

**STATE RESPONSES AND MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC  
PROTESTS IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF END SARS AND END  
HUNGER PROTESTS IN LAGOS STATE.**

**Omoyeni Tolulope Julius**

Department of Peace and Security Studies.  
Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology.  
Ikere Ekiti  
omoyeni.tolulope@bouesti.edu.ng  
Tel No: 08132996098

**Omoyeni Sunday Olusina**

Lt. Colonel, Nigerian Army Education corps  
sunday.omoyeni@army.mil.ng

**Onuoha Anthony Uchenna**

Department of Political Science, University of Benin, Benin City  
anthony.onuoha@socsci.uniben.edu  
Tel No:08063306355

**Olabamiji, Aminat Abiodun**

Department of Peace and Security Studies.  
Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology.  
Ikere Ekiti  
olabamiji.aminat@bouesti.edu.ng  
Tel. No: 07030129015

**Abe Victor Oluwaseyifunmi**

Department of Peace and Security Studies.  
Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology.  
Ikere Ekiti [abe.0674@bouesti.edu.ng](mailto:abe.0674@bouesti.edu.ng)  
Tel.No: 09032657771

**Akinlade Ruth Bolade**

Department of Peace and Security Studies.  
Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology.  
Ikere Ekiti. [akinlade.0704@bouesti.edu.ng](mailto:akinlade.0704@bouesti.edu.ng)  
Tel. No: 08029993829

### **Abstract**

The right to peaceful protest is an internationally recognized right enjoyed by citizens of countries all over the world. Enshrined in Section 39 and 40 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) it guarantee the rights of citizens to peacefully assemble and express their opinions. However when protest degenerates into violence and wanton destruction of lives and properties, the State's responses often become too repressive and rapacious exploiting the situation to silence dissent and opposition to the government This study examines state responses and management of public protests in Nigeria, with a specific focus on the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests in Lagos State. The research investigates the motivations behind these movements, the dynamics of state-citizen interactions during the protests, and the strategies employed by the government and law enforcement agencies in handling the unrest. This research explores the underlying causes, government reactions, and societal impacts of these movements. The #EndSARS protests, which initially targeted police brutality, and the #EndHunger/ End Bad Governance protests, which emerged in response to widespread high cost of living, bad shape of the economy, rising cost of food prices and broader issues of bad governance prompted this research to analyze the effectiveness of state policies and strategies in addressing civil unrest.

**Keywords:** Public Protests, EndSARS, End Bad Governance, Police Brutality, State Repression, State Response, Human Rights, Civil Unrest

### **Introduction**

Public protests have long been a vital mechanism for citizens to express their dissatisfaction, demand change, and hold governments accountable. The right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression are cornerstones of democratic societies, enshrined in both international human rights laws and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Specifically, Sections 39 and 40 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) affirm the rights of Nigerians to assemble peacefully and express their opinions. Despite these protections, the line between peaceful protest and violent unrest often becomes blurred, particularly in situations where grievances are deep-seated and widespread.

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed a surge in public protests, reflecting growing frustrations with systemic issues such as police brutality, economic hardship, and perceived government inefficacy. Two significant movements EndSARS and EndHunger have emerged as potent symbols of the people's demand for justice, reform, and better governance. The EndSARS protests, ignited by pervasive police brutality, and the EndHunger protests, fueled by escalating economic challenges and widespread poverty, have both drawn attention to the state's responses to civil unrest.

While these movements began as peaceful expressions of public discontent, they were often met with severe and sometimes violent reactions from the state. The government's approach to managing these protests has raised critical questions about the balance between maintaining public order and respecting citizens' constitutional rights. Allegations of excessive force, human rights violations, and attempts to stifle dissent have been leveled against state actors, prompting a need for a thorough examination of how Nigeria manages public protests.

Public protest is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria, from the popular Aba women protest turned riot to the Ali Must go, the anti- SAP protest, June 12 protest, the occupy Nigeria protest and several other demonstrations, Citizens have always demanded better deal and changes from their government through demonstrations and peaceful protests. The EndSARS movement in 2020, is one of the most notable protest against police brutality and corruption. The movement gained widespread support across the country, with thousands taking to the streets to demand an end to the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS).

In October 2020, Nigerians started protests calling for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), an infamous police unit accused of violent harassment and extrajudicial killings across the nation (Ebiede, 2020). The protests erupted following a viral video showing a SARS officer allegedly shooting a man in Delta State, before driving off (Parkison, 2020). Peaceful protests, primed under the hash tag #EndSARS, spread across the country and to Nigerians in diaspora in solidarity with the movement, including in the USA and Europe. On

20th October 2020, Nigerian soldiers shot at protesters at Lekki Toll Gate, in a bid to restrict the #EndSARS protest, killing at least ten persons, according to the report of the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry on Restitution for Victims of SARS Related Abuses and Other Matters (Judicial Panel of Enquiry, 2021). Furthermore, on 13 February 2021, the Nigerian police once again restricted #EndSARS protests, arresting many protesters including a popular comedian named Debo Adedayo popularly known as Mr. Macaroni (Busari&Princewill, 2021).

SARS was created in 1992 to fight serious, violent crimes in Nigeria, including carjacking and armed robbery; however, SARS become synonymous with allegations of police brutality and impunity. Amnesty International has documented SARS alleged abuses, including extortion, rape and extrajudicial killings of innocent civilians (Ojigho, 2020). Many people in Nigeria have complained about SARS frequently extorting young Nigerians who seemed to have disposable income (Parkison, 2020). The #EndSARS protest became a platform for sharing personal stories of trauma, including violence, theft, intimidation, rape, and extrajudicial killings by SARS officers. The Nigerian government's response to these protests highlighted its persistent intolerance of dissent, particularly against its actions. This issue is not new, as evidenced by its forceful handling of several previous protests.

EndSARS was propelled by the activities of SARS and the brutality of the police, however, that was not only an immediate cause as the protest was also the effect of years of bottled-up anger and frustration over the dehumanizing face of government policies and programs, absence of rule of law, poverty in the land as well as high energy costs (BBC, 2020).

The challenges of managing public protests in Nigeria is deeply intertwined with the issue of state Repression and human rights violations, presenting a grim picture of a society in which the fundamental right to protest is often met with brutality and suppression. The legal framework surrounding public protests in Nigeria is deeply flawed, lacking the necessary provisions to safeguards and protect protesters from arbitrary arrests, excessive use of force, and other violations of their human rights. This, coupled with a culture of

impunity that shields security forces from accountability for their actions, creates a climate of fear and intimidation that stifles the ability of citizens to exercise their right to protest. The result of this toxic mix of weak legal protections and state impunity is a cycle of unrest that continues to plague Nigeria. While protests often begin as peaceful calls for change, the heavy-handed response of security forces can quickly escalate tensions, leading to violence and further crackdowns.

The repeated use of violence against protesters breeds mistrust and resentment, further eroding the relationship between citizens and the state. This, in turn, fuels a growing sense of desperation and despair among young people, who are increasingly drawn to alternative forms of expression and resistance, including extremism and violent rebellion. The failure to effectively manage public protests, therefore, represents a crisis of governance and legitimacy that threatens to undermine Nigeria's stability and prosperity, that demands urgent attention in order to correct the wrongs of the past and forge a new path for the future of managing public protest in Nigeria

This study aims to investigate state's responses and management strategies during these pivotal protests in Lagos State. By analyzing the motivations behind the #EndSARS and #EndHunger movements, the interactions between the state and its citizens, and the effectiveness of government strategies in quelling unrest, this research seeks to uncover the complex dynamics at play in Nigeria's protest culture. The findings of this study will not only shed light on the effectiveness of current state policies but also contribute to broader discussions on the role of protests in shaping democratic governance in Nigeria

### **Research Objectives**

1. To interrogate the underlying motivations and causes of the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests especially in Lagos State
2. To examine the strategies and responses employed by the Nigerian state and law enforcement agencies in managing the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests.
3. To evaluate the impact of state responses on the escalation or de-escalation of violence during the protests

4. To investigate the role of communication and public relations strategies used by the government during the protests.
5. To assess the legal and human rights implications of the state's responses to the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests

## **Literature Review**

### **Public Protest in Nigeria**

The right to peaceful protest is firmly established under international law, and Nigeria has enacted various laws that suggest support for this right. However, certain laws and government actions have, at times, restricted or undermined the exercise of peaceful protest. Section 40 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees this right, although its full enjoyment is sometimes hindered government desire to uphold public order.

Since Nigeria's independence from Britain, civil activist and union leaders have utilized public protest in the forms of strikes and mass protests to make demands from the government (Hari, 2014). They adopt it to clamour against social anomalies such as low standard of living/high cost of living, poverty, unemployment, corruption, military oppression, brutality, and general maladministration (Ochi, & Mark, 2021).

During the 1990s, Nigeria witnessed several peaceful protests against military regimes. These mass demonstrations were organized by civil society organizations and social activists. Prominent figures such as Gani Fawehinmi, Beko Ransome-Kuti, and Femi Falana led protests through groups like the Campaign for Democracy (CD) during the military dictatorships of General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha. The likes of Afrobeat icon Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti used music as a form of protest against societal injustices, corruption, and oppressive government policies (Hari, 2014). The activists at some point suffered all manner of hardships and imprisonments, however, they managed to keep protests in the consciousness of Nigerians (Oyelude et al., 2023).

The momentous eight-day “#Occupy-Nigeria” peaceful protest from January 9 to, January 16, 2012, marked the first nationwide mass

demonstration since the return of democracy in 1999 (Ochi, & Mark, 2021). The mass demonstration was to protest the increase in the pump price of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS). Mass protesters spent nights on major streets around the country demanding a reversion to the old pump price of PMS (Ochi, & Mark, 2021). Another significant peaceful protest in Nigeria emanated due to allegations of human rights abuse and cruelty to Nigerians, the protest for the scrapping of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was started in 2017 by Segun Awosanya and other activists on Twitter (Akerele, Azeez, & Adeniyi, 2022). It was a relatively subtle social media: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. protest. By October 4, 2020, the protest had intensified online and the first #EndSARS demonstrations in Nigeria broke out on October 8, 2020. This was following an allegation of a SARS policeman shooting a young Nigerian man in front of the Wetland Hotel in Ughelli, Delta State (Iwuoha, & Aniche, 2021). Within a few days, as the incidents video became viral on social media there were widespread protests and it assumed global recognition and these demonstrations were occurring simultaneously in all of Nigeria's major cities.

Throughout history, peaceful protests have helped to force a reassessment of society's moral bounds. Movements have used peaceful protest to achieve their aims, including the recognition of rights, and the end of slavery, colonialism and racial discrimination (Werft & Ngalle, 2016). Recently, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, formed in 2013 in the USA and committed to fighting racism especially in the form of police brutality, has grown into a worldwide protest (Hoffman, 2017). BLM protests have been largely peaceful and have resulted in some major changes (Mansoor, 2020). These include police reforms (for example, some cities, such as Washington DC in the USA, have passed policies restricting the use of chokeholds by law enforcement agents), racist relics (for example, several monuments honouring slave owners, colonizers and Confederate leaders have been removed) and education (for example, schools, including in Milwaukee, Indianapolis, San Diego, and Philadelphia districts, are adopting racial equity policies and closing racial gaps among students) (Menjivar, 2020). In Africa, peaceful protests have proven to be a feasible instrument for showing socio-political or economic resistance and people around Africa have used this

tool many times to protest against their government's actions and to demand government attention to act in a particular way (Sanches, 2022). The right to peaceful assembly, including the right to protest, is protected under international law, specifically in Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. These laws guarantee the right to assemble freely, with restrictions allowed only for national security, public safety, and other necessary concerns. In October 2020, the #EndSARS protests erupted across Nigeria, led primarily by young Nigerians in various cities, along with activists and celebrities. The protests, which had their symbolic center at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, aimed to end police brutality and call for accountable governance. Solidarity protests were also held globally by Nigerians in the diaspora.

However, the protests turned violent when alleged government-sponsored thugs attempted to disrupt them. This led to clashes, and on the night of October 20, 2020, following a statewide curfew declared by the Lagos State governor, armed soldiers arrived at Lekki Toll Gate and opened fire on unarmed protesters. Video footage, notably by DJ Switch, showed peaceful protesters being shot while singing the national anthem. This incident, known as the Lekki Toll Gate shooting, resulted in a contested number of casualties. In response to the protests, the Nigerian government, on October 11, 2020, announced the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), marking the fourth such dissolution since 2017 under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. Despite these actions, the government's previous promises to dissolve SARS had not led to lasting reforms.



**Table showing Notable Protests in Nigeria**

| Year | Date        | Name                    | People   | Location                 | Note   | Response(s)  |
|------|-------------|-------------------------|--|--------------------------|--|--|
| 1929 | 6 December  | Aba Women's Riot        | Igbo women                                       | Eastern Nigeria          | The women protested against tax levies imposed by the colonial government. It led to the death of many of the women  | The government's initial response was violent, repressive and concession |
| 1947 | 27 November | Abeokuta Women's Revolt | Abeokuta Women's Union<br>Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti | Alake's Palace, Abeokuta | The women protested against an unfair tax regime which led to the abdication of the then Alake of Egbaland, Oba Sir Ladapo Ademola II and the abolition of the tax regime by the colonial government | A mix of repression, Arrest, negotiation and eventual concessions        |
| 1978 | 17 April    | Ali Must Go             | Segun Okeowo<br>Ahmadu Ali                       | Universities nationwide  | A 50 kobo increase in student fees sparked the protests  | Repression, use of Lethal force and Brutal Crackdown                     |

|      |               |                  |                                     |                                  |   |   |
|------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| 1989 | 24 May - June | Anti-SAP riots   | National Union of Nigerian Students | Universities nationwide          | The protests occurred as a result of the effects of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) introduced by the Ibrahim Babangida-led government                            | Use of Lethal Force, Curfews and Crackdowns   |
| 1993 |               | June 12 Protests | Nigerians                           | South West Nigeria               | The protests occurred as an aftermath of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections by Ibrahim Babangida   | Repression, use of Lethal force Curfews, Crackdowns, Media Suppression                |
| 2012 | 2-14 January  | Occupy Nigeria   | Nigerians                           | Nigeria (including the diaspora) | Nigerians protested against the removal of fuel subsidies and eventual price hikes by the Goodluck Jonathan government. It led to the reinstatement of the subsidy and a review of the Federal Government spending. | Deployment of Security Forces, Curfew and Restrictions and Dialogues and Negotiations |

|      |  |            |           |                                  |  |   |
|------|--|------------|-----------|----------------------------------|--|---|
| 2020 |  | End SARS   | Nigerians | Nigeria (including the diaspora) | A protests are against police brutality meted out by a now-defunct specialised police unit known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). | Use of Lethal Force, Curfews and Media Crackdowns |
| 2024 |  | End Hunger | Nigerians |                                  |  | Repression & Media Crackdowns                     |

Source: Author's compilation

### **State Responses and management of Public Protests in Nigeria**

Nigeria's approach to managing public protests has historically been characterized by a combination of repression, containment, and sometimes, reluctant concessions. The state's response to the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests reflects a broader pattern of state behavior where security forces are often deployed to quell dissent rather than engage in constructive dialogue with protesters. This approach raises critical questions about the balance between maintaining public order and upholding citizens' rights to peaceful assembly and free expression.

The management of the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests saw the deployment of various strategies by Nigerian law enforcement agencies. The management of public protests by the Nigerian state and its law enforcement agencies has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, particularly in light of the recent #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests. These movements have not only highlighted the grievances of Nigerian citizens but also exposed the state's strategies and responses in dealing with civil unrest. These strategies can be broadly categorized into pre-emptive, reactive, and post-protest measures.

### **Pre-emptive Measures and Intimidation**

Pre-emptive measures by the Nigerian state often involve surveillance, intimidation, and harassment aimed at deterring the organization and escalation of protests. According to Omotosho (2021), the Nigerian police and other security agencies have historically relied on intimidation tactics, such as the harassment of activists and monitoring of social media, to prevent protests from gaining momentum. This approach is consistent with the state's broader strategy of maintaining control by suppressing dissent before it can fully materialize. However, despite these efforts, the #EndSARS protests in October 2020 gained widespread support, largely due to the public's deep-seated anger over police brutality and the power of social media in mobilizing the masses (Akinola, 2021).

### **Reactive Measures: Use of Force and Containment**

Once protests are underway, the Nigerian state's response has typically been characterized by the use of force. The deployment of military and police forces during the #EndSARS protests, particularly the events at Lekki Toll Gate, where peaceful protesters were allegedly shot by soldiers, has been widely documented and criticized (Smith, 2021). This incident, often referred to as the "Lekki Massacre," serves as a stark example of the state's reliance on violence to suppress dissent. Scholars like Adekoya (2021) argue that the use of force in this context reflects the state's historical reliance on authoritarian tactics, a legacy of Nigeria's military past, which continues to influence contemporary governance.

The use of curfews and movement restrictions, such as the 24-hour curfew imposed in Lagos State, is another reactive strategy employed by the state to manage protests. According to Ibrahim and Ogundipe (2022), these measures are often justified on the grounds of maintaining public order but are criticized for stifling legitimate expressions of dissent. The shutting down of social media platforms and internet restrictions during the protests further intensified the perception of a state intent on silencing opposition (Oyeleke, 2022).

### **Post-Protest Measures: Judicial Panels and Concessions**

In the aftermath of the protests, the Nigerian government employed a combination of punitive and conciliatory strategies. One of the key responses was the establishment of judicial panels of inquiry to investigate allegations of police brutality and the events surrounding the protests (Adebayo, 2021). While these panels were seen as a step toward accountability, their effectiveness has been questioned. Researchers like Onyekwere (2022) note that the panels have been criticized for their limited scope, slow proceedings, and lack of independence, which undermine their potential to deliver justice.

In addition to the panels, the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was announced in response to the protesters' demands. However, this concession was met with skepticism, as many believed it to be a superficial measure that did not address the deeper issues of police reform and accountability (Akinyele, 2021). The state's post-protest strategies, therefore, highlight a pattern of offering limited concessions while continuing to employ repressive tactics to maintain control.

### **State-Citizen Interactions and Public Perception**

The state's strategies during the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests have had significant implications for state-citizen interactions. The aggressive response, particularly the use of lethal force, has further eroded public trust in the government and law enforcement agencies. According to Okeke (2021), the state's actions during the protests have exacerbated existing tensions and deepened the divide between the government and its citizens, particularly among the youth who feel marginalized and disenfranchised.

Moreover, the state's handling of the protests has been criticized for its lack of transparency and accountability. The initial denial of the events at Lekki Toll Gate and the subsequent attempts to downplay the violence have fueled public outrage and international condemnation (Igwe, 2022). This has raised questions about the state's commitment to upholding democratic principles and human rights, particularly in the context of managing civil unrest.

Comparing Nigeria's response to public protests with other democratic contexts reveals significant differences in approach. In many democracies, the management of protests involves a balance between maintaining public order and protecting citizens' rights to peaceful assembly and free expression. For instance, the response to the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States involved both instances of police violence and significant efforts at dialogue and policy reform (Jones & Smith, 2021). In contrast, the Nigerian state's approach has been more focused on suppression, reflecting broader issues within Nigeria's political and security apparatus, such as weak democratic institutions and a legacy of authoritarianism (Ogundele, 2022)

### **The Role of Communication and Public Relations Strategies Used by the Government During the EndSARS and EndHunger Protests**

The role of communication and public relations strategies employed by the Nigerian government, particularly during the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests, is crucial in understanding how the state sought to manage public perception and control the narrative around these movements. These strategies involved not only traditional media channels but also a significant presence on social media platforms..

The Nigerian government's communication strategy during the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests was multifaceted, employing both traditional media and digital platforms to reach a wide audience. According to Nwankwo (2022), government officials frequently used state-controlled media outlets to downplay the protests, labeling them as unlawful gatherings that threatened public order. This narrative was reinforced by statements from government spokespersons, who framed the protests as being hijacked by "hoodlums" and "miscreants," thereby attempting to delegitimize the protesters' demands (Adeyemi, 2021).

In addition to traditional media, the government leveraged social media platforms to disseminate its messages rapidly. Officials and state-sponsored accounts engaged in online campaigns aimed at discrediting the protests. For instance, hashtags such as #DefendLagos and #EndSARSisAScam were promoted by pro-government accounts to counter the #EndSARS narrative (Akinbile, 2021). These campaigns were designed to create confusion, polarize public opinion, and weaken

the momentum of the protests by suggesting that the movements were either baseless or had ulterior motives.

Public relations efforts by the Nigerian government during the protests were characterized by attempts to control the narrative and manage the fallout from accusations of human rights abuses. One of the key tactics was the use of press releases and official statements to assert that the government was responsive to the protesters' demands. For example, the announcement of the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was heavily publicized as a concession to the protesters, despite widespread skepticism about the sincerity of the move (Osuntokun, 2021). This strategy aimed to portray the government as being open to reform while simultaneously continuing to deploy security forces against demonstrators.

Moreover, the government's public relations strategy included efforts to shift blame for the violence that occurred during the protests. Scholars like Eze (2021) note that the government frequently pointed to the destruction of property and loss of lives as justification for the heavy-handed response by security forces, thereby diverting attention from the allegations of state-sanctioned violence against peaceful protesters. This narrative was further amplified by pro-government media outlets, which focused on the actions of alleged "violent elements" within the protests rather than on the legitimate grievances being expressed by the majority of participants.

The Nigerian police and other security agencies played a significant role in using social media to influence public perception during the protests. As highlighted by Adetola (2022), security agencies engaged in misinformation campaigns, often releasing doctored videos and images that purported to show protesters engaging in violent acts. These tactics were aimed at justifying the use of force against protesters and diminishing public sympathy for the movement. For instance, after the Lekki Toll Gate shooting, several government-aligned accounts circulated claims that the incident was staged or exaggerated, despite mounting evidence to the contrary (Olawale, 2021).

Additionally, security agencies used social media to monitor and suppress the activities of protest organizers. According to Okafor

(2021), social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook were extensively used by the police to track and arrest key figures in the #EndSARS movement. This surveillance was part of a broader strategy to disrupt the organization of the protests and instill fear among activists. The police also attempted to engage in direct communication with the public via social media, often issuing warnings and spreading messages intended to discourage participation in the protests (Ajibade, 2021). These efforts were aimed at creating a narrative that positioned the state as a protector of public order, while framing the protesters as threats to national security.

The communication and public relations strategies employed by the Nigerian government during the protests were met with significant criticism both domestically and internationally. Many observers pointed out the discrepancies between the government's public statements and the realities on the ground, particularly in relation to the Lekki Toll Gate incident. The government's attempts to control the narrative were largely unsuccessful in the face of overwhelming evidence, including live social media broadcasts and eyewitness accounts that contradicted official claims (Babalola, 2022).

International human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, also criticized the Nigerian government for its use of disinformation and propaganda to obscure the truth about the state's response to the protests (Amnesty International, 2021). These organizations argued that the government's communication strategies were not only misleading but also exacerbated the human rights violations occurring during the protests.

### **Legal and Human Rights Implications of the State's Responses to the EndSARS and EndHunger Protests**

The state's responses to the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests in Nigeria have raised significant legal and human rights concerns, particularly regarding the use of force, the restriction of freedoms, and the accountability of state actors.

In Nigeria, the right to peaceful assembly and protest is enshrined in Sections 39 and 40 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which guarantee the freedoms of expression and assembly. These rights are



further supported by international human rights instruments to which Nigeria is a signatory, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). According to Akinyemi (2021), these legal provisions are intended to protect citizens' rights to voice their grievances and demand accountability from the government without fear of reprisal.

However, the implementation of these rights is often challenged by conflicting legal provisions and state practices. For instance, the Nigerian Public Order Act grants the government broad powers to regulate public assemblies, which has been criticized for being used to suppress dissent rather than to facilitate peaceful protests (Ojo, 2022). During the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests, the government invoked these provisions to justify the deployment of security forces and the imposition of curfews, actions that many legal scholars argue were disproportionate and aimed at stifling legitimate protest (Agbakoba, 2021).

One of the most contentious aspects of the state's response to the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests was the use of force by security agencies, particularly the Nigerian police and military. The Lekki Toll Gate incident on October 20, 2020, where unarmed protesters were allegedly shot by soldiers, has been widely condemned as a gross violation of human rights (Amnesty International, 2021). Legal analysts argue that the use of live ammunition against peaceful protesters was not only a breach of Nigeria's constitutional obligations but also a violation of international human rights law, which mandates the use of force only as a last resort and in a manner proportionate to the threat posed (Ekpo, 2021).

The state's violent crackdown on protesters also raises questions about the legality of such actions under Nigerian law. The Constitution provides for the right to life and prohibits extrajudicial killings, yet numerous reports indicate that the state's response during these protests resulted in the unlawful deaths of civilians (Ogunleye, 2022). Additionally, the lack of accountability and transparency in the aftermath of these events, particularly the failure to hold security

personnel accountable, further exacerbates concerns about the rule of law in Nigeria (Olumide, 2021).

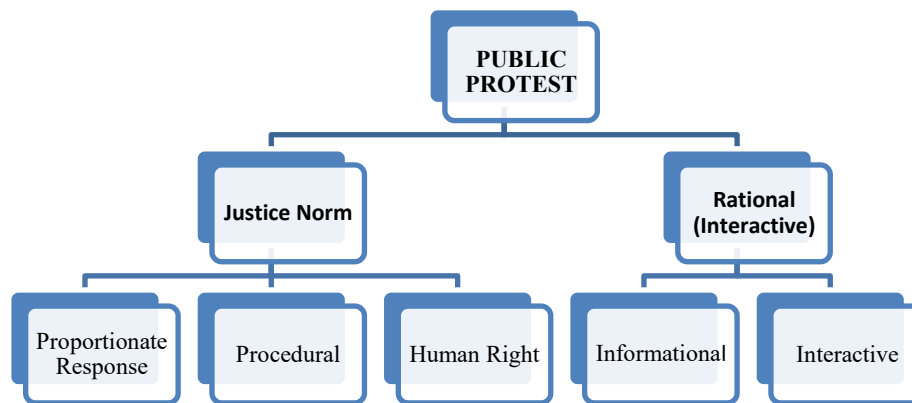
In addition to the use of force, the state employed various strategies to restrict the freedoms of assembly, expression, and movement during the protests. The imposition of curfews in Lagos and other parts of the country, ostensibly to prevent violence, was viewed by many as a tactic to suppress dissent and limit the ability of protesters to mobilize (Bassey, 2021). These curfews were enforced with a heavy hand, often leading to clashes between security forces and civilians.

Moreover, the government's use of digital repression, including the shutdown of social media platforms and the monitoring of online activities, represents another significant violation of human rights (Adekoya, 2022). The freezing of bank accounts of individuals and organizations linked to the protests was also criticized as an unlawful restriction on the right to freedom of association and an attempt to financially cripple the movement (Olawale, 2022). These actions highlight a broader pattern of state behavior aimed at undermining civil liberties in the face of public dissent.

The lack of accountability for human rights abuses committed during the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests underscores the challenges facing the rule of law in Nigeria. Despite widespread documentation of abuses by security forces, including reports from international human rights organizations, there has been little in the way of judicial redress or official accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2021). This failure to hold perpetrators accountable not only violates the rights of victims but also undermines public trust in the justice system and the rule of law.

Legal scholars have argued that the government's reluctance to address these abuses reflects a broader culture of impunity within the Nigerian state, where security agencies often operate with little oversight or consequence (Odinkalu, 2021). This culture is further perpetuated by the lack of independence and effectiveness of oversight bodies, such as the National Human Rights Commission, which has been criticized for its inability to investigate and prosecute human rights violations effectively (Umejisi, 2022)

## Conceptual Framework



### Conceptual framework on the response and management of public protest in Nigeria

Sibanda & Lues (2019), are of the view that public protest should be an open and accountable process through which communities can exchange opinions and have the power to influence agenda setting and, ultimately decision making. In this regard the notion presented here is that government should engage with protesters and seek to understand their grievances, and communicate transparently and openly with the public also government should respond to protests proportionately, using force only when necessary and in accordance with the rule of law.

### Discussion of findings

This paper observed that the #EndSARS movement was primarily driven by widespread outrage over police brutality, particularly by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS was notorious for human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and extortion. The movement gained momentum in October 2020 after a video surfaced online showing a SARS officer allegedly killing a young man. This incident, coupled with years of accumulated grievances, ignited widespread protests across Nigeria, with Lagos State as a central hub.

However, the EndSARS protests were not solely about police brutality. They also reflected broader frustrations with systemic corruption, poor governance, and the lack of accountability within Nigerian institutions. The youth, who were at the forefront of these protests, expressed their anger at the lack of opportunities, unemployment, and the perceived neglect by the state. The protests were a demand for dignity, justice, and a remained social contract between the government and its citizens.

The EndHunger protests, which also took place in Lagos State, were driven by economic grievances, particularly the rising cost of living, food insecurity, and unemployment. These protests were closely linked to the broader EndBadGovernance movement, which criticized the government's handling of the economy and its failure to provide basic social services.

The economic hardship experienced by many Nigerians was occasioned by the poor handling of the economy by the Tinubu administration, which led to job losses, inflation, and increased poverty levels. The EndHunger protests were a direct response to these conditions, with protesters demanding immediate government intervention to alleviate their suffering. The movement highlighted the disconnect between the government and the lived realities of ordinary Nigerians, particularly the poor and marginalized.

Both the EndSARS and EndHunger movements were significantly amplified by social media, which played a crucial role in mobilizing, organizing, and sustaining the protests. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were used to share information, coordinate protests, and raise awareness both locally and internationally. The use of social media also allowed the youth to bypass traditional media channels, which were often seen as biased or controlled by the state.

The protests in Lagos, a major urban center with a large youth population, were particularly vibrant, reflecting the power of digital mobilization. The youth, disillusioned with the status quo, found in social media a tool to amplify their voices and demand change. This

digital activism underscored a shift in how protests are organized and the role of technology in contemporary social movements.

Furthermore, the underlying causes of both protests can be traced back to systemic inequality and governance failures. The Nigerian state has struggled with issues of corruption, weak institutions, and poor service delivery. These systemic problems have created a fertile ground for discontent, particularly among the youth who feel marginalized and disenfranchised.

In Lagos State, the economic hub of Nigeria, the contrast between wealth and poverty is stark. While the city is home to a wealthy elite, a significant portion of the population lives in poverty. This inequality is exacerbated by limited access to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The protests, therefore, can be seen as a response to these entrenched inequalities and the failure of the state to address them.

Collective memory and identity also played a role in the mobilization of the protests. The memory of past movements, such as the Occupy Nigeria protests in 2012, and the shared experience of police brutality and economic hardship, created a sense of solidarity among protesters. This collective identity, particularly among the youth, transcended ethnic and religious lines, uniting diverse groups in a common cause.

It is instructive to note that the various strategies and responses employed by the Nigerian state and law enforcement agencies in managing the EndSARS and EndHunger protests were marked by a combination of repression, control, and limited concessions. While these measures were effective in eventually quelling the protests, they also highlighted significant gaps in the state's ability to manage public dissent in a manner consistent with democratic norms and human rights. The heavy-handed approach, particularly the use of force and the criminalization of protest activities, further alienated the public and exacerbated existing tensions between the state and its citizens.

This study further highlights how the Nigerian government's communication and public relations strategies during the EndSARS and #EndHunger protests aggressively deploy narrative control, public

perception management, and the suppression of dissent. While the government sought to use both traditional and digital media to shape public opinion and justify its actions, these efforts were largely undermined by the transparency and immediacy of social media, which provided an unfiltered view of the protests to both national and international audiences. The role of security agencies in twisting public perception through misinformation campaigns further highlights the challenges of ensuring accountability and transparency in the digital age. The state's responses to the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests reveal significant legal and human rights implications, particularly concerning the use of force, the restriction of fundamental freedoms, and the lack of accountability for abuses committed by state actors. While Nigeria's legal framework provides for the protection of civil liberties, the state's actions during these protests demonstrate a troubling pattern of violations that undermine the rule of law and the protection of human rights. The failure to hold security forces accountable for their actions not only perpetuates a culture of impunity but also raises serious questions about the state's commitment to upholding the principles enshrined in its Constitution and international human rights obligations.

### **Conclusion**

The EndSARS and EndHunger protests in Nigeria were landmark events that highlighted significant gaps in the state's approach to managing public dissent and safeguarding human rights. These movements, driven by widespread discontent over police brutality, economic hardship, and governance failures, exposed the deep-rooted frustrations within Nigerian society and the urgent need for reform. The state's responses, characterized by excessive use of force, suppression of civil liberties, and inadequate accountability, not only undermined the constitutional rights of citizens but also exacerbated public mistrust in the government and its institutions.

The protests and their aftermath underscore the necessity for a more balanced and humane approach to managing civil unrest one that respects the rights of citizens while maintaining public order. The failure to adequately address the grievances that fueled these protests or to hold accountable those responsible for human rights abuses continues to pose a significant challenge to Nigeria's democratic development and social

stability. As the nation moves forward, it is imperative to learn from these events to prevent future unrest and to build a more just and equitable society.

### **Recommendations**

1. **Establish Independent Oversight Mechanisms:** To address the widespread concerns over police brutality and state violence, the Nigerian government should establish independent oversight bodies with the power to investigate and prosecute security personnel involved in human rights abuses. These bodies should be insulated from political interference and equipped with the resources needed to conduct thorough investigations. Strengthening the National Human Rights Commission and empowering it with prosecutorial authority could be a significant step toward ensuring accountability.
2. **Reform Policing Practices:** Comprehensive reform of the Nigerian police force is essential to restoring public trust and preventing future abuses. This reform should include rigorous training on human rights, de-escalation techniques, and the lawful use of force. Additionally, community policing initiatives should be expanded to foster better relationships between the police and the communities they serve, with a focus on collaborative problem-solving rather than punitive measures.
3. **Enhance Legal Protections for Protesters:** The legal framework governing protests in Nigeria should be reviewed and amended to align more closely with international human rights standards. This includes repealing or amending the Public Order Act to prevent its misuse in suppressing peaceful assemblies. Clear guidelines should be established for law enforcement during protests, emphasizing the protection of the right to peaceful assembly and the proportional use of force.
4. **Promote Dialogue and Conflict Resolution:** To address the underlying grievances that led to the #EndSARS and #EndHunger protests, the government should prioritize dialogue and conflict resolution. Establishing formal channels for citizens to express their concerns and participate in decision-making processes can help mitigate tensions before they escalate into unrest. National and regional forums should be created where

government officials, civil society organizations, and community leaders can engage in constructive dialogue on pressing social issues.

5. **Strengthen Economic and Social Support Systems:** The economic and social factors that contributed to the #EndHunger protests highlight the need for more robust support systems to protect vulnerable populations. The government should implement targeted economic policies aimed at reducing poverty, improving access to education and healthcare, and addressing unemployment, particularly among the youth. Social safety nets, such as food security programs and unemployment benefits, should be expanded to provide immediate relief to those most affected by economic hardships.
6. **Develop a National Strategy for Social Media Use:** Given the role of social media in organizing and mobilizing protests, the government should develop a national strategy that respects freedom of expression while addressing the potential for misinformation and incitement to violence. Rather than resorting to digital repression, the government should invest in public education campaigns to promote responsible use of social media and enhance digital literacy. Additionally, law enforcement agencies should be trained on the ethical use of social media for public engagement and should adopt transparent communication strategies during crises to build public trust.

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