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LANGUAGE AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA AS POTENT TOOLS FOR NATION-BUILDING AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE #ENDSARS PROTESTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
On the 8th of October, 2020, Nigerian youths, almost simultaneously, took to the streets in major cities in virtually all the thirty-six states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, to demand the disbandment of the dreaded anti-crime police outfit, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, popularly known as SARS. The police outfit was a specialized unit of the police established to tackle the rising cases of armed robberies, kidnapping, and other violent crimes. As times went by, the unit began to derail from this mandate as its men began to take law into their hands. There were many cases of alleged extra-judicial killings, extortions, harassments, and brutality. The youths were mostly the targets of these SARS operatives. Having been long brutalized by SARS operatives, the endurance of the youths got to its elastic limit and it eventually snapped. Language and the social media played important roles in the success recorded by the EndSARS protesters. The social media, which ordinarily have youths as the bulk of their users, offered the Nigerian youths the platforms to disseminate information, rally support and sustain the momentum of the struggle. Nigeria being a multilingual nation, the English language was central to the achievement of these three key components of the struggle. Within a short period of the struggle, the struggle achieved its aim as police authorities announced the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. The paper concludes that Nigeria can be a better nation if the Nigerian people are ready to use their rights to peaceful protests to draw the attention of the nation's political leaders to the ills plaguing the nation with the aim of making the leaders make amends as appropriate. It is recommended that the Nigerian masses should cultivate the culture of putting their leaders on their toes by making them accountable and responsible.

Key-Words*:* #EndSARS, Language, Nigeria, Nigerian youths, Social media

Introduction

Language has been the most cherished cultural element that man is divinely endowed with. Thus Okedigba, Shittu and Tiamiyu (2018) have argued that language is arguably the most important property of man because man does virtually everything in life with language, and that it is our possession of language that differentiates us from other (lower) animals. Similarly, they say it is language that facilitates interactions between and among people which enables the formation of orderly and growing societies.

In the course of interacting with one another, frictions do result in the society. Frictions are normal in human societies as certain actions by some persons or groups of persons may be intolerable to others. More often than not, it is usually with language that human-beings first express their approval or disapproval of an action. This approving and disapproving qualities of language have helped to a large extent in ensuring justice, harmony and orderliness in human societies. The recent EndSARS protests in Nigeria were thus manifestations of Nigerian youths' disapproval of the brutality of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a special unit of the Nigerian Police Force. These youths massively employed the social media in the organisation of their protests and the dissemination of information to members and non-members alike.

Social media are interactive digitally-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation or sharing/exchange of information, ideas, career interests, and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks (Kietzmann and Hermkens, 2011; Obar and Wildman, 2015). Some qualities of social media include the following: First, social media are interactive Internet-based applications, normally called "apps." Secondly, they have user-generated contents like text posts or comments, digital photos or videos, etc. However, data generated through all online interactions is the life-blood of social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Obar and Wildman, 2015). Thirdly, it is the users that create service-specific profiles for the websites or applications that are designed and maintained by the social-media organisations. Lastly, social media facilitate the development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other individuals or groups (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Social media services are usually accessed via web-based apps on desktops, laptops, or mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. Users create highly interactive platforms through which individuals, communities, and organizations can share, co-create, discuss, participate, and modify user-generated content or self-curated content posted online whenever they engage with any of these electronic services (Kietzmann and Kristopher, 2011). Some of the social media websites mostly used in Nigeria include Facebook (and Facebook Messenger), Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Telegram, WhatsApp, and Snapchat.

Social media outlets are different from traditional media such as print magazines and newspapers, and television and radio broadcasting in quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy, and permanence (Xiaohui, Wei, Xiangming, and Haoran, 2016). Social media outlets operate in a *dialogic* transmission system (i.e., many sources to many receivers), while traditional media outlets operate under a *monologic* transmission model (one source to many receivers). They gave the examples of a newspaper which delivers to many subscribers and a radio station that broadcasts the same programmes to the people in an entire city simultaneously as traditional media outlets operating *monologic* transmission.

Nation-Building

According to Harris (2017), nation-building is constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. It involves the active participation of its citizens in various walks of life. A strong and powerful nation is built on dedication and hard work of its citizens and some amount of smart planning on the part of the government. According to Wimmer (2018), "the early development of civil-society organisations, the rise of a state capable of providing public goods evenly across a territory, and the emergence of a shared medium of communication" are three factors which tend to determine the success of any nation-building project on the long-run. In the case of Nigeria, though it could be said that the first factor obtains, the vibrancy of civil-society organisations in the land is dying.

The second factor is virtually non-existent and is even the basis for most of the problems facing the country. The third factor is akin to a national language, and it is equally absent in Nigeria, at least for now. The English language which comes close to fulfilling that role fails because majority of Nigerians do not speak the language. In addition, the language does not have any cultural root in Nigeria just as Nigerians do not have any emotional attachment to it like they do for their various mother tongues.

In countries that were once colonised like Nigeria, certain divide and rule practices of the colonial masters had resulted in ethnically heterogeneous populations, hence nation building efforts usually involve deliberate construction of national identity which usually involves the molding of the different ethnic groups into a nation. This important component of nation-building efforts is, however, difficult in Nigeria because of factors such as *cronyism* (exclusion of all but friends); *corruption* (self-enrichment by government officials, a development which erodes trust and breeds poverty), and *tribalism* (allegiance to one's own tribal or social group) as identified by Wimmer (2018). The situation is even more dire now than ever before. Certain actions of the present government and the citizenry are indicative of the deep-rootedness of ethnicism in the land.

An Overview of the #EndSARS Protests

End SARS denotes the movement organised by the Nigerian youths calling for the disbandment of a unit of the Nigerian Police Force, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, SARS, that was notorious for its brutality against the Nigerian masses, especially the youths. The protest is said to have first started in 2017 as a mere Twitter campaign using the #ENDSARS to demand that the police outfit be disbanded by the Nigerian government (Salaudeen, 2017; Ogundipe, 2017). That campaign did not achieve much before it died down although it was able to create the awareness.

Operatives of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, SARS, have been alleged to hound young Nigerians, mostly males, using their dress modes, tattoos, and dread-locked hairstyles as parameters for identifying "criminals" among the youths. In fact, the operatives had become laws on their own. At the height of their brutality, they were alleged to be mounting illegal road blocks, conducting unwarranted checks and searches, arresting and detaining innocent youths without warrant or trial, raping women, and extorting young male Nigerians for driving exotic vehicles and using laptops and expensive phones like iPhones (Kazeem, 2020a).

Nigerians, who were either victims or witnesses of some of the obnoxious and highly detestable actions of SARS operatives, have shared oral and video evidence showing that

SARS operatives engaged in kidnapping, murder, theft, rape, torture, unlawful arrests, unlawful detention, humiliation, extrajudicial killings and extortion. For instance, Kazeem (2020b) says Amnesty International reported that between January 2017 and May 2018 alone, around 82 cases of torture and extrajudicial executions had been levelled against SARS.

The EndSARS protests, however, resurfaced again in October, 2020 because the police unit was growing more daring and more brutal with many incredible abuses allegedly committed by operatives of the squad. A viral on-line video of October 3, 2020 showing a SARS operative shooting a young man outside Wetland Hotel, Ugheli, Delta State and then driving the young man's Lexus SUV away was believed to be the immediate cause of the nation-wide EndSARS protests. The said video caused so much anger and public outcry on social media, especially on Twitter, as it trended with the #ENDSARS (Okon, 2020). The on-line #EndSARS protest thus began on Saturday, October 3, 2020.

Although the on-line viral video of October 3, 2020 was the immediate cause of the protests, there was no doubt that the protests were a product of steamy pent-up anger of the youths against the infamous police unit. The speed and intensity with which the online protests spread were amazing. As of October 9, 2020, that was barely a week after the viral video, the hashtag #EndSARS had attracted 2.4 million tweets and was the number one Twitter trending topic in several countries in the month of October (Egbunike, 2020). About 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag have been accumulated on Twitter alone within the first few days of the protests (Kazeem, 2020). There were also solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in diaspora and sympathetic non-Nigerians in many major cities of the world. Most of the youth protesters were angered by the earlier comment of President Muhammadu Buhari to the effect that Nigerian youths were lazy.

The organisation of the protests was superb and novel in the land. Contrary to previous protests by labour unions, student unions and civil society organisations, the #EndSARS protests did not have given leaders. There were as many youths as possible co-ordinating the protests in different cities and towns all over the country. According to Gbenga Sesan, quoted by Kazeem (2020), "These protests are different because they are decentralized and not directed by 'leaders' or typical 'activists'." The idea behind the decentralisation was to make it difficult, if not impossible, for the government to compromise the leaders and kill the protests prematurely.

As for funding, the protests were funded through crowd-funding. Many Nigerians within and in the diaspora made donations. In fact, funds were not a problem as donations were coming in torrents from different persons and organisations. For instance, Kazeem (2020) reports that a group, Feminist Coalition, formed by young Nigerian feminists, was able to raise $55,000 (that is about ₦24,750,000) within four days through cash and bitcoin donations. Funding was, however, decentralised. The funds were expended primarily on the provision of food and water for the protesters and first aid medications for protesters who might have health emergencies. Parts of the donations were also used to foot the hospital bills of some protesters that were brutalised by the police.

One other unique thing about the organisation of the protests was that there were young lawyers on ground all over the country providing legal representations to protesters that were arrested by the police. This helped greatly in forestalling unlawful detentions

without sentence which would have resulted if there was no such provision. Kazeem (2020) quotes Moe Odele, one of the lawyers coordinating the legal efforts, to have said that there were over four hundred volunteer lawyers on standby.

In terms of mobilisation, the social media played a very important role in mobilising young Nigerians to converge on protest grounds during the #EndSARS protests. Twitter and WhatsApp were the two platforms that were most deployed for this. This was how it worked. After a few young Nigerians had gathered at a particular location for the protest, they would take to their Twitter handles or WhatsApp platforms to share their location to other young Nigerians whom they called out to for "reinforcement" at the venue. Within a very short time, the venue would be filled up with young Nigerians.

The #EndSARS protesters also used different social media platforms to mobilise the public to ware-houses or buildings where COVID-19 relief materials were kept by state governments in the different state capitals without being shared after several months. This showed the callousness and non-concern of some state governments for the welfare of their citizens. Several of such discovered ware-houses or buildings housing COVID-19 relief materials were looted by the protesters. These discoveries further fuelled the anger of the protesters who were of the opinion that the affected state governments never wanted to distribute the relief materials, especially when it was discovered that many of the relief items had got spoilt or expired. It was at this point that the protesters began to destroy some public properties or those linked to persons in government or those close to government.

Language Use During the #EndSARS Protests

There is no-gain-saying that language played a very crucial role in the EndSARS protests across the country. Language got used in different ways by the protagonists (the protesters) and the antagonists (government officials and the agents of the state). While the protagonists employed language to sensitise, mobilise and sustain the tempo and intensity of the protests, the antagonists used language in propaganda to discredit the protesters and their alleged "sponsors" and sway public sympathy in favour of the government. The Minister of Information, Mr. Lai Mohammed, and other government spokespersons were actively involved in the latter group.

The protagonists used language verbally and graphically. The verbal component included interviews and chants. Interviews were granted media houses by some arrow-heads of the protests where-in the mission of the protesters was reiterated to debunk government's propaganda. Chants were used to show the displeasure of the protesters with SARS and to urge the protesters on to voice their anger against SARS and the government. One of such popular chants was "Enough is enough!"; a clarion call for a stoppage to SARS's brutality against the Nigerian youths. There was also the *Sọ̀rọ́ Sókè* chant, meaning "speak up." *Sọ̀rọ́ Sókè* is from Yoruba, one of the Nigerian major languages. Alake, cited in Busari (2020), says *Sọ̀rọ́ Sókè* became "an EndSARS battle cry... a tone of rebellion, a note of valid belligerency and a chant of unification in the Nigerian struggle against police brutality and terrible governance."

Placards bearing different messages beautifully written to catch attention and generate public and international anger against the then dreaded police outfit were carried by many of the protesters. Some of the placards read: *#SARS MUST GO; We Have No Leaders; Stop Killing the Leaders of Tomorrow; "Young", Not Criminal; The Power of the Youth is*

Stronger than You that is in Power, End SARS, End Bad Government Now ooo!; We Can't be the Future of the Nation if We are Dead; SARS KILL, SARS RAPE, SARS EXTORT, #END SARS NOW ; etc.

Effectiveness of Social Media Activism in Nigeria and Government's Antagonism

Though some people may want to underplay the power of the social media in effecting changes in government and governance, it is, however, certain that any government that ignores its power does so at its own peril. For instance, it is believed in some quarters that the loss that former President Good-luck Jonathan suffered at the 2015 presidential elections was orchestrated by the fact that former American President, Barrack Obama, and the First Lady, Michelle lent their voices to the #BringBackOurGirls campaigns. In fact, President Barack Obama's admonition to Nigerians to open the "next chapter" at the then forth-coming polls had a strong impact on the outcome of the elections. Ex-President Good-luck Jonathan himself confirmed this in his book, *My Transition Hours*, when he says: "If someone was conducting an experiment on how propaganda could be used to bring down a government, it worked."

The #EndSARS protests provided another tangible example of the power of social media in ensuring accountability and enhancing good governance. At the early stage of the protests, the ruling elites did not take the protests and the protesters seriously as the "protests were initially perceived as another of the youths' episodic mischief-making that would fizzle out if left unaddressed" (Gimba; cited in Tanko, 2020). He argues that it was this perception that was responsible for the slow response of the government to this "unprecedented movement." The protests recorded a huge success. One main achievement of the protests was their ability to force concessions from the government; among which are the immediate disbandment of SARS, and a promise of wider police reform. This has in no small measure bolstered the confidence of the Nigerian youths who now believe that they could bring about positive changes to the nation's body polity.

While commenting on the success recorded by the protesters, a protester who wished to be simply called "CM" because she had received many threats to her life, told Busari (2020) thus: "We are united as Nigerian youths. It has been the most scary, fearful and heart-breaking time but regardless of class, tribe and all of that, we came together to say we don't want to be killed, extorted, harassed, brutalized. One thing I have gotten out of this entire thing is that the moment people come together, they can achieve anything."

Prior to the protests, operatives of the now disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) had become a law to themselves. Very many atrocities were reported against them and the image of the Nigerian Police in particular and that of the nation as a whole was being dented at an unimaginable level. Having been tired of the unprofessional conducts of the operatives of the security outfit, many prominent Nigerians had called for the outfit to be disbanded long before the breakout of the #EndSARS protests. Rather than disband it, cosmetic reforms had all along been effected with no tangible result. The #EndSARS protesters, however, were able to see to it that the unpopular security outfit was totally disbanded. The protagonists of the protests were able to achieve their aim of ending the reign of the infamous Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) mainly because they made effective use of the different social media that were available to them.

At the height of the protests, government had to deploy soldiers who allegedly shot at unarmed protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos killing several youths in the process. Though there were denials on the part of the government and military authorities that the soldiers never fired live bullets at the protesters at Lekki Toll Gate, evidences captured on phones and posted on-line suggested that the soldiers actually fired live bullets into the crowd of unarmed youths who were out on peaceful protests. A Nigerian celebrity, DJ Switch, was live-streaming the protests on her Instagram page when the shooting happened. In an interview with CNN's Busari, she said: "I'm heartbroken. There was no warning. We just heard gunshots and the soldiers came in, guns blazing. It's the worst thing I have seen in my life. They were just shooting like we were goats and chickens." There was no actual figure of those that died in the shooting, but Amnesty International put the number of casualties at twelve (Busari, 2020).

Like he was being forced to do so, President Muhammadu Buhari addressed the nation on the 22nd of October, 2020. Disappointingly, he failed to mention the killing that took place at the Lekki Toll gate on the 20th of October, 2020 in his address. Instead, his statement contained some sort of veiled threat to the youths without showing any empathy to the families of those that were killed by security personnel during the protests.

Given the prominent role played by social media in the success recorded by the #EndSARS protesters and the devastating impact the protests had on the image of the government and its acceptability to the Nigerian masses, the Nigerian government today appears to be wary and scared of social media at the same time. These are manifest in the reactions of government and government officials to social media operations in the country ever since the end of the #EndSARS protests. For instance, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) has fined three television stations; Channels Television, African Independent Television (AIT) and Arise Television three million naira (₦3 million) each over their "unprofessional coverage" of the #EndSARS protests. According to the then Director-General of the Commission, Mr Armstrong Idachaba, the television stations used unverified user-generated content from violent scenes caught on camera during the protests. He said the media houses violated Section 5.6.9 of the Nigerian Broadcasting Code which provides that the broadcaster will be held liable for any breach of the code emanation from the use of material from User-Generated Sources. Earlier, the Commission had warned media houses not to "embarrass the government" in their coverage of the protests.

Steps are being taken surreptitiously by government to muzzle social media. For instance, the National Cybersecurity Policy and Strategy (NCPS), 2021 was launched on Tuesday, February 23, 2021 by President Muhammadu Buhari. At the launch, he accused social media of being used to incite and escalate violence in the country during October 2020 historic #EndSARS protest. While speaking at the launch, the Nigerian President says his administration has been taking proactive steps to ensure progressive use of internet and cyberspace with the assurance that the NCPS will offer the needed platform to effectively tackle the many threats in the nation's cyberspace. The launch was ostensibly to afford the government the opportunity to regulate the nation's cyber space.

The recent ban of Twitter in Nigeria by the Federal Government of Nigeria has, however, revealed its real intention, which is to curtail freedom of speech and deny Nigerians the opportunity to air their views on the worsening situation of affairs in the nation. Twitter's alleged crime was its deletion of President Buhari's tweet about the crisis in South-Eastern

Nigeria which the on-line social medium considered to be offensive and a violation of some of its rules. Like the government was just waking up from a deep slumber, the Minister of Information, Mr Lai Muhammed, has started asking that all social media platforms must be registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission before they can "do business" in Nigeria.

There have also been moves at the National Assembly to promulgate laws that will limit the operations of the different social media in the country. For instance, in November 2019, a bill to tackle what has been tagged "falsehoods and manipulations" online was introduced in the Nigerian Senate. However, the bill had been severely criticised by the media, civil society groups and prominent Nigerians who have argued that the bill was aimed at muzzling the media and gagging the public. What is heart-warming is that the bill has not been passed by the National Assembly. Nigerians should, however, not let down their guard for now as the government appears to be hell-bent on regulating the social media. Unconfirmed report has it that the Nigerian government has set aside around N41 billion to monitor the social media in order to check the publication of news considered offensive to, and inciting against the government.

The other good news about the #EndSARS protests apart from the dismantling of SARS is the fact that various state governments set up judicial panels to investigate cases of brutality and extra-judicial killings levelled against some operatives of the disbanded police outfit. Some victims of SARS brutality and killings have been given monetary compensations by the panels. Though what is paid to the victims may not be enough for the loss they suffered, it is good that it has been established that some actions of SARS operatives were illegal and criminal.

Conclusion

The Nigerian masses have a lot to do if the misrule and atrocities currently plaguing the nation are to be over-come. Nigerians will need to take their destinies in their own hands by asking their leaders questions. The #EndSARS protests have shown that Nigerian leaders could be made to do the right thing through (peaceful) civil disobedience which even the Nigerian Constitution sanctions. If we continue to treat our leaders like gods, it might be difficult to make Nigeria great again.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made: First, Nigerians, especially the youths, should oppose any attempt to regulate the social media and gag the masses. Our laws guarantee freedom of speech for us as Nigerian citizens. The youths should resist any attempt by the government to repackage SARS and recycle its erstwhile brutal operatives.

Secondly, the National Assembly should rise up to its responsibility as arm of government that is empowered to check the likely excesses of the executive. Should it fail to do so, it will only be promoting autocracy and dictatorship.

Finally, Nigerians should refuse to be lured into voting for candidates that are unintelligent and bereft of leadership qualities that could promote national peace, unity and progress on the basis of religion, region or ethnicity.

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