen, Irit [2008], "Killer Cults on Campus: Secrets, Security and Services Among Nigerian Students", *Sociologus* 58, n°1, p.12.

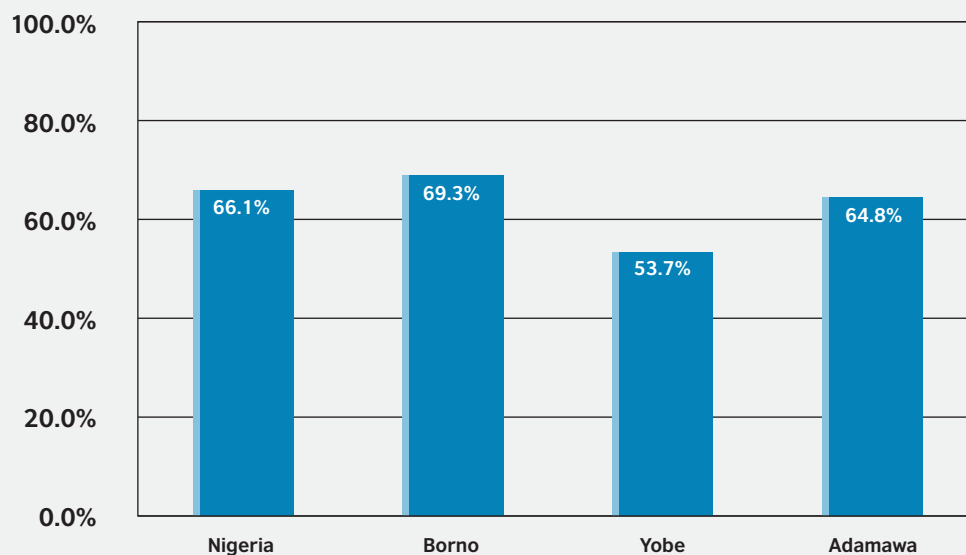
³ Momodu, Jude Abdulkareem [2019], "The Nigerian Army and Internal Security Operations in the Fourth Republic", in Oshita, Oshita, Ikenna Mike Alumona & Freedom Onuoha (eds.), *Internal Security Management in Nigeria: Perspectives, Challenges and Lessons*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, pp.399-440.

As noted by some Nigerian scholars, “the level of impunity, pervasiveness and normality of such actions on the one hand and rarity of legal conviction of such officials on the other hand suggest a tacit acceptance of such criminal conduct and arguably elevate such actions to the status of unwritten official policy.”⁴ “This issue, they argue, goes beyond standard state weakness”. It rather reveals “a criminogenic atmosphere where the state constitutes the worst abuser of human rights within its borders.” In this regard, law and order in Nigeria evokes the crimilegal system described by some scholars when the moral, normative and social boundaries between legality and criminality are completely blurred.⁵

Undoubtedly, the Nigerian War on Terror has exacerbated the brutality of the police and the army with a deep sense of impunity since the Boko Haram uprising of 2009.

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data of the NigeriaWatch project thus reveals that, together with parastatal militias, government forces killed more people than the insurgents between 2007 and 2019.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 (figure 1).

Figure 1: The frequency of killings by security operatives that intervened in lethal incidents: Nigeria, Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa (1st June 2006 – 31 May 2021)



Source: nigeriawatch.org

⁴ Abdulazeez, Medinat & Temitope Oriola [2018], “Criminogenic patterns in the management of Boko Haram’s human displacement situation”, *Third World Quarterly* vol.39, n°1, p.86.

⁵ Schultze-Kraft, Markus [2019], *Crimilegal Orders, Governance and Armed Conflict*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2019p.

⁶ Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine, « Boko Haram : qui tue qui ? Le décompte macabre d’une guerre sale au Nigeria », *Le Monde* 22 April 2020. Access: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/04/22/boko-haram-au-nigeria-qui-tue-qui-le-decompte-macabre-d-une-guerre-sale_6037441_3212.html

⁷ Afeno, Super Odomovo [2016], “Killings by the security forces in Nigeria: Mapping and trend analysis (2006–2014)”, in Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine (ed.), *Violence in Nigeria: A qualitative and quantitative analysis*, Ibadan, IFRA-Nigeria, Leiden, African Studies Centre, Waposo Series n°3, pp.112-40.

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 (figure 2). 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 (figure 3). By contrast, the level of involvement of the police in the killings (less than 37%) was much lower than the national average (almost 65%), probably because the police is absent from war-torn areas. In fifteen years, Borno recorded less than 2% of a total of 2,912 lethal incidents where the police killed at least one person.

Figure 2: The share of Borno State in lethal incidents where government forces killed at least one person in Nigeria (1st June 2006 – 31 May 2021)

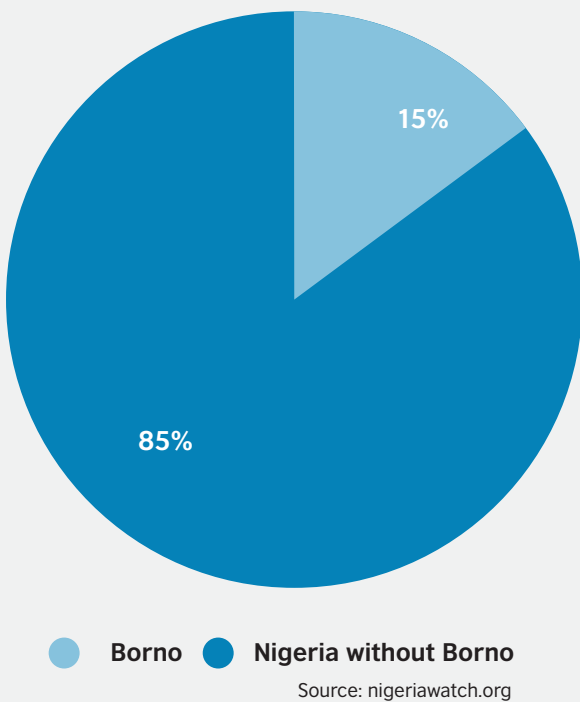
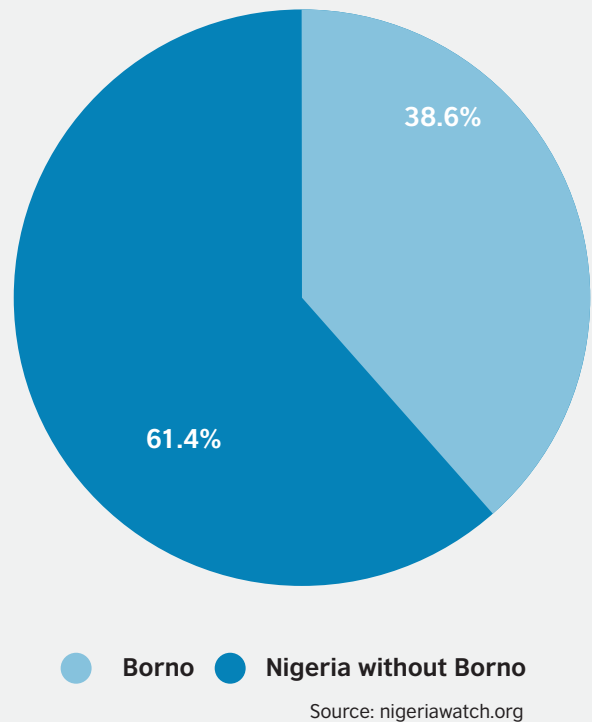


Figure 3: The share of Borno State in lethal incidents where the military killed at least one person in Nigeria (1st June 2006 – 31 May 2021)



To understand the conduct of hostilities in the North East, it is thus important to distinguish between the role of the police and the army. BYA states follow different patterns. In Adamawa, for instance, the level of involvement of the police in the killings (52%) is lower than the national average but higher than in Borno (37%) or Yobe (35%), a characteristic that might contribute to explain why there were a few protests against SARS in Yola and none in Maiduguri or Damaturu. In the same vein, the level of involvement of the army in the killings was higher (77%), maybe because of the intensity of the fighting in northern Adamawa, as compared to Borno (76%) and Yobe (64%). Such a pattern, however, confirms findings of the NigeriaWatch project showing that, nationwide, the police usually kill more frequently, yet is responsible for less fatalities, while the military intervene less often, yet are more involved in large-scale massacres. Thus, the police 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.

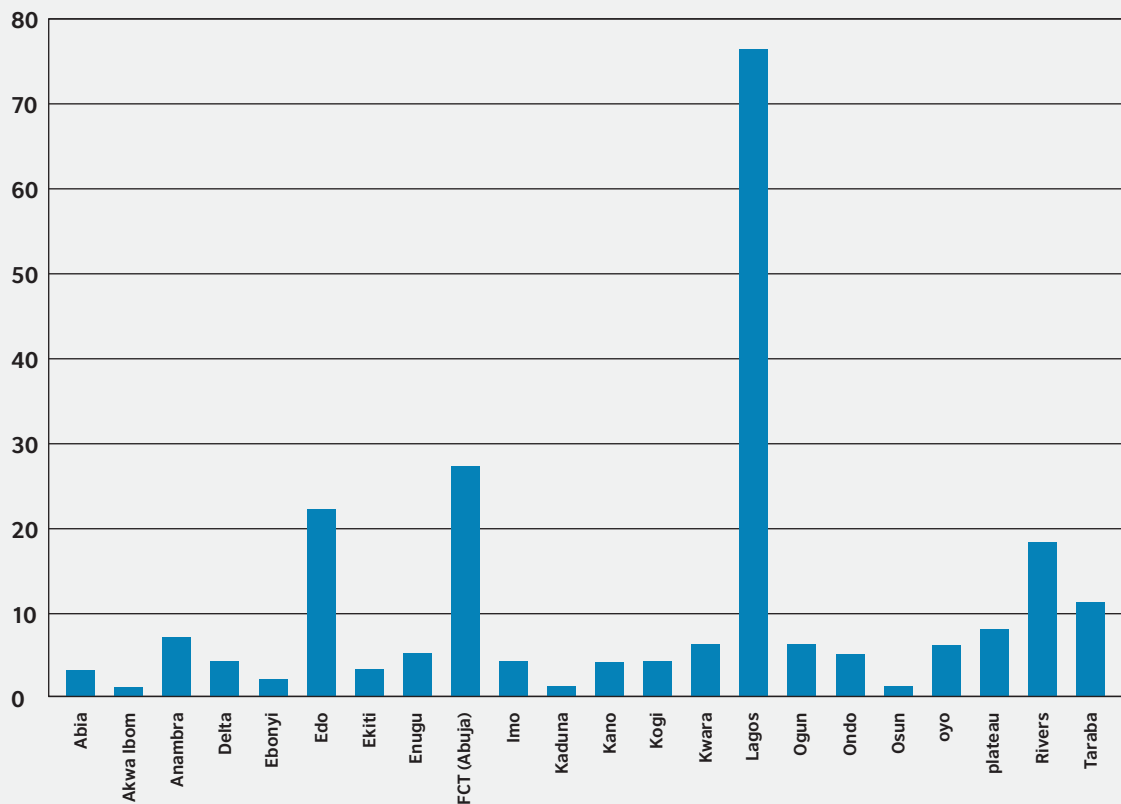
II. Apathy or Resistance? The End SARS Movement in North East Nigeria

On Thursday 8 October 2020, nationwide protests against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) broke out after weeks of outrage and anger over police brutality, harassment, and extortion in Nigeria. The immediate trigger was a video that showed a SARS officer shooting a young motorist in Ughelli, Delta State, pushing his body out of the car and driving off with his Lexus SUV. The protests were led predominantly by young Nigerians including activists and celebrities and claimed about 225 lives across 21 states and the FCT, with 104 of the victims killed on 20 October 2020. Yet the people of BYA states did not participate in the demonstrations (figure 4). Although there were pockets of protests across Northern cities like Jos, Kaduna, and Abuja, 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.

Several reasons explain what could wrongly be seen as a form of social apathy, as it is sometimes believed that Nigerian citizens in the North East are more submissive to constituted authority. Because of the nearly unquestionable respect they command among their followers, local religious and traditional leaders have undoubtedly the capacity to influence people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours in ways that are unimaginable down South. In October 2020, for instance, they indeed cautioned people against participating in the protests.⁸ But the respect paid to traditional authorities does not properly explain why people in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states did not join the End SARS movement. Other reasons played a role.

Figure 4: Fatalities from the End SARS protest, per state in 2020



Source: Ukoji, Vitus, Nigeria: Tenth Report on Violence (2020), Ibadan, Nigeria Watch, 2021, p.15. Access: http://www.nigeriawatch.org/media/html/NGA-Watch-Report2020_Final.pdf

⁸ Interview, Activist in Maiduguri

A preview of the general perception of SARS operations in the North East

To start with, the general perception of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) for Nigerians from the Southern part of the country is almost a stark contrast to what is obtainable in the North East, particularly in the so-called BYA states. Before the End SARS protests in October 2020, the average man living in Lagos, Warri or Onitsha was likely to have been aware or may have even experienced human rights violations by the Squad, from extortion to torture. But his equal 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 solve 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. For many locals, SARS was doing a good job. Its operatives were swift, brave, hardworking and committed to securing lives and properties.⁹ For instance, they always stood gallantly by the Borno state governor whenever his convoy came under attack by the insurgents.

Many stories abound of how SARS operatives successfully protected civilians. Some of them, for instance, were even said to have rescued soldiers who had been ambushed and abducted by Boko Haram along the strategic Maiduguri-Damaturu highway, which is currently the only relatively safe road linking Borno to other parts of Nigeria. According to one oft-repeated story, SARS operatives were able to trail and fight off the insurgents, releasing the military personnel with their equipment. This action also benefited to the

people. The capacity to travel safely along the Maiduguri-Damaturu highway is now 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.

Local political leaders also appreciated the Squad's efficiency and their comparatively good community relations skills. For instance, SARS operatives were responsible for the personal security of the Borno state governor whenever he visited high-risk communities outside of Maiduguri metropolitan area. They benefited from his support and cooperated quite well with the "official" vigilantes of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), i.e. those endorsed and backed by the authorities.

Actually, residents in Borno and Yobe did not completely rule out acts of human rights violations by the Squad in the North East or other parts of Nigeria. But they praised the otherwise detestable unit for all the positive impacts they made on their lives. The police were seen as 'friends of the people' and law-abiding citizens were made to believe that the End SARS protesters were but a bunch of criminals engaged in drug trafficking or internet fraud.¹⁰ It is mainly the military who were accused of perpetrating serious human rights violations and not being effective against Boko Haram despite their key role in counterinsurgency efforts.

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 Borno SARS Commander, CSP Ibrahim Mohammed, was for instance honoured by a sociocultural lobby, the Kanem-Borno Forum, and the State House of Assembly, during a special session.¹¹ The Network of Civil Society Organisations in Borno State, a coalition of civic groups, also staged a ProSARS demonstration to celebrate its outstanding role in the fight against Boko Haram. While the End SARS protests were raging in other parts of Nigeria, they felt that the members of the Squad deserved to be shown some sympathy.¹² Similarly in neighbouring Yobe, at around the same time, ProSARS demonstrations were staged while prayer sessions were conducted in churches and mosques seeking divine support for not only SARS but, more generally, all security agencies operating in the region.¹³

⁹ Interview, Activist in Maiduguri

¹⁰ Interview, Civic activist in Yola

¹¹ Interview, Journalist in Maiduguri

¹² Interview, Civic activist in Maiduguri

¹³ Interview, Civic activist in Damaturu

Despite this unusually positive picture, however, some people think differently. To them, for instance, SARS alone cannot take the glory of securing the strategic Maiduguri-Damaturu highway, which is under the collective responsibility of the Rapid Response Squad (RRS).¹⁴ Moreover, the Squad is accused of arresting rustlers only to divert and sell stolen cattle in the black market. Instead of mediating civil disputes, their men also extorted money from citizens according to some reports.¹⁵ Finally, SARS is 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 the same vein, it is very possible that reactionary forces have been at play in the ProSARS protests.

The diminished influence of the police in the North East

The fairly positive image of SARS in the North East does not mean the complete absence of human rights violations by the Squad. The nearly complete absence of demonstrations against the police across the BYA states has also to do with a combination of factors that include the sociocultural context, the prevailing security architecture in the region, as well as 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. For instance, the diminished influence of the police over public affairs in BYA states reduced their interactions with civilians while the military took the lead in counterinsurgency efforts and human rights violations.



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While no one can dispute the brutal nature of SARS across Nigeria, the types of human rights abuse that the End SARS movement protested against did not exist in any parts of the Northeastern states. Due to their primary role in internal security prior to the advent of the Boko Haram insurgency, the Nigerian police and particularly the Crack Squad had a record of sheer brutality in Borno, which was well documented. This included the July 2009 brutal killing of Mohammed Yusuf [the founder of Boko Haram]. However, the start of the insurgency and subsequent deployment of the military in the state, changed the security architecture of Borno such that the police's role in the state's security architecture became secondary; they were no longer the primary drivers of security. Moreover, acts of criminality especially petty crimes had significantly reduced due to the insurgency which further diminished the police's influence over people's life.¹⁶”

¹⁴ The Rapid Response Squad (RRS) is a multiagency collaboration between the police, the CJTF, the Department of Security Services (DSS), and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC).

¹⁵ Interview, Civic activist in Maiduguri

¹⁶ Interview, Academic in Biu

Yet the people of Yola reacted differently. Unlike the residents of Maiduguri and Damaturu, they did not organise Pro SARS protests and prayer sessions. This is pretty understandable as the people of Adamawa had a different and less intense experience with the insurgency. This automatically meant that their interactions with SARS were also varied.¹⁷ In fact, there was an abortive attempt to organise End SARS protests at the Adamawa State University in Mubi. But the organisers could not mobilise people to go into the streets because reluctant students did not feel connected with the largely Southern-based End SARS movement. So, they did not see the need to risk their lives for a cause they had no direct link with, since they were not sure how the security forces would react.

Interestingly, although citizens of Adamawa did not actively participate in either the End SARS nor in the Pro SARS demonstrations, they were fully engaged in the post-protests looting of Covid-19 palliative materials, mostly food items.¹⁸ While they did not feel concerned by collective actions against or in support of the police, they were thus connected to the looting spree all over Nigeria.

The role of social media

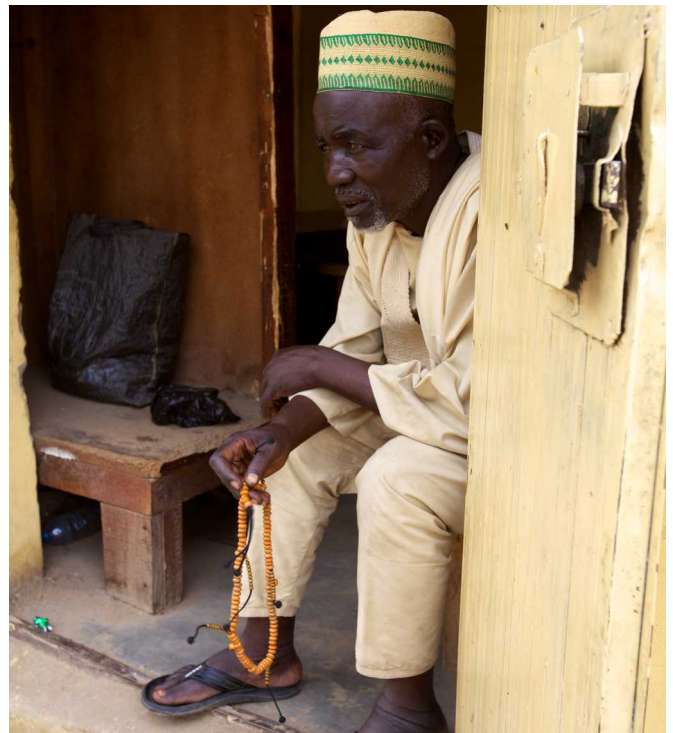
The entire End SARS protests began as a Twitter campaign in 2017 under the hashtag #EndSARS. Twitter also played a huge role in both the mobilisation and coordination of demonstrations in 2020. This prompted questions as to whether or not the low-level social media penetration in the North East could have been a factor in the citizens' disinclination to participate in the protests, together with widespread poverty levels and high illiteracy rates. Indeed, Twitter is not very much used in the region, compared to other social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. This is 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, which have more options for vernacular languages.¹⁹

Generally speaking, WhatsApp is the most popular social media platform in the country, followed by Facebook, with Twitter being in a distant sixth position.²⁰ In Nigeria, Twitter is viewed essentially as an 'intellectual and elitist' social media, hence its low numbers of active users compared to Facebook and WhatsApp. This also explains its unmatched influence and effectiveness in holding those in authority accountable, which made it the most suitable platform for the End SARS campaign.

Yet social media was not the leading factor explaining the lack of mobilisation against police brutality. If people in the region had felt strong enough connection with the End SARS protests, they could have used WhatsApp or Facebook to join the demonstrations. Indeed, information from Twitter is easily shared on other social media platforms. Beyond that, mobilisation could still have happened through radio, phone calls and word-of-mouth which are also very effective tools for mass mobilisation.²¹

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In essence, Northerners may not be as social media savvy as their counterparts from the South but they are also very informed when it comes to politics and current affairs, thanks to their avid radio listening culture which helps them keep abreast of developments not only in Nigeria but around the world, through platforms such as the BBC, VOA, RFI, all which offer multiple bulletins in Hausa, on daily basis.²²”



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¹⁷ Interview, Civic activist in Yola

¹⁸ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/north-east/423173-EndSARS-police-arrest-120-suspected-hoodlums-for-looting-in-adamawa.html>

¹⁹ Interview, Journalist in Maiduguri

²⁰ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1176101/leading-social-media-platforms-nigeria/>
<https://noi-polls.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Social-Media-Poll-Report.pdf>

²¹ Interview, Civic activist in Yola

²² Interview, Civil servant in Maiduguri

The North – South divide

One of the major explainers of almost outright rejection of the End SARS protests by people in the North East was the age-long North-South divide. As a result of a perceived ‘I don’t care’ attitude of people in Southern Nigeria to the decade-long Boko Haram insurgency and human rights violations perpetrated by both the security forces and the insurgents, people from the North East did not see the need to associate themselves with the End SARS protests. Their conviction stemmed from the belief that people in the South had never bothered to exert pressure on the federal government to end the insurgency in their region, as they were exerting pressure on the government to end SARS. This, coupled with the fact that the Boko Haram experience taught them a bitter lesson regarding dissent of any form, as well as the perceived highly instrumental role of SARS in the fight against terrorism in the North East, shaped attitudes towards the End SARS movement.

There was also a religious undertone to the reluctance to join the protests. At the inception of the Boko Haram uprising, 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.²³ On the contrary, many Muslims from the North East thought that Christians in the predominantly South did not care about their suffering because they viewed the problem as an internal fight between different Islamic schools of thought. They were like: “What is my business if my enemy is killing my enemy?” Hence, people in BYA states saw no reason to worry about End SARS protests that were perceived to be largely an affair of Southerners who were insensitive to the prevailing insecurity situation in the North East.²⁴

Moreover, the fact that End SARS was understood to be essentially supported by Southern social media influencers

and Nollywood celebrities was another reason why youths from the North East could not connect with the movement. Indeed, local celebrities were hardly involved in the protests.

Actually, Northerners were not completely absent from Twitter campaigns. A constituency collectively known as Arewa Twitter promotes perceived regional interests.²⁷ 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. Doubtlessly, the Southern origin of the End SARS movement affected its acceptability in the North East. Another weighty perception that worked against the whole protest was the view that demonstrators were part of a ploy to undermine a Northern president, Muhammadu Buhari.

Thus, 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.

Indeed, 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.²⁸ President Buhari himself re-echoed this belief during a press interview.²⁹

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If the influencers were largely Northerners and celebrities were Kannywood²⁵ stars speaking in Hausa via say WhatsApp or Facebook, the results could have been different. This further clarifies why it was largely not about social media penetration rather, about the perception of stardom. Had it been there were prominent Northerners who enjoyed street credibility involved in the End SARS protests, that could have motivated youths in the region to join in the protests.²⁶ ”

²³ Interview, Academic in Maiduguri

²⁴ Interview, Civic activist in Maiduguri

²⁵ Kannywood is the Hausa-language film industry of Northern Nigeria, largely based in Kano.

²⁶ Interview, Academic in Maiduguri

²⁷ Interview, Civic activist in Abuja

²⁸ Interview, Civic activist in Maiduguri

²⁹ <https://punchng.com/EndSARS-protest-was-to-remove-me-from-office-buhari/>

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When the demands of the protesters changed from five to ten and from ending police brutality to calling for transparency, accountability and good governance, Northerners concluded it was all about regime change. Generally speaking, Nigerians tend not to protest when ‘one of their own’ is in power for the sentimental feeling that ‘our man is in charge’. So, geopolitical dichotomy always plays a role in which part of the country is more actively participating in protests. When President Jonathan was in power, people from the South were not seen actively protesting on national issues. Now that Buhari is in power, Northerners are not likely to be seen protesting.³⁰”

Boko Haram insurgency and fears of repression as deterrents against protests

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.³¹ Currently in 2021, Maiduguri enjoys a fragile peace and its inhabitants do not want to risk a protest that may degenerate into uncontrollable riots.³²

Thus, in 2020, political, traditional and civil society leaders did not find it difficult to mobilise people for prayer sessions and peace processions supporting the police in Borno and Yobe, the two states worst hit by the insurgency. After SARS was eventually proscribed by Abuja, the Borno governor was even reported to have called on the federal government to deploy the disbanded unit’s personnel to his state to complement the military’s counterinsurgency efforts, ostensibly in recognition of the role the Squad had all along played in the campaign against Boko Haram.³³ Various individuals and groups re-echoed the governor’s call for a massive deployment of SARS operatives to the North East to help fight terrorism.

On account of the militarized 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, however, people of the region sometimes came 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 mobilisation 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.

³⁰ Interview, Civic activist in Abuja

³¹ Interview, Civic activist in Damaturu

³² Interview, Journalist in Abuja

³³ <https://ait.live/governor-zulum-calls-on-fg-to-deploy-dissolved-sars-to-borno-state/>

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Owing to the culture of violence they have been accustomed to in the last decade, youths from Northeast are most likely not either afraid of being killed by the insurgents or being repressed by the security forces. The Borno youths have become so hardened that on many occasions when the Boko Haram terrorists advanced towards Maiduguri, the youths had stood up against the terrorists till they were chased out the metropolis.³⁴”

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.³⁵ Again, in 2019, IDPs from Dalori Camp were reported to have blocked Maiduguri highways, for lack of food and medicine.³⁶ 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 12.³⁷

Also, the massive looting of government and privately-owned facilities in the tail end of the End SARS protests in Adamawa could not have happened if fear of repression by the security forces had been a key factor to deter citizens from action.³⁸ 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.³⁹ As we have seen, moreover, they were not keen on protesting police brutality because the SARS threat was neither close nor existential threat to them. Consequently, they gave up joining the planned demonstrations.

Do North East citizens lack a culture of organised protests?

Unlike Southerners, people in the North East do not often occupy the streets to express their discontent over socioeconomic, cultural and political issues. But history has shown that when push comes to shove, they have opted for protests as their last resort.

“

When they choose to protest, the protests are in most cases, organised and under some kind of mobilisation usually under the umbrella of certain associations like labour unions, the civil society as well as thought leaders. For instance, in March 2021, there was a protest by motorized tricycle operators in Maiduguri who were unhappy with a planned increase in tax by the state government. Thus, members of the tricycle operators association in Maiduguri held a protest in the city under the mobilisation and guidance of the association's leadership, after which the government called their leadership for a dialogue.⁴⁰”

There are other recorded instances of protests in the region. In 2020, for instance, Adamawa teachers aggrieved about the non-payment of their salaries demonstrated peacefully against the government just as the students in Adamawa protested over the lingering ASUU strike the same year.⁴¹ These instances confirm that the idea of protesting is not completely alien to the people in the North East, even if Muslims are often said to be more likely to 'submit their grievances to Allah' when their rights are violated.

³⁴ Interview, Journalist in Maiduguri

³⁵ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1166791/amp>

³⁶ <https://www.africanews.com/2019/06/27/nigeria-idps-protest-over-food-shortage/>

³⁷ Interview Civic activist in Maiduguri

³⁸ Interview, Civic activist in Maiduguri

³⁹ Interview, Civic activist in Yola

⁴⁰ Interview, Journalist in Maiduguri

⁴¹ Interview, Civic activist in Yola

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Human rights abuse by the police is almost a global phenomenon. It exists in both developed and developing countries alike. In the United States of America, for instance, police brutality sparked the BlackLivesMatter movement, akin to the End SARS movement in Nigeria. What differs from one country to another is the degree to which such violations exist as well as the mechanisms available to handle such cases.

Although most people in the North East have painted a very positive picture of SARS, one cannot simply conclude that there is complete absence of human rights violations by the Squad in BYA states. For sure, the secondary role the police now plays in the region's security architecture and the violent opposition they have to contend with in the form of the Boko Haram insurgency have reduced their influence and their interaction with harmless civilians. When it comes to human rights violations by security forces in the North East, people's accusing fingers are more easily pointed at the army. By virtue of their training and their

primary role in the counterinsurgency operations, the military are the front-liners. Considering their daily exposure to violence and the trauma that comes with it, they are also more likely to be aggressive and brutal with civilians.

Remarkably, SARS is seen as resorting to a different modus operandi in its dealing with people in the North, especially compared to the way it operates in the South, where it publicly stops, detains, extorts money or even kills innocent citizens. In BYA states, people may not unreservedly like SARS, but there is a general sense that the presence of the Squad makes lives more bearable – they are an evil necessity.⁴² Yet it is also possible that the police takes advantage of Northerners' alleged submissive nature and lack of formal education to manipulate victims of abuses and incite their relatives to keep quiet.⁴³ In this regard, we should not exclude the possibility that human rights violations by the police are less visible, another factor that could explain why people of BYA states did not join the End SARS protests.



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⁴² Interview, Civic activist in Yola

⁴³ <https://africanarguments.org/2020/10/EndSARS-there-is-no-north-south-divide/>

METHODOLOGICAL ANNEX

The quantitative study covers a period of 15 years exactly, from 1st June 2006 to 31 May 2021. In the NigeriaWatch database, the word ‘police’ includes the Mopol and SARS while the ‘army’ category includes the Navy and the Air Force.⁴⁴ 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 recognized by law.

In the second part of the study, the findings are almost entirely 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 met included human rights defenders, journalists, civic 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.



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⁴⁴ As for Joint Task Forces (JTFs), they usually combine units of the police and the army. But they can also include other security institutions. For the sake of clarity, it is here considered that reports on JTFs refer mainly to the police and the army. These task forces are not to be confused with paramilitary militias called ‘Civilian JTF’ in northeastern Nigeria.

The Managing Conflict in Nigeria (MCN) Programme aims to support Nigerians with conflict resolution, at both the state and community level. Our work focuses on reducing violence, promoting stability and strengthening resilience so that Nigerians feel more safe and secure in their communities. We work in North Eastern Nigeria in three focal states – Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe – some of the country's most conflict-affected regions. The four-year programme (2017-21) is funded by the European Union and implemented by the British Council.

MCN commissioned this study in collaboration with NigeriaWatch – an on-going research project that develops a database to monitor fatal violence and human security in Nigeria – and IFRA-Nigeria – one the 27 public research institutes under the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs based overseas.

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