



RESEARCH ARTICLE

LETHAL REPRESSION AND ITS IMPACT ON CIVIL SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF THE END SARS PROTEST IN LAGOS, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The End SARS protests of October 2020 in Nigeria represented a pivotal moment in the nation's socio-political landscape, as thousands of predominantly young Nigerians mobilized to demand the dissolution of the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit infamous for extrajudicial killings, extortion, and widespread human rights abuses. This paper examines the lethal repression of these protests, with a particular focus on the violent crackdown at Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos on October 20, 2020, where security forces killed at least 12 peaceful protesters, marking a tragic escalation in state-citizen tensions. Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources, including reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry and Restitution, as well as survivor testimonies and social media documentation, this study investigates the multifaceted impacts of state violence on Nigerian civil society. It explores how the brutal response undermined civic engagement, eroded public trust in state institutions, and posed significant challenges to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The findings reveal a deepening trust deficit between the government and its citizens, the suppression of youth-led activism through intimidation and arbitrary detentions, and a broader chilling effect on freedom of expression and assembly. Furthermore, the paper assesses the resilience of civil society in the face of repression, highlighting ongoing advocacy efforts and the global amplification of the End SARS movement. By situating the protests within Nigeria's broader socio-political context, this study underscores the long-term implications of lethal repression for democratic development, emphasizing the urgent need for accountability, institutional reforms, and inclusive governance to restore civic trust and foster a vibrant civil society in Nigeria.

Keywords: Lethal repression, end SARS, civil society, impact assessment.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The End SARS movement, which began in 2017 as a social media campaign under the hashtag #EndSARS, emerged as a powerful response to the systemic abuses perpetrated by Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit established in 1992 to combat armed robbery but later notorious for extrajudicial killings, torture, extortion, and arbitrary detentions (Amnesty International, 2020). The movement gained unprecedented momentum in October 2020, catalyzed by viral video depicting SARS officers allegedly killing a young man in Ughelli, Delta State, on October 3, 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The presented incident ignited nationwide protests, primarily led by Nigerian youth, who took to the streets to demand not only the dissolution of SARS but also broader systemic reforms addressing police brutality, corruption, and poor governance (The Washington Post, 2020a). The protests, characterized by their decentralized organization and amplified through platforms like Twitter and Instagram, resonated globally, drawing statements of support from international figures such as UN Secretary-General António Guterres and then-U.S. President Joe Biden (BBC News, 2020).

The Nigerian government's response, however, escalated tensions, culminating in the violent crackdown at Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos on October 20, 2020, where security forces, including the Nigerian military, opened fire on peaceful protesters, killing at least 12 individuals and injuring many others (Amnesty International, 2021). This incident, often referred to as the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, marked a tragic turning point in the End SARS movement, exposing the state's willingness to use lethal force to suppress dissent (Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021). The crackdown was not an isolated event; across Nigeria, at least 56 people were killed during the protests, with additional reports of state-sponsored violence and intimidation (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

This paper explores the profound impact of lethal repression during the End SARS protests on Nigerian civil society, focusing on three key areas: the erosion of public trust in state institutions, the suppression of civic activism and dissent, and the broader challenges to democratic participation and consolidation. By analyzing primary and secondary sources, including reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry and Restitution, and social media documentation, this study examines how state violence reshaped civic engagement and the democratic landscape in Nigeria, while also highlighting the resilience of civil society in the face of repression (Okunola, 2021; @AmnestyNigeria, 2023).

2.0. CONCEPTS, THEORIES, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The End SARS Movement

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), established in 1992 by the Nigerian Police Force to combat armed robbery and violent crimes, evolved into a symbol of systemic state violence and impunity over nearly three decades (Amnesty International, 2020). Initially formed to address rising crime rates in urban centers, SARS became infamous for widespread human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, extortion, unlawful detentions, and harassment of young Nigerians, particularly those perceived as affluent or nonconformist, often under the guise of profiling criminals (Human Rights Watch, 2020a). By 2017, the #EndSARS hashtag emerged as a powerful digital rallying cry, initiated by Nigerian youths on social media platforms like Twitter to document and protest these abuses,



marking the beginning of a grassroots movement against police brutality (Amnesty International, 2021). The movement gained traction through viral stories of SARS victims, amplifying public outrage and fostering a collective demand for accountability (Falana, 2020).

The 2020 End SARS protests were ignited by a viral video on October 3, 2020, showing a SARS officer allegedly shooting a young man in Ughelli, Delta State, and abandoning his body, an incident that crystallized years of pent-up frustration with police impunity (BBC News, 2020a). This sparked nationwide demonstrations, with Lagos, Nigeria's commercial hub, serving as the epicenter. Protesters, organized under the #EndSARS banner, articulated five key demands: the immediate release of all arrested protesters, justice and compensation for victims of police brutality, independent investigations into SARS abuses, psychological evaluation and retraining of SARS officers to ensure professionalism, and increased police salaries to address systemic issues contributing to corruption (Okunola, 2021).

Unlike previous protests in Nigeria, the End SARS movement was distinctly youth-led, decentralized, and leaderless, relying heavily on social media to coordinate actions, share evidence of abuses, and mobilize resources such as food, medical supplies, and legal aid for protesters (The Washington Post, 2020a). The movement's global resonance was unprecedented, with the #EndSARS hashtag trending worldwide and garnering solidarity from international figures, including UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who called for an end to police brutality in Nigeria, and then-U.S. President Joe Biden, who urged the Nigerian government to respect the right to peaceful protest (UN News, 2020; @JoeBiden, 2020). Celebrities, activists, and diaspora communities further amplified the protests through social media campaigns, crowdfunding initiatives, and global demonstrations in cities like London and New York (Al Jazeera, 2020).

However, the Nigerian government's response, particularly the lethal crackdown at Lekki Toll Gate on October 20, 2020, where security forces killed at least 12 peaceful protesters, exposed deep-rooted systemic issues in state-citizen relations (Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021). The violent repression, coupled with tactics such as freezing activists' bank accounts, deploying state-sponsored thugs, and imposing curfews, raised critical questions about the Nigerian state's commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law (Human Rights Watch, 2020b; @AmnestyNigeria, 2023). This paper uses the End SARS movement as a lens to examine the impact of lethal repression on civil society, highlighting the interplay between state violence, civic activism, and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Lethal Repression at Lekki Toll Gate

Lethal repression refers to the use of state-sanctioned force that results in death, injury, or the extreme suppression of individuals or groups, often with the intent to eliminate political opposition, control populations, or deter dissent. It is a subset of broader political repression, which encompasses any action by a state entity to control its citizenry through force for political reasons, particularly to restrict their participation in political life (Davenport, 2007; Earl & Soule, 2010)

On October 20, 2020, Nigerian security forces, including personnel from the Nigerian Army and Police, opened fire on peaceful protesters at Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, a key site of the End SARS movement that had become a symbolic hub for demands to end police brutality (Amnesty International, 2021). According to Amnesty International (2021), at least 12 people were killed, and



numerous others were injured in what has been widely described as the Lekki Toll Gate massacre. Reports indicate that prior to the shooting, CCTV cameras were disabled, streetlights were turned off, and the toll gate's electronic billboard was deactivated, actions that suggest premeditation by state actors (CNN, 2020; Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021). The Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry and Restitution, established in response to public outcry to investigate the incident, confirmed at least nine deaths and four missing persons presumed dead, with some families testifying anonymously due to fear of government reprisal (Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021). The panel's findings also included evidence of military-grade ammunition used against unarmed protesters, further corroborating claims of excessive force (Premium Times, 2021).

The Nigerian government, including the military and federal authorities, initially denied the killings, with then-Minister of Information Lai Mohammed dismissing reports as "fake news" and claiming no lives were lost (BBC News, 2020a). However, these denials were contradicted by extensive evidence from credible sources, including investigative reports by CNN (2020) and BBC News (2020b), which utilized eyewitness accounts, video footage, and forensic analysis to confirm the use of live ammunition. Survivor testimonies, such as those documented by Human Rights Watch (2020), described a chaotic scene where security forces fired indiscriminately, targeting protesters waving Nigerian flags and singing the national anthem, actions that underscored the peaceful nature of the demonstration (Al Jazeera, 2020).

The repression was not confined to Lekki Toll Gate. Across Nigeria, at least 56 people died during the End SARS protests, including protesters, bystanders, and others allegedly targeted by state-sponsored thugs known as "hoodlums" deployed to disrupt demonstrations (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In cities like Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Obigbo, security forces employed excessive force, including tear gas, water cannons, and live ammunition, which escalated tensions and led to violence and property destruction in some areas (Okunola, 2021). The government's broader strategy to suppress the movement included freezing the bank accounts of prominent protest leaders, such as Modupe Odele and Rinu Oduala, under the pretext of anti-terrorism financing laws, a move criticized as an attempt to silence dissent (The Guardian Nigeria, 2020). Curfews imposed in Lagos and other states further restricted freedom of assembly, while reports of arrests and harassment of activists persisted long after the protests (Amnesty International, 2023). These tactics not only stifled the End SARS movement but also exposed systemic issues of state impunity and disregard for democratic rights, setting the stage for significant repercussions on Nigerian civil society (Vanguard Nigeria, 2020).

Impact on Civil Society

The lethal repression of the End SARS protests in October 2020 had profound and lasting consequences for Nigerian civil society, fundamentally reshaping civic engagement, deepening distrust in state institutions, undermining democratic development, and leaving psychological scars on participants and observers. The violent response, particularly the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, not only disrupted the momentum of the youth-led movement but also highlighted systemic issues of state impunity and authoritarianism. The following sections analyze these impacts in detail, supported by a range of credible sources, including human rights reports, scholarly analyses, and media investigations.

**Erosion of Trust in State Institutions**

The violent crackdown on the End SARS protests significantly deepened the already substantial trust deficit between Nigerian citizens and the state. Nigeria consistently ranks among the top seven countries with the highest levels of citizen distrust in government institutions, a situation exacerbated by the government's handling of the protests (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020). The Nigerian military's initial denial of the Lekki Toll Gate killings, despite compelling evidence from eyewitnesses, video footage, and forensic analyses, fueled public skepticism and outrage (CNN, 2020; Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021). The dismissive demeanor of then-President Muhammadu Buhari, who was filmed chuckling during a discussion about victim compensation, further alienated citizens and reinforced perceptions of an indifferent and repressive state (Al Jazeera, 2021). This lack of accountability, coupled with the government's failure to implement the recommendations of the Lagos State Judicial Panel, which confirmed state involvement in the killings, entrenched the view that state institutions prioritize control over justice (Premium Times, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021). The absence of meaningful sanctions against security forces involved in the crackdown, as noted by Amnesty International (2023), solidified perceptions of a state unwilling to uphold the social contract, undermining confidence in governance structures such as the judiciary, police, and executive branches (Okunola, 2021). This erosion of trust has long-term implications, as citizens increasingly view state institutions as adversarial, weakening the foundation for effective governance and democratic participation (Falana, 2021).

Suppression of Civic Activism

The repression of the End SARS protests stifled civic activism, particularly among Nigeria's youth, who constitute over 60% of the country's population and were the driving force behind the movement (UNICEF Nigeria, 2020). The arbitrary detention of at least 15 protesters, many held without trial three years after the protests, sent a chilling message to potential activists about the risks of challenging state authority (Amnesty International, 2023). Testimonies from detained protesters, such as Daniel Joy-Igbo and Sodiq Adigun, reveal the personal toll of prolonged detention without due process, including psychological trauma, loss of livelihoods, and social stigmatization (The Guardian Nigeria, 2023). The government's use of trumped-up charges, such as theft, arson, and terrorism, against activists, alongside tactics like freezing the bank accounts of protest leaders like Modupe Odele, Rinu Oduala, and others, signaled a deliberate strategy to criminalize dissent (Vanguard Nigeria, 2020; Reuters, 2020). The Central Bank of Nigeria's actions, justified under anti-terrorism financing laws, were widely criticized as an abuse of power aimed at silencing the movement (Human Rights Watch, 2020b). These measures created a pervasive climate of fear, discouraging participation in protests and other forms of civic engagement. For instance, a 30-year-old protester interviewed by BBC News (2021) stated, "I don't think I can ever protest again after what I saw at Lekki," reflecting a broader sentiment among youth who now perceive activism as a dangerous endeavor (Adebayo, 2022). This suppression has significantly weakened the vibrancy of Nigeria's civil society, limiting its capacity to advocate for systemic reforms and hold the state accountable (@EndSARS, 2023).

Impact on Democratic Development

The End SARS protests exposed the fragility of Nigeria's democracy, which, despite transitioning to civilian rule in 1999, remains marred by authoritarian tendencies and weak institutional accountability (Freedom House, 2021). The violent response to peaceful protests, particularly at Lekki Toll Gate,



violated fundamental rights to freedom of assembly and expression enshrined in Nigeria's 1999 Constitution and international human rights frameworks, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Falana, 2021). The lack of accountability for security forces involved in the crackdown, as highlighted by Human Rights Watch (2021), reinforced a culture of impunity that threatens democratic consolidation. The government's tactics, including the use of state-sponsored thugs to disrupt protests and the politicization of the movement through ethnic and religious divisions, further polarized civil society, undermining its ability to unite for systemic change (Okunola, 2021; The Washington Post, 2020b).

For example, government officials' attempts to frame the protests as an Igbo-led agitation alienated other ethnic groups, weakening the movement's national cohesion (Al Jazeera, 2020). The failure to address the protesters' demands, such as comprehensive police reform and justice for victims, highlighted the state's resistance to democratic accountability, further eroding public faith in the democratic process (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2021). These actions have entrenched a perception that Nigeria's democracy is more performative than substantive, posing significant challenges to civil society's role in fostering democratic governance (@AmnestyNigeria, 2023).

Trauma and Disillusionment

The brutal repression of the End SARS protests left lasting psychological scars on protesters, witnesses, and the broader Nigerian populace, contributing to widespread disillusionment with the state. Survivors reported ongoing trauma from witnessing bloodshed and fearing for their safety, with some, like a 30-year-old events planner shot at Lekki Toll Gate, expressing profound disillusionment with the value of their lives in Nigeria (BBC News, 2021). The psychological impact was compounded by the government's failure to provide justice or adequate compensation to many victims, despite the Lagos State Judicial Panel awarding \$637,470 to 47 petitioners (Premium Times, 2021). The panel's recommendations, including compensation and sanctions against culpable officers, were only partially implemented, leaving many victims and their families without closure (Amnesty International, 2023).

This inaction deepened a sense of hopelessness among young Nigerians, for whom the protests represented a reawakening of civic activism. The violent response led some to question the viability of protesting in Nigeria, with one survivor stating, "I'll never go to another protest in Nigeria, because we can't protect ourselves" (The Guardian Nigeria, 2023). The trauma and disillusionment have had a chilling effect on future activism, as fear of reprisal and lack of faith in state responsiveness discourage collective action (Adebayo, 2022). This psychological toll, combined with the physical and economic hardships faced by victims, has weakened the social fabric of civil society, limiting its capacity to mobilize effectively (Okunola, 2021).

Government Response and Civil Society Resilience

The Nigerian government's immediate response to the End SARS protests included the announcement on October 11, 2020, by the Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, that the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) would be disbanded and replaced with a new Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit (BBC News, 2020a). However, this move was widely criticized as a superficial rebranding, as the SWAT unit was perceived to consist of the same personnel and operational practices as SARS, failing to address the protesters' demands for systemic police reform (Human



Rights Watch, 2020b; Okunola, 2021). The establishment of the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry and Restitution, announced by Lagos State Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu on October 19, 2020, marked a significant step toward accountability. The panel investigated the Lekki Toll Gate incident and other instances of police brutality, confirming at least nine deaths and four missing persons presumed dead, and recommended sanctions against culpable security forces and compensation for victims (Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021; Premium Times, 2021).

Despite awarding \$637,470 to 47 petitioners, the panel's recommendations faced limited implementation at the federal level, with no significant prosecutions of security personnel, highlighting the government's reluctance to address systemic impunity (Amnesty International, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2021). The federal government's initial denial of the Lekki killings, coupled with then-Minister of Information Lai Mohammed's dismissal of evidence as "fake news," further undermined public trust and exposed the state's prioritization of control over accountability (CNN, 2020; The Guardian Nigeria, 2021).

The government also employed tactics to discredit and suppress the movement, including sponsoring counter-protests, deploying state-backed thugs to disrupt demonstrations, and infiltrating protest groups to sow discord (Vanguard Nigeria, 2020; Falana, 2021). The freezing of bank accounts of prominent activists, justified under anti-terrorism financing laws, and the imposition of curfews in Lagos and other states were deliberate strategies to stifle dissent (Reuters, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2021).

The actions, however, failed to extinguish the movement's momentum, as Nigerian civil society demonstrated remarkable resilience. The decentralized, leaderless nature of the End SARS protests, facilitated by social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, enabled rapid coordination, resource mobilization, and global amplification (Amnesty International, 2021). Crowdfunding initiatives supported protesters with food, medical supplies, and legal aid, while diaspora communities organized solidarity protests in cities like London, New York, and Toronto, ensuring the movement's demands reached an international audience (Al Jazeera, 2020; The Washington Post, 2020b).

Civil society organizations, such as Amnesty International, Feminist Coalition, and local groups like Enough is Enough Nigeria, played a pivotal role in sustaining advocacy, documenting abuses, and demanding accountability (Amnesty International, 2023; @Feminist_Co, 2020). Prominent activists, including Rinu Oduala, who served on the Lagos Judicial Panel before resigning in protest of government inaction, and Debo Adedayo (Mr. Macaroni), a comedian-turned-activist, became symbols of resistance, organizing memorial protests on anniversaries of the Lekki massacre and maintaining pressure for justice (Premium Times, 2022; @mrmacaronii, 2023). These efforts were bolstered by the movement's global reach, with endorsements from figures like UN Secretary-General António Guterres and international celebrities, which kept the Nigerian government under scrutiny (UN News, 2020).

Despite the chilling effect of repression, the resilience of Nigerian civil society was evident in its ability to adapt, with activists using encrypted platforms and anonymous accounts to continue organizing in the face of surveillance and harassment (Okunola, 2021). The End SARS movement's legacy lies in its demonstration of civil society's capacity to challenge state power, even under severe repression, and its role in inspiring a new generation of activists committed to systemic change (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2021; @EndSARS, 2023).



2.2. Theoretical Framework

Human Rights Theory

John Locke (1689) argued that individuals possess inherent, inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property that derive from their nature and not from the government. He contended that the legitimacy of government is based on its respect for these natural rights, and if a government fails to protect them, the people have a right to resist or overthrow it. His ideas profoundly influenced the American and French Revolutions.

Human Rights Theory underscores the fundamental importance of protecting and promoting human dignity, freedom, and well-being, rooted in the principle that all individuals are entitled to inalienable rights regardless of their status. In the context of the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, this theory provides a critical framework for analyzing the systemic violations perpetrated by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and the lethal repression of peaceful protesters, particularly during the Lekki Toll Gate massacre on October 20, 2020. The theory emphasizes the state's obligation to uphold rights enshrined in domestic and international frameworks, such as the Nigerian Constitution (1999), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), and highlights the role of civil society in demanding accountability for violations (Donnelly, 2013). The lethal repression of the #EndSARS movement serves as a stark case study of state failure to adhere to these principles, with significant implications for civil society and democratic governance.

1. Right to Life and Security: The SARS unit's documented involvement in extrajudicial killings, torture, and physical violence directly violated the right to life and security of person, as guaranteed under Article 4 of the ACHPR and Section 33 of the Nigerian Constitution (Amnesty International, 2020). The Lekki Toll Gate massacre, where at least 12 peaceful protesters were killed by security forces, represents a egregious breach of these rights, with evidence of premeditation indicated by the disabling of CCTV cameras and streetlights (CNN, 2020; Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021). Such actions underscore the state's failure to protect citizens from arbitrary deprivation of life, a core tenet of human rights law (UN Human Rights Committee, 2018).

2. Freedom from Arbitrary Arrest and Detention: The #EndSARS protests brought to light widespread cases of arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions, and extortion by SARS officers, which contravene the principles of due process and the rule of law as outlined in Article 6 of the ACHPR and Section 35 of the Nigerian Constitution (Human Rights Watch, 2020a). The prolonged detention of at least 15 protesters without trial three years after the protests, as reported by Amnesty International (2023), further exemplifies the state's disregard for legal protections, creating a chilling effect on civic participation (Falana, 2021). The use of trumped-up charges, such as theft and terrorism, against activists like Sodiq Adigun, highlights a deliberate strategy to suppress dissent (The Guardian Nigeria, 2023).

3. Accountability and Justice: Human Rights Theory emphasizes the state's duty to investigate, prosecute, and remedy human rights violations, a principle central to the #EndSARS movement's demands for accountability (Shelton, 2015). The Lagos State Judicial Panel's findings, which confirmed state violence at Lekki and recommended sanctions and compensation, represent a partial acknowledgment of this duty, yet the federal government's failure to act on these recommendations perpetuates a culture of impunity (Premium Times, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021). The denial of



the Lekki killings by government officials, including then-Minister of Information Lai Mohammed, further eroded trust in state institutions, undermining the principles of justice and redress (BBC News, 2020a).

3.0. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature. The authors employed secondary search methodology in generating secondary data from published and unpublished documents. The thrust in each content and context are identified and systematically evaluated using content analytical approach. Each perspective is chronologically and thematically elucidated in the next sections that follow.

4.0. CONTENT ANALYSIS AND DISCOURSES

Application of Human Right Theory to #EndSARS:

Violation of Human Rights: The #EndSARS protests were a direct response to systemic human rights abuses by SARS, including extrajudicial killings, torture, extortion, and unlawful detentions, which targeted young Nigerians, particularly those perceived as affluent or nonconformist (Amnesty International, 2020). The lethal repression at Lekki Toll Gate, where security forces used live ammunition against peaceful protesters, violated the right to life and peaceful assembly, as protected under Articles 4 and 11 of the ACHPR (Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2020). These actions reflect a broader pattern of state-sanctioned violence that contravenes human rights obligations.

Demand for Accountability: The movement's five key demands—immediate release of arrested protesters, justice and compensation for victims, independent investigations, officer retraining, and increased police salaries—aligned with human rights principles of accountability and reform (Okunola, 2021). The lack of meaningful prosecutions and the government's dismissive response, exemplified by President Muhammadu Buhari's casual demeanor during discussions of victim compensation, deepened public disillusionment and highlighted the state's failure to uphold its duty to remedy violations (Al Jazeera, 2021; @AmnestyNigeria, 2023).

Civil Society Mobilization: The #EndSARS protests demonstrated the power of civil society to mobilize against human rights abuses, with youth leveraging social media to document violations and demand justice (Amnesty International, 2021). The global attention garnered by activists like Rinu Oduala and Mr. Macaroni, supported by organizations like Amnesty International and Feminist Coalition, underscores civil society's role in holding states accountable when they fail to protect human rights (Premium Times, 2022; @Feminist_Co, 2020). However, the lethal repression and subsequent harassment of activists, including account freezes and detentions, illustrate the risks faced by those advocating for human rights in repressive contexts (Reuters, 2020).

Generational Conflict Theory

Generational Conflict Theory examines tensions between age groups arising from differing values, experiences, and expectations, often exacerbated by socio-political and technological divides (Bengtson, 1993). In the context of the #EndSARS protests, this theory illuminates the dynamics between Nigeria's youth, who led the movement, and the older generation, including political leaders and security officials, whose actions reflected resistance to change. The lethal repression of the



protests, particularly at Lekki Toll Gate, intensified these generational tensions, highlighting a disconnect between the aspirations of young Nigerians and the entrenched power structures upheld by older elites. The theory provides a lens to understand how generational differences in values and access to technology shaped the movement and its outcomes.

1. Different Values and Expectations: Younger generations in Nigeria, particularly those born after the return to civilian rule in 1999, prioritize transparency, accountability, and human rights, driven by exposure to global democratic ideals and frustration with systemic corruption (UNICEF Nigeria, 2020). In contrast, older generations, including political leaders who experienced military rule, often prioritize stability, state control, and continuity, viewing protests as threats to order (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2020). The lethal repression of the #EndSARS protests, including the use of live ammunition against peaceful youth at Lekki, reflects this generational clash, as older elites in government and security forces responded with authoritarian tactics to maintain control (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

2. Technological Divide: The younger generation's proficiency with digital tools, particularly social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, was a defining feature of the #EndSARS movement, enabling rapid mobilization and global outreach (Amnesty International, 2021). This technological divide empowered youth to bypass traditional media and state censorship, contrasting with older generations' reliance on conventional communication and control mechanisms (Okunola, 2021). The government's attempts to counter this, such as disabling internet access and threatening social media bans, underscored its discomfort with youth-driven digital activism (Vanguard Nigeria, 2020; @EndSARS, 2023).

3. Leadership and Representation: The #EndSARS movement highlighted a generational demand for leadership that reflects the aspirations of Nigeria's youth, who constitute over 60% of the population but feel marginalized in governance structures dominated by older elites (UNICEF Nigeria, 2020; Falana, 2021). The violent repression, coupled with dismissive rhetoric from leaders like President Buhari, deepened the perception that the older generation is out of touch with the needs of younger Nigerians, fueling calls for systemic reform (Al Jazeera, 2021).

4.0. Application of Generational Conflict Theory to #EndSARS:

Youth-Led Movement: The #EndSARS protests were predominantly driven by young Nigerians, often referred to as the "Soro Soke" (Speak Up) generation, who expressed frustration with systemic police brutality and governance failures (The Washington Post, 2020b). The lethal repression at Lekki Toll Gate, where security forces targeted young protesters, intensified generational conflict, as youth perceived the state's response as an attack on their right to demand change (Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021). This clash reflects a broader generational divide, with youth challenging the status quo upheld by older leaders (Adebayo, 2022).

Use of Technology: The protests leveraged social media to organize rallies, document abuses, and crowdfund resources, showcasing the technological prowess of Nigeria's youth (Amnesty International, 2021). The global trending of #EndSARS, amplified by activists like Rinu Oduala and international supporters, demonstrated the power of digital platforms to challenge state narratives, a capability less accessible to older generations (Premium Times, 2022; @mrmacaronii, 2023). The



government's response, including threats to regulate social media and the freezing of activists' accounts, highlighted its struggle to counter this technological advantage (Reuters, 2020).

Demand for Change: The movement's demands for SARS's disbandment, police reform, and broader governance changes reflected the younger generation's rejection of traditional power structures and their insistence on accountability (Okunola, 2021). The lethal repression, coupled with the government's failure to address these demands meaningfully, deepened generational tensions, as youth felt their aspirations were dismissed by an older elite prioritizing control over reform (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2021). The ongoing detention of protesters and lack of justice further fueled this divide, with young Nigerians expressing disillusionment with a system that punishes their advocacy (@AmnestyNigeria, 2023).

5.1. Conclusion

The lethal repression of the End SARS protests in Lagos, particularly the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, had a profound impact on Nigerian civil society. It deepened distrust in state institutions, suppressed civic activism, and highlighted the challenges of democratic development in a context of systemic impunity. However, the movement's legacy lies in its ability to galvanize a new generation of activists and expose Nigeria's governance failures to a global audience. To rebuild trust and strengthen civil society, the Nigerian government must prioritize accountability, implement comprehensive police reforms, and foster inclusive dialogue with citizens. Without these steps, the cycle of repression and resistance will persist, further eroding Nigeria's democratic fabric.

5.2. Recommendations

The lethal repression of the End SARS protests in Nigeria, particularly the violent crackdown at Lekki Toll Gate on October 20, 2020, underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to address human rights violations, rebuild trust in state institutions, and foster a vibrant civil society capable of advancing democratic governance. Drawing on the analysis of the protests through the lenses of Human Rights Theory and Generational Conflict Theory, the following recommendations aim to address the root causes of the repression, promote accountability, and empower Nigerian civil society, with a focus on youth engagement and institutional reform. These recommendations are informed by the findings of the Lagos State Judicial Panel, human rights reports, and the resilience demonstrated by activists (Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021; Amnesty International, 2023; Okunola, 2021).

1. Implement Comprehensive Police Reform

To address the systemic human rights violations highlighted by the #EndSARS movement, the Nigerian government must prioritize comprehensive police reform. This includes disbanding and restructuring units like SARS, ensuring thorough vetting, psychological evaluation, and retraining of officers to align with human rights standards, as demanded by protesters (Amnesty International, 2020). The replacement of SARS with the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit was widely criticized as superficial; instead, reforms should focus on establishing independent oversight bodies to monitor police conduct and investigate abuses, as recommended by the Lagos State Judicial Panel (2021). Legislation should be enacted to criminalize extrajudicial killings and ensure swift prosecution of offending officers, addressing the culture of impunity noted by Human Rights Watch (2021). Increased police salaries and improved working conditions, as demanded by protesters, could reduce corruption and incentivize professionalism (Falana, 2021).



2. Ensure Accountability and Justice for Victims

The government must fully implement the recommendations of the Lagos State Judicial Panel, including prosecuting security personnel responsible for the Lekki Toll Gate massacre and other protest-related deaths (Premium Times, 2021). Compensation for victims and their families, as partially initiated with \$637,470 awarded to 47 petitioners, should be expedited and expanded to cover all verified cases of abuse (Lagos State Judicial Panel, 2021). Establishing a national truth and reconciliation commission, modeled on international examples like South Africa's post-apartheid process, could provide a platform for victims to share their experiences and foster healing, addressing the psychological trauma reported by survivors (Adebayo, 2022; BBC News, 2021). Public apologies from senior officials, including acknowledgment of the Lekki killings, would signal a commitment to accountability and help rebuild trust, countering the dismissive attitude exemplified by former President Muhammadu Buhari (Al Jazeera, 2021).

3. Protect Freedom of Assembly and Expression

To prevent future repression, the Nigerian government must uphold the rights to freedom of assembly and expression, as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution (1999) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Falana, 2021). This includes repealing or amending laws used to criminalize dissent, such as those invoked to freeze activists' bank accounts (Reuters, 2020). The government should cease threats to regulate social media, which played a critical role in mobilizing the #EndSARS movement, and instead protect digital spaces as platforms for civic engagement (Amnesty International, 2021). Training for security forces on crowd control and non-lethal measures, in line with UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms, would help prevent excessive force during protests (UN Human Rights Committee, 2018).

4. Foster Inclusive Governance and Youth Representation

Addressing the generational conflict highlighted by the #EndSARS protests requires greater inclusion of Nigeria's youth, who constitute over 60% of the population, in governance structures (UNICEF Nigeria, 2020). The government should establish mechanisms for youth representation, such as advisory councils or reserved legislative seats, to ensure their voices shape policy (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2020). Dialogue forums between government officials and youth leaders, including activists like Rinu Oduala and Debo Adedayo (Mr. Macaroni), could bridge the generational divide and address the demand for leadership that reflects youth aspirations (@mrmacaronii, 2023). Investing in education and employment opportunities for young Nigerians would reduce the marginalization that fueled the protests, fostering a sense of stake in the democratic process (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2021).

5. Support Civil Society and Digital Activism

The resilience of Nigerian civil society, exemplified by the decentralized, youth-led #EndSARS movement, should be supported through funding and capacity-building for local organizations like the Feminist Coalition and Enough is Enough Nigeria (@Feminist_Co, 2020). International partners, including human rights organizations, should provide technical assistance and protection for activists facing harassment, such as those whose accounts were frozen (Reuters, 2020). The government must end the persecution of activists, including the release of those detained without trial, as reported by Amnesty International (2023). Encouraging digital activism by ensuring internet access and protecting



online freedoms will sustain civil society's ability to mobilize and hold the state accountable (Okunola, 2021).

6. Promote International Accountability and Support

The international community, including the United Nations and African Union, should pressure Nigeria to uphold its human rights obligations under treaties like the ACHPR (UN News, 2020). Sanctions or travel bans on officials implicated in the Lekki massacre, as suggested by some activists, could deter future impunity (@AmnestyNigeria, 2023). International donors should support Nigerian civil society through grants for advocacy and legal aid, ensuring groups can continue documenting abuses and pursuing justice, as demonstrated by Amnesty International's ongoing efforts (Amnesty International, 2023). Global solidarity campaigns, as seen during the #EndSARS protests, should be sustained to maintain pressure on the Nigerian government (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no conflicting of interest exist in this manuscript.

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