

LETHAL REPRESSION IN NIGERIA AND ITS EFFECT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE END SARS AND END HUNGER/ BAD GOVERNMENT PROTEST

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Abstract

This study focused on the effect of lethal repression on peaceful protests in Nigeria, specifically examining the #EndSARS and #EndHunger/BadGovernment protests. It analysed the government's indifference to the plight of its citizens and its tendency to resort to violent repression to curtail peaceful protests. Both primary and secondary data were utilized in this study; the primary data were collected through the use of key informant interviews, while the secondary data were sourced from textbooks, journals, newspapers, and other materials. Findings revealed that lethal repression significantly affected peaceful protests, as it deterred citizens from participating due to the perceived dangers associated with Government's response to peaceful protests. The study concludes that with the findings from the field, lethal repression has negatively affected citizens' right to peaceful protest. As such, little or nothing will be done in the near future to call government to order, when policies without a human face have been passed and implemented. The study recommended that citizens should be more conscious in electing leaders to manage Government affairs to avoid the risks associated with elected autocratic leaders who employ lethal repression against peaceful protesters. Additionally, it recommended that protesters should adhere to rules of peaceful protest to ensure that public properties are not damaged during demonstrations.

Keywords: Lethal- repression, End-Sars, End-Hunger, Bad government

Introduction

Protest has historically served as a fundamental mechanism through which citizens globally display their discontent with unacceptable governmental policies. The right to peaceful protest is firmly established in numerous international human rights laws, notably encapsulated in Article 21 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which affirms the right to peaceful assembly, enabling individuals to convene and collectively express their perspectives. Also the UN human right committee N0, 37 which provides guidance on the right to peaceful assembly describes the state's obligations to protect this right and offer direction to those who plan protests. Section 40 of the Nigerian 1999 Constitution as amended, further strengthens the right to peaceful protest by granting individuals the right to peacefully assembly and association.

Protest in Nigeria has increased in recent times (which are indicative of escalating discontent with systemic shortcomings). This is Consequent on socio-economic pathologies like police brutality, economic difficulties and a perceived lack of governmental effectiveness. Two notable movements, #EndSARS and #EndHunger/Bad Government, have arisen as powerful representations of the public call for justice, reform, and improved governance. The #EndSARS protests, sparked by widespread police brutality, alongside the #EndHunger/Bad Government protests, driven by escalating costs of goods and services and pervasive poverty, have both highlighted the State's reactions to civil unrest. Although these protests were intended as peaceful manifestations of public discontent, they encountered violent suppression from the state. When residents peacefully demonstrated against police brutality and unfavourable government policies that have trapped them in poverty, starvation and bondage, the government responded by harassing, killing, and arresting them (Aniche,2020). The balance between maintaining public order despite police violence and a dire economic climate and defending citizens' constitutional rights to peaceful protest was called into question by this government's deadly repression approach.

According to Amnesty International Report (2021), “over 51 persons (unarmed civilian) were killed all over the country during the #EndSARS protest which began on 8th October, 2020 with so many injured, as a result of the lethal repression that the State engaged to deter citizens from participating in future protest that is supposed to be their constitutional rights. The case was even more pathetic with the #End Hunger/Bad Government protest in August 2024, where not fewer than 22 persons were killed, several injured and over 500 persons including journalist arrested and charged to court for treason (Cable News Network, 2024). Public protest has continued to diminish due to the lethal repression response of the state. The #EndHunger/Bad Government protest did not gain momentum as much as the #EndSARS protest did. Although it was initially planned to be a 10days Protests it was quickly aborted due to the lethal repression response of the state, (Princewill and Busari, 2024)

Statement of the Problem

Throughout history, lethal repression has functioned as a mechanism employed by authoritative regimes to deter citizen dissent against perceived oppressive policies, (Bove, Platteau and Sekeris 2017). A pertinent case is that of the Ogoni people, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, whose opposition to the adverse effects of crude oil extraction culminated in the detention and extrajudicial killings of at least 50 Ogoni citizens (Ref-world, 1994). During this military era, numerous peaceful protesters faced arrest and detention, while others chose exile as a means of self-preservation (Ihonvbere,1996). The re-establishment of democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999 sowed optimism regarding the protection of fundamental rights, particularly the principle of freedom of speech—a cornerstone of democratic societies. However, an analysis of two specific protests reveals that the government continues to employ lethal repression as a strategy to suppress dissent and silence the populace.

In this context, lethal repression operates as an instrument for "state capture" (Trejo and Ley), mandating that policies and programmes be unconditionally accepted by the citizenry.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to:

1. Examine the type of lethal repression that was unleashed against peaceful protesters 2020 and 2024; and
2. Examine how lethal repression tactics has infringed on right to free assembly.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Lethal Repressive State of Nigeria and Africa

The history of lethal violence is widespread in Nigeria as well as other African countries (Tamuno, 1970; Alemika and Chukwuma, 2000; Abati, 2020). However, Abati (2020) argues that the lasting impact of colonialism is less responsible for the increasing incidence of suppression in Africa than the ruling elite's shortcomings. Ihonvbere (2003) asserts that post-independence governments in Africa function primarily as instruments of police violence, intimidation, murder, crimes against humanity, and excessive repression, rather than as protectors of their citizens or facilitators of development. Ake (1981) views the State as a particular form of class oppression. A key characteristic of this form of domination is that the institutional mechanisms of control become autonomous and largely disconnected from the social classes, including the ruling class.

The African state is normally characterized by high levels of ethnic conflict, one-party rule, and high levels of efficiency standards in political competition, frequent military takeovers, political repression, and weak economic growth (Ake, 1981). Similarly, Buyse (2018), notes that "the State is progressively limiting civic spaces to protect the interests of the ruling elites and privileged Government officials by strengthening the state's brutal systems, including the enforcement agencies alongside militarized forces, which enable them to grossly violate fundamental freedoms as well commit crimes against humanity become widespread (Buyse, 2018; Margulies, 2018; Iwuoha, 2020; Cole, 1999; Malena, 2015; Clark, 2016).

Examining the repressive government actions, the shrinking public areas and the instances of police brutality in Nigeria. The repressive State uses overt violence and intimidation to silent its citizens' Its primary goal is to induce deep fear in people by using force and regular monitoring in order to regulate the public and destroy the systems of collective citizen organization (Heywood, 2007). In order to limit civic environments, these regimes criminalized public meetings, implement arbitrary laws, and encourage deadly tyranny (Van Kesteren, 2019; Ezeibe et al., 2020).

Although dictatorial governments are usually associated with brutality, both autocratic as well as democratically elected government exhibit repressive behavioural patterns, especially those in low- and middle-income countries (Centre for Global Challenges, 2018). Forcible along with ideological tactics are both used by the oppressive state to increase its level of oppression. The military, police, and prisons are examples of

coercive tactics, whereas the courts and legislatures are examples of the ideological apparatus. The states rhetorical along with coercive elements primarily employ non-violent and violent means, respectively, to protect their positions of power and preserve their hold on the populace (Ake, 1981; Althusser, 1970; Margulies, 2018; Aniche, 2018a; Iwuoha, 2020).

After Nigeria gained political autonomy, the post-colonial court system—particularly its police force—maintained its colonial traits as state agents against students, political opponents, as well as members of labour unions (Ake, 1981; Cole, 1999). Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and similar accords are recognised by the ruling elites, they rely on corrupt practices and state brutality to retain their stranglehold on power (Ihonybere, 2001). The state continually shrinks civic spaces to defend the interests of the ruling class yet concurrently enhancing and broadening the power of its repressive institutions, which include the armed forces and police, to severely infringe human rights (Buyse, 2018). Reducing civic spaces entails restricting the rights to free expression, accessibility to information, association, along with organization (Malena, 2015).

What is noteworthy is that substantial human rights breaches still present a serious security threat in Nigeria, despite gains in civil and political rights in May 1999 after years of military rule (Bappah, 2016). The reason for this is that the Nigerian Police Force was set up to preserve state interests in resource expropriation and being exploited, not to meet the needs or protect the populace (Kalu, 2017). Consequently, there is an escalating distrust between the police and State authorities and the general populace. Due to this growing mistrust, along with the police's corrupt and authoritarian nature, Nigerian youths are frequently treated as criminals until they can prove their innocence, contrary to what Nigerian laws stipulate (Anaekwe and Oti 2024). Additionally, the concept of regime security is often confused with national security since the police and other governmental agencies in Nigeria have not become independent from the present administration (Afen, 2014).

Based on this, the police's primary function is often to defend the governing system as opposed to the general public. Police and military personnel often use harsh and brutal methods to repress the populace in order to protect the government and its interests.

To defend repression, formal breaches, and human rights restrictions, the Nigerian government uses legal and regulatory structures. According to Section 45 (1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended), no law that is deemed reasonably justified in a democratic society for: (a) defence, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health, or, (b) protection of the rights and freedoms, (c) declare valid the rights enshrined in Sections 37, 38, 39, 40, and 41 of the same Constitution and (d) allow law enforcement officials to make arrests without a warrant, take and destroy property, and access information from any person or organization without any boundaries. These legislative frameworks have legitimized severe restrictions on Human Rights. The state along with its authoritarian agents has

been further emboldened to continue their attack with little opposition. This is comparable to the Chinese police's methodology, which functions with no monitoring and gives them considerable latitude to do as they like. This unchecked authority has resulted in numerous reports of human rights violations (Wang & Madson, 2013; Wang, 2020), including killings and other severe acts of repression against the populace. Although studies abound on Human Rights abuse/violation, not much has been done on the effects of lethal repression on peaceful protest. Therefore, this study intends to contribute to body of knowledge by looking at lethal repression and its effects on peaceful protest in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This research employed two theoretical frameworks for analysis. The first, frustration and aggression theory was utilized to explain the motivations behind citizens' engagement in protests. The second framework, power theory, was applied to understand the government's use of lethal repression as a means of coercion.

Frustration Aggression Theory

John Dollard, Neal Miller, Leonard Doob, Orval Mowrer, and Robert Sears first proposed the frustration–aggression hypothesis of violence in 1939. Neal Miller and Leonard Berkowitz subsequently developed it in 1941 and 1989, respectively, according to this notion, when someone's attempts to accomplish an objective and his ambition are thwarted or disappointed, aggressiveness results. According to the thesis, aggressiveness is always the outcome of frustration, and frustration always comes before aggression. (Spencer, 2018).

Two years later, Miller and Sears updated the theory to suggest that, while frustration motivates a want to react, violence is just one outcome that may arise from that need. As a result, the revised hypothesis showed that although frustration drives potentially hostile behaviours, aggressiveness itself is the cause of any aggressive action, indicating that frustration is a required but not sufficient condition for aggression. The theory aims to explain the causes of violence and provide light on why people turn to scapegoating. Dollard and his colleagues define frustration as the "state that arises when a goal-oriented reaction encounters resistance," and aggressiveness as "an act intended to cause harm to an organism (or a representative of an organism)." According to the notion, people become aggressive because they are frustrated, but they attack (source) an innocent person when they are unable to address the cause of their anger. For example, when someone is humiliated and treated disrespectfully at work and is unable to respond because he fears losing his job, he may vent his frustration and fury on his family at home.

Applying the frustration–aggression theory to this study, the widespread brutality perpetrated by police against young Nigerians resulted in significant frustration, particularly among the youths. This frustration contributed to increased aggression, which, amplified by social media, facilitated the organization of the End-SARS protest. Furthermore, frustration arising from the escalating cost of living and the depreciation of

the Naira, following the removal of fuel subsidies, affected the entire population. These combined frustrations ultimately led to the End Hunger and Bad Government protest.

Methodology

Data for this study was gathered using both primary and secondary sources. For the primary source focus group discussion was carried out with the 10 Key informant selected purposively from three distinct Civil Society Organizations based in the three Senatorial District of the Edo state. These organisations were purposefully selected because of their track records of civil society activism in the State. The population of the three Civil Society Organisation put together was 331. Three persons were selected from two Civil Society Organisations in Edo-north and Edo-central respectively while four Persons were selected in Edo-south (the Senatorial District with the highest number of Civil Society Organisations in the State). The secondary data were sourced from a range of materials, including newspaper articles, online publications and academic journals. Data emanating from focus group with the key informant were analyzed using the deductive thematic, conscious effort was made to capture the exact word of respondents.

Analysis of Data

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a division of the Nigeria Police Force, became the focus of widespread nonviolent protests in October 2020 across major Nigerian cities. These demonstrations emerged in response to persistent allegations of racketeering, torture, and extrajudicial killings by SARS personnel. The #End-SARS campaign rapidly expanded as protesters began to demand broader political and constitutional reforms, including economic federalism, political restructuring, and improved governance. Protesters also called for a direct address from the President of the Nigeria.

Adeshokan (2020), criticizing his delayed engagement with the movement. The president's eventual response failed to mitigate public anger. The protests culminated on October 20, 2020, when police and military forces opened fire at the Lekki toll gate in Lagos, a central site for the movement. This incident marked the effective end of the protests. Reports indicate that over 100 protesters were killed nationwide during the initially peaceful demonstrations. Public outrage intensified following the release of a video showing President Buhari laughing during a discussion about compensation for victims. The response of Nigerian security services, characterized by disproportionate use of force, reflects a longstanding disregard for the right to life. The situation escalated further when individuals alleged to be government-sponsored attempted to disrupt the protests, resulting in increased violence.

Following the imposition of a nationwide curfew by the Lagos State governor, armed military personnel entered the Lekki Toll Gate on October 20, 2020, and fired upon unarmed demonstrators, resulting in multiple fatalities. This incident raises significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of constitutional protections for the right to

peaceful assembly in Nigeria. The government's use of lethal force caused profound loss and trauma among affected families.

In the aftermath of the #EndSARS protests, the Nigerian government employed similar repressive tactics in 2024 against demonstrators protesting adverse economic conditions resulting from the removal of fuel subsidies and currency fluctuations. Reports confirm that at least 50 individuals were killed and over 100 arrested, including a journalist and several minors. Despite the severity of the economic crisis, the recent 'End Hunger/Bad Government' protests attracted less public engagement compared to #EndSARS. This reduced participation is likely due to widespread fear of violent repression, which has discouraged many citizens from engaging in peaceful protest. Table 1 below presents data on casualties resulting from the Nigerian State's repression during both protest movement (Bartusevicius, Leeuwen and Petersen 2023)

Table 1 Represent the Casualty of the Lethal Repression of the two Protest 2020/2024

DATE OF LETHAL REPRESSION INCIDENT	LOCATION	CASUALTY
10 October 2020	Ogbomosho, Oyo state	1 protester shot dead and other 7 protesters injured
11 October 2020	Ogbomosho, Oyo state	3 persons (protesters) were shot dead
12 October 2020	Surulere, Lagos	A stray bullet hit an onlooker some protesters injured and some arrested
16 October 2020	Edo State House of Assembly	2 protesters shot dead with many injured
20 October 2020	Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos	15 persons (protesters) killed with many people injured
2 August 2024	Kano, and Yobe	13 persons (Protesters) killed
2-5 August 2024	In Nigeria	Over 700 persons including a journalist were arrested and charged to court for different offences ranging treason to public destruction of public properties
2-6 August 2024	In Nigeria	22 persons were killed with more than 4 persons injured
4 November 2024	Abuja	114 persons (minor) was charged for treason before Justice Obiora Ekwuatu

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2025

Data Presentation

Data gotten from the key informant interview conducted will be presented thematically.

Question1. Does lethal repression have an effect on your ability to organize peaceful in Nigeria?

Respondent 1

Lethal repression significantly impairs the capacity of civil society to effectively organize peaceful protests. As evidenced by our experiences, when we sought to mobilize opposition against a specific local policy within the state, certain members of our group expressed concerns regarding the anticipated severe repercussions from the government. Notably, some individuals articulated their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the cause, stating, "I can die for Nigeria." This sentiment underscores how the threat of violent repression can profoundly impact civic engagement and the organization of nonviolent demonstration efforts.

Respondent2 *"Yes it have serious effects on us as civil society many of our members have beaten and arrested in different protest and this act as discouragement for some who do not have the courage or stamina to bear such oppression." For example, during the End-SARS protest, a member of ours was detained for almost four days and was seriously beaten. Imagine taking a bread winner from the family of four; you know the kind situation the home will be going through knowing that their father is in police custody. Lethal repression has real weaken civil society in Nigeria*

Respondent 3 *well in as much lethal repression (sic) to have weaken our ability to peaceful protest of harsh government policies, does not mean we will still not talk even in the face of this repression.*

Question 2. How did the public response to the lethal repression of peaceful protests in 2020 influence the events of 2024?

Respondent 1

The public response indicated a prevailing sense of fear and reluctance to participate in the recent hunger protest. If you observe closely, you'll notice that the protest in 2024

was significantly less impactful compared to the one in 2020, which garnered a much larger turnout, largely due to the tragic events of that year.

Respondent 2

The response of the public showed lack of interest to the call for peaceful

Protest in 2024 due to the lethal repression experience of citizens in the End-SARS protest of 2020 and this affected the turnout of youth to the hunger protest

Respondent 3

The 2020 lethal repression negatively affected participation of end hunger/bad government peaceful protest of 2024 must citizens despite the hunger were not interested in participating in the protest due to fear of possible lethal repression

Question 3. How have lethal repression tactics been employed by governments to suppress peaceful protests and assemblies in recent years?

Governments often direct the police and armed forces to intimidate peaceful protests. During the #EndSARS protests, armed police and soldiers were responsible for opening fire on demonstrators who were holding the Nigerian flag. In various regions of Nigeria, tear gas was deployed, resulting in injuries and dislocations. Their strategy has consistently involved engaging armed security personnel against peaceful protesters.

Question 4. In what ways do these tactics impact the public's perception of their right to free assembly and expression?

Respondent 1

Whether consciously or unconsciously, these tactics instill fear and discourage citizens from participating in assemblies. When individuals perceive that expressing their opinions could result in negative repercussions, they may choose to self-censor or opt out of assembly's altogether. This ultimately infringes upon their rights to peaceful assembly and undermines the foundations of democracy.

Respondent 2

The tactics, at which the government handled peaceful protest, is enough to discourage citizens to

free assembly and expression, and how citizens perceive their own rights. If people see peaceful protests being met with excessive force or suppression, they may feel discouraged or even fearful about exercising their freedoms. This can create a chilling effect, where individuals and groups hesitate to voice their opinions due to potential consequences.

Respondent 3

Being a member of civil society organization have shown us that most Nigerians do not believe in their right especially when it has to do with issues concerning the government they are very quick to fear due to the fact that rights have over time been trampled upon by the government especially the right to peaceful protest

Question 5. What type of lethal repression was unleashed against peaceful protest 2020 and 2024?

Respondent 1

in 2020 we lost some our members to gunshot from the lethal repression the government some arrested somewhere beaten government usually employ different types of lethal repression to scare peaceful protesters, in 2020 they employed mostly killing and arrest of innocent protesters same was repeated in 2024 always living sorrow tears and blood with innocent protesters armed police officers and military opened fire on peaceful protesters, in different part of the country.

Respondent 2

The lethal repressions unleashed were killing innocent protest by armed state security personnel, and in discriminate arrest of peaceful protesters including minors (sic).

Respondent 3

Killing and arrest has always been their game to scare citizens from questioning their inhuman policies that led to hunger and starvation in a country that bless with abundant natural resources.

Data Analysis

The result from the field shows that lethal repression significantly impairs the capacity of civil society to effectively organize peaceful protests. As evidenced by respondents interviewed many persons.

Theme one: Fear

Many respondent expressed fear in participating in peaceful protest due to the foreseen dangers associated with such, this has gone to show that lethal repression can effectively deter critics from questioning any draconian policy of the government, some persons who participated in the peaceful protest, were injured, some arrested charge to court for treason, police and armed forces intimidated peaceful protests. During the #EndSARS protests, armed police and soldiers opened fire on demonstrators who were holding the Nigerian flag (Sulaimon 2024). In various regions of Nigeria, tear gas was deployed, resulting in injuries and dislocations. Their strategy has consistently involved engaging armed security personnel against peaceful protesters this aligned with objective one of the research to examine the type of lethal repression that was unleashed against peaceful protests in 2020 and 2024. Further findings revealed that lethal repression whether consciously or unconsciously, instills fear and discourages citizens from participating in assemblies, this ultimately infringes upon their rights to peaceful assembly. Like the late music maestro sang "I no wan die, I want build house" (sic) by Fela Anikulapo Kuti. This finding aligned with objective two of the research to examine how lethal repression tactics have infringed on the right to free assembly.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This research paper found that lethal repression hurts citizens participating in peaceful protest based on the foreseen dangers associated, the study reviewed further that lethal repression has led to the limitation of citizens' right to peaceful assembly as such limiting the fundamental human rights of citizens. These findings aligned with Asogwa et al (2021), where similar cases of human rights limitation during the #EndSARS protest were reported, however unlike their study which focused on human rights violations in Nigeria, this study is on the effect of lethal repression on peaceful protest. The results from this study suggest that lethal repression effectively has a negative outcome on citizens' right to peaceful protest.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that with the findings from the field lethal repression has negatively affect citizens right to peaceful protest at such little or nothing will be done in the near future to call government to other when policies with human face are been passed and implemented.

Recommendations

1. **Effective Representation:** It is imperative for the Nigerian electorates to be conscious in electing competent leaders to manage the affairs of governance in the country. When an autocratic leader is elected, there is bound to be a significant consequence, including the potential for violent repression of peaceful protests.

2. **A Call for Dialogue** Democracy is a system of government where the majority rules, and citizen participation is paramount. Given this, elected leaders must understand that policies perceived as oppressive by the people must be resisted. Instead of resorting to lethal repression, a peaceful dialogue should be initiated and followed through to the end.
3. **Playing By The Rule:** Protesters on their part must ensure that a call for peaceful protest does not lead to destruction of public property by ensuring that everyone involved in the protest must be made to understand the rules of the protest.

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