



The Impact of Social Media on Citizen's Participation in Government (A Case Study of the End SARS Movement in Nigeria)

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Abstract

This study is to assess the impact of social media on citizens' participation in governance using the EndSARS movement in Nigeria as a case study. The specific objectives of the study were to evaluate the level of usage of each of the various social media channels in the EndSARS movement, examine the role of social media influencers on citizen's participation in the EndSARS movement, and finally, examine what extent shared personal experiences of individuals through social media encourage citizens to participate in the EndSARS movement. The research adopted a quantitative approach in carrying out a study. The quantitative data was gathered through primary sources which include questionnaires. Data gotten from the response to the questionnaire would be analysed and used by carrying out a regression analysis. The findings of this study showed the wide use of social media in participating in governance. Findings showed the wide use of social media among youths in engaging in political discussions about issues in this case police brutality. It was therefore recommended among other recommendations that Government should make policies that promote the continuous engagement of its citizens especially the youths on social media by all its institutions and agencies, also political parties and leaders should also promote the continuous engagement of youths online as a way to understand their opinion as well as mobilize them towards certain social and political issues and Government should make sure they promote an enabling atmosphere for youths to share their opinions on social media without fears of being victimized.

Key Words: Impact of Social Media, Citizen's Participation in Government and EndSARS Movement in Nigeria.



Introduction

Political participation means “citizens’ involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives”. It involves “the various methods by which citizens express their political views and/or exercise their rights and influences on the political processes”. Thus, it is a civic activity and a critical part of any democracy; “an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political issue.

Political participation can also be said to be a set of activities that citizens perform to influence government’s structured policies or officials”. Through political participation, citizens can elect political representatives, who make policies in favor of the citizens who are the ultimate beneficiaries of social programs put in place by the representatives. Political participation also “entails citizens’ engagement in the discussions of socio-political and economic issues which serve as yard-sticks for choosing would-be leaders. It may also include assessing the capabilities of the incumbencies and advocating ways of alleviating societal ills for a more prosperous country”¹

Political participation, therefore, includes such activities as political discourse, political campaigns, voter registration, voting, writing and signing of petitions, civil protests, public consultations, donating money towards elections, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, political advocacy, monitoring and reporting of cases of violation of the electoral process such as frauds, rigging, intimidation, violence, monetary inducements, underage voting, and so on.

Most countries in Africa are faced with the problem of national development. “In a democratic society, both the leaders and the people are collectively responsible for this problem of national development, while the leaders can be blamed for not abiding by the main tenets of democracy, which is the prioritization of the ‘common good’ over personal interest, which in turn is made manifest in national development.

The people on the other hand, are also to be greatly blamed for their lack of interest in political participation, this lack of interest on the side of the people gives the leaders room to do whatever they want, however they want it and whenever want it, since nobody questions their policies and actions². The political stability and development of any political system is directly related to the level of the awareness and positive involvement of the citizens in civic and political matters. This is the reason why it is posited that democracy demands from the common man a certain level of ability and character: rational conduct and active participation in the government.

In a political system, the citizens can be involved in the political process and decision making by joining political party, voting during election, participating in electoral campaign, community affairs and other political activities. The level and pattern of political participation of the citizens determine, to some extent, the success of the political system. “It is only through active and popular political participation that the people can checkmate the activities of the leaders and re-direct their minds towards the pursuance of common good as against private interest, so as to enhance national development³.

Political participation is seen as a panacea for development in a democratic society because, it makes policies legitimate, as it makes people to have a sense of belonging and can lay claim of ownership of such policies. It is through political participation that the citizens partake in the governance of their country, by so doing, they are able to make input in the decisions and policies of the government, applaud a government that is doing well and condemn/oppose a bad government or even remove such government. Through political participation citizens form and



support a given government or the implementation of any policy based on certain grounds. The purpose of participation of citizens in the policy making arrangement is to create sense of belonging and awareness necessary for the sustainability of policy despite the nature of such policy, consolidate democracy and engender good governance”⁴.

The many benefits of using social media for political participation include granting citizens the opportunity to participate actively and get involved fully in the political discourse by adding their voices on issues posted on social media sites. The platforms also afford electorates a friendlier avenue of assessing candidates for political offices and promoting transparency in governance, thus, advancing the tenets of participatory democracy that sees the media as debate avenues which aid tremendously the actualization of involvement in politics. Social media also offer a range of potentials for innovating governance and finding new ways of governing by creating an opportunity of listening to citizens’ opinion pool online, thereby setting ideas about citizenry needs including the possible reaction of people towards public decision-making processes.

The platforms equally provide politicians with the opportunity to be informally free with the public as politicians can reach the masses to assess the political atmosphere even before venturing into the campaign. This connection helps politicians to appeal to citizens, communicate their humor, indicate their approachability, as well as accessibility to the public, thereby making them seem more personable and in constant contact with their supporters”.

“Even though the advent of social media in the political arena has drastically impacted the politicians and voters alike; the use of social media for political participation has its drawbacks. Misinformation, political harassment, rumors, fake news, propaganda and trolling are some of the problems of using social media for political participation. Besides, the topic of bots affecting the outcome of elections has recently become a mainstream topic during elections. Bots are used to leak fake news stories, spread dissension and create fake profiles on social media platforms that sow divide between people and political parties⁵

Very few studies have considered online forms of citizen political participation in their inquiry. It has been established that the technological interventions that take place in society, influence and often expand the existing understanding we have about the construct of citizen political participation. Thus, continuing with the observed tradition, where societal changes have influenced the conceptualization of citizen political participation in literature, we now need to consider, how tweets, posts, shares, retweets, likes and up-votes of citizens on political posts in social media impact the form of citizen political participation.

The aim of this study is to assess the impact of social media on citizen’s participation in governance” using the EndSARS movement in Nigeria as a case study. The specific objectives are to:

- i. evaluate the level of usage of each of the various social media channels in the EndSARS movement.
- ii. examine the role of social media influencers on citizen’s participation in the EndSARS movement
- iii. examine the extent to which shared personal experiences encouraged citizens to participate in the EndSARS movement.

This study is strictly an empirical study, based on primary data. In this study, the researcher made use of a survey research design. A Survey research design refers to the research method used for collecting data from a pre-specified group of respondents to gather information and



insights on various areas of interest⁶. It involves gathering data through the use of a standardized instrument whose purpose is to make sure each respondent is able to provide answers to the questions having being exposed to equal situations concerning the information needed to avoid partialities that could influence the outcome of a research. Survey research design can be divided into two broad categories, i.e. questionnaire and interview⁷. Survey research design is appropriate for the study because it will enable the researcher to collect data in form of writing and spoken language. This will allow the researcher to study selected issues in depth, openness and detail. Also, survey research design is found to be the most appropriate for this study because it helps to obtain original data and most times requires meeting the respondents and providing them with self-administered questionnaire. Therefore, a survey research design through the use of questionnaires was used to gather information from youths residing in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Social media

Social media emerged with the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web. They are usually associated with the term “web 2.0” which is used to describe websites that provide opportunity for a user to interact with the sender of a message. For a better knowledge of the concept of social media, it is important we define web 2.0. Web 2.0 describes a modern way in which users use the internet in such a way that allows contents to be continuously altered by all users in a sharing and collaborative way⁸. “It has a lot to do with how technology is used by individuals than technology itself, for instead of just retrieving information, participants are now creating and sharing it, and therefore adding value to the sites that allow them to do so”.

Web 2.0 refers to “the move from simple information gathering to systemic interoperability and partnership in a bid to achieve greater results”. “Web 2.0” refers to “the state of the web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to “web 1.0” which describes the state of the web prior to the early 2000’s”. “Web-based communities, social networking sites video-sharing sites, Wikis, and blogs, are among examples of web 2.0 sites”⁹.

“When we talk of social media, we mean those Internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. In other words, social media are interactive web-based media platforms that offer citizens opportunity and place to connect, share opinions, experiences, views, contacts, knowledge, expertise, as well as other things like job and career tips. They belong to a new genre of media that focuses on social networking allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends and share information with greater freedom as well as publish their views on issues on the World Wide Web. It is this interactive or collaborative nature of these tools that makes them social”. These media are described as “online platforms that promote participation, openness, conversation and connectedness”¹⁰. They are also seen as “social instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers or magazines⁴. They are online content, created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies to disseminate information across geographical boundaries, providing interaction among people⁵. They support democratisation of knowledge and information, thereby making the people both information producers and consumers.

Social media is described as “an online media that facilitates communication through the use of feedback mechanisms, engaging the participants’ active on the platform and improvement of



contents, it is the opposite of traditional media, which delivers content without allowing users the chance to modify the content”¹¹. A researcher sees “social media as a name referring to a broad array of software tools that creates participants generated contents that can be shared.” The term social media refers to “the wide range of internet based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchange, contribution or join online communities”¹².

Concept of Citizen Participation

The term citizen participation has been used interchangeably with the word “citizen political participation” and “political participation”. This words means the same thing and all refers to “citizens’ involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives. It refers to the various mechanisms through which the public express their political views and, and/or exercise their influence on the political process”. It is seen as “the involvement of people, (not necessarily active) in any political process before a collective decision is arrived”¹³.

In other words, political participation entails citizens’ engagement in the discourse of socio-political and economic issues which serve as yardsticks for choosing would be leaders. It may also include assessing the capabilities of the incumbencies and advocating ways of ameliorating societal ills for a more prosperous country. Political participation includes such activities like political discourse, political campaigns, voter registration, the actual voting, writing and signing of petitions, attending of civil protests, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, political advocacy, monitoring and reporting of cases of violation of the electoral process such as frauds, rigging, intimidation, violence, monetary inducements, underage voting, etc.”¹⁴

The essence of political participation in any society, either civilized or primitive, is to seek control of power, acquisition of power and to influence decision making. Political participation is a means of contributing one’s quota to the political system and overall development of the nation”. “Political participation is one of the fundamental requirements of democratic governance. This is the reason why it is emphasized that ideally, democracy means individual participation in the decisions that involves one’s life”¹⁵. In a democratic system, there is the necessity for the citizenry to be fully involved in the democratic procedures of the choice of rulers and effective communication of the public policies and attitudes. Any claim to democratic regime or state must essentially embrace a high degree of competitive choice, openness, and enjoyment of civic and political liberties and political participation that involves all groups of the society”¹⁶

Citizen participation is valuable and beneficial personal levels because it has the capacity to bring about improvements in communities and neighborhoods, build relationships and strengthen the social fabric, and create feelings of personal and collective empowerment. Meaningful citizen participation infuses policy making processes with the resources and insights of those who are most affected by the policy outputs, and promote decisions that average citizens”¹⁷. Both practitioners and academics recognize the value of citizen participation in planning decisions for its democratic theoretical and practical reasons. Participation benefits processes because it increases government accountability to the public, infuses lay knowledge into decision making, and improves public support for policies. Participation also benefits the planning profession because it increases public awareness of and appreciation for planning”¹⁸.



The need to involve citizens in a meaningful way in public policy-making has been reinforced by increased dialogue about the value of participatory planning and the necessity of understanding cultural dimensions in planning. This dialogue suggests that empowering citizens through meaningful participation in planning and designing their communities may result in more successful implementation because of citizen “buy-in,” which might actually enhance the “chances and speed of implementation of community projects”¹⁹.

Police Brutality in Nigeria

The term "police brutality" “has been in use since as early as 1872 in the United States of America. The first of which was reported during an incidence where a civilian who was under arrest was beating to a coma at the Harrison Street Police State in Chicago”. Brutality is one of several forms of misconduct which involves undue violence by security officers on citizens in a society. This misdemeanor known as police brutality exists in many states and countries in the world, most especially in under-developed or developing countries²⁰

Police brutality refers to the intentional use of excessive force directed towards a state’s citizens by the police officers or security agents. This excessive force may be in form of physical or psychological intimidation. The act is evident in several countries in the global world especially in the news and social media where the cases are out rightly reported. Brutality is seen in form of police misconduct that may involve sexual abuse, corruption, indiscriminate shooting on innocent civilians, false arrests, racial profiling, and political repression in all sense²¹.

Numerous countries all over the world have permitted or allowed their security forces to employ force in arresting suspects and in shielding or protecting themselves. These security operatives are, however, supposed to employ reasonable force in regulating any situation and in executing their security objectives. Police brutality usually violates the suspects’ constitutional human rights and this should be out rightly stopped.

“It is a common saying that the police are your friend. But in a country like Nigeria, the opposite is the case. It is generally evident that ordinary citizen thinks the policeman is anything negative, and not a friend”. “The Police all over the world are state authorities vested with the responsibility on law enforcement and maintenance of order in their societies. In carrying out their responsibilities, the police may be authorized to use reasonable force when the need arises. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Police Act, international conventions, professional ethics and other statutes regulate and as well constrain the use of force by police in discharging their statutory functions²².

Despite these regulations, the police in many societies including Nigeria resort to using extreme force beyond limits as permitted by law in discharging their duties and in the process grossly disregard the rule of law and resorts to killings extra-judicially, torture and subject civilians or citizens to all sorts of inhumane and ill-treatment; unfortunately, the same citizens that they have earlier sworn to protect”. The Nigerian citizens are rough handled, mishandled and brutalized in various ways through; beating, shooting indiscriminately, maiming and killing of citizens, unnecessary restrains such as handcuffs and leg chains, unnecessary use of firearms against suspects and innocent members of the public, torture of suspects in order to forcefully excerpt confession and extortion of gratification²³.

However, a large portion of these cases are concealed by the Nigerian Police officers in their stations, evidence is destroyed and proof of any such acts is also hidden from the public”. “This



is actually pursuant to the fact that the victims' family members many a times would be denied justice when they seek a redress in court of law. Unfortunately, there have been numerous criminal charges brought and public protests against the Officers of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police in recent times²⁴. High numbers of innocent civilians have been unlawfully killed and eliminated by drunk and trigger-freaked SARS police officers in various states of the country". "The said SARS officers would storm any location; it could be checkpoints on inter-state roads, beer parlous, cinemas, club houses and host of others to enforce unlawful arrests in the name of looking for "yahoo-yahoo boys" or internet fraudsters and criminals in the states²⁵

The EndSARS Movement

End SARS is a decentralized social movement, and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria. The slogan calls for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police with a long record of abuses. The protests which takes its name from the slogan started in 2017 as a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #ENDSARS to demand the disbanding of the unit by the Nigerian government. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) "was a branch of the Nigeria Police Force under the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department (SCIID)²⁶

It was founded in late 1992 as one of the 14 units in the Force Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department, which was established to detain, investigate, and prosecute people involved in crimes like armed robbery, kidnapping, and other violent crimes²⁷. The squad was created as a masked police unit to perform undercover operations against violent crimes like armed robbery, car snatching, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and the bearing and use of illegal firearms. However, SARS had been accused of several human rights violations, illegal "stop and searches", illegal arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, sexual harassment of women, and abrutalizing of young male Nigerians. The human rights abuses were documented in trending videos on social media²⁸. under the Native Authority Ordinance of 1943

(Shalloon 2008). Note that the constitutional conference of 1954 paved the way for a quasi-federal system of government in Nigeria. At this conference, it was agreed that the Nigeria Police Force should be the only police authority and that the existing local and native police forces should be dissolved or absorbed, if possible, into the Nigeria Police Force (Shyllon 2008). Nevertheless, the dissolution was never carried out in spite of coming into operation of the 1954 Constitution. It was not until 1966 when the first coup d'état took place that the then government of Aguiyi-Ironside decreed that all local police forces and native authority police forces should be placed under the overall command of the Inspector-General of Police (Tamuno 1970).

Be that as it may, the complete absorption of the local police forces into the NPF was finally completed between 1967 and 1969 (Jemibewon 1978), maybe as a result of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). At this juncture, the long journey into a centralized police system in Nigeria commenced amidst the presence of a federal structure, at least on paper. One of the Nigeria Police Force's units, Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), created in 1992 to tackle and prevent criminal-related offenses ranging from highway robbery, kidnapping, and armed robbery, etc. recently became notorious for her conduct of the operation. The SARS' unruly behavior to



Nigerian citizens reached its crescendo in the year 2020. It was their assault, extrajudicial killings, extortion, unlawful arrest, and detention of innocent citizens that resulted in the END SARS protest of October 2020.

Amnesty International has accused the SARS officials of regularly detaining young male Nigerians illegally and extorting money from their relatives. In 2016, a human rights activist, Segun Awosanya popularly known as Segalink, started the END SARS campaign on Twitter prompting police authorities to announce the reform of the police unit, but nothing tangible was achieved at the time. In 2018, Nigerian rapper Michael Ugochukwu Stephens professionally known as Ruggedman joined the campaign to end police brutality by releasing a single titled *Is Police Your Friend?* In 2017, a petition signed by 10,195 people was submitted to Nigeria's National Assembly calling for a total disbandment of SARS (Ibrahim 2017). Not minding that a few senators backed the call for total disbandment of the END SARS Protest and Centralized Police System in Nigeria. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad, popularly known as SARS, was established as a special police unit in 1992 to tackle increasing incidents of armed robberies and kidnappings for ransom by criminal elements operating across Nigeria. Originally set up to operate independently in order to target criminal groups, the unit's success hinged on its anonymity and mode of operation¹⁷³. SARS operatives conducted covert operations in plain clothes and unmarked vehicles to support police operations responding to community distress calls on armed robberies and other serious crimes. Over the years, however, SARS officials have been implicated in widespread human rights violations and have garnered a reputation for arbitrary arrests, torture, rape, extortion, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings²⁹.

In recent years, Nigeria has experienced a significant increase in violence targeting civilians by state forces. ACLED records nearly 100 events of violence targeting civilians perpetrated by state forces in 2020 alone. The Nigerian government has failed to bring perpetrators to justice despite promises of police reform. This has continued to embolden SARS officials and other security personnel to operate with impunity.³⁰ After the 3 October 2020 shooting of an unarmed man, for example, police sources denied the incident despite video evidence to the contrary, reporting instead that the victim was arrested and sustained injuries when he jumped out of a police patrol car

The campaign generated a lot of buzz since it started and it is disheartening to see that people live in constant fear of those that should be protecting them. The stories online surrounding the #EndSARS movement are sad, to say the least. With tales ranging from police officers stopping youths simply because they drive 'big' cars to accusing innocent persons of murder, to extortions, threats, and bullying, it's safe to say that the men of SARS have become the terror they were tasked to eradicate³¹.

Raising their voices to join the campaign, many prominent musicians including Don Jazzy, Simi, Falz, Patoranking, Olamide, and Reekado Banks among others, have aligned with the people, calling on the Federal Government to scrap the 'terror squad' for its flagrant abuse of power. "Over 100,000 tweets from concerned Nigerians. The people don't feel protected. If we cannot fix SARS then end SARS", Don Jazzy tweeted. Patoranking also chimed in, "You can never be bigger than the people #EndSARS"³².



The message got to the right quarters, so it seemed. The personal assistant to President Muhammadu Buhari on New Media, Bashir Ahmed, responded with a statement on Twitter: “I have earnestly been following #EndSARS — I must say it is indeed saddening. While it is not within my power to do anything. But I promise to bring this very urgent matter to the attention of relevant authorities³³. Rest assured that the Buhari administration is a listening one.” In his statement, the Inspector General of Police, Ibrahim Idris, ordered the immediate re-organization of the squad formations in all the states. But unfortunately, this has done little to appease Nigerians. This is partly due to the arrest of a certain Moses Motoni allegedly by officials of SARS in Jabi, Abuja³⁴. That birthed another round of social media campaign with Nigerians taking to Twitter to demand the release of Moses Motoni and relentlessly plea the eradication of SARS.

After experiencing a revitalization in October 2020 following more revelations of the abuses of SARS, mass demonstrations occurred throughout the major cities of Nigeria, accompanied by vociferous outrage on social media platforms. About 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag have been accumulated on Twitter alone. Solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in diaspora and sympathizers occurred in many major cities of the world³⁵. The protests is notable for its patronage by a demographic that is made of entirely young Nigerians. The movement expanded to include demands for good and accountable governance.

On Sunday, 11 October 2020, the protestors made a list of five demands to be met by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The demands which were signed by 'A Nigerian Youth' demanded for the immediate release of all arrested during the protests as well as justice and compensation for all who died through police brutality in Nigeria. They also demanded that an independent body be set up within 10 days to investigate and prosecute all reports of police misconduct³⁶. The protestors also asked for the psychological evaluation and retraining of SARS operatives before they are deployed to any other police unit. Lastly, they asked for adequate increase in the salaries for officers of the Nigerian police”.

Within a few days of renewed protests, on 11 October 2020, in response to the public outcry on police brutality, the Inspector-General of Nigeria Police banned the FSARS, Special Tactical Squad (STS), Intelligence Response Team (IRT), Anti-Cultism Squad and other tactical units from mounting of roadblocks, checkpoints, stop-and-search and other routine and patrols. Even though the move was widely received as a triumph of the demonstrations³⁷.

However, it was noted in many quarters that similar announcements had been made in recent years to pacify the public without the unit actually being disbanded, and that the government had merely planned to reassign and review SARS officers to medical centers rather than disband the unit entirely. “Similar bans had been announced multiple times over the previous four years, causing citizens of Nigeria to question whether the bans would actually be upheld³⁸.”

As this was the fourth time that the Nigerian government had announced a similar ban on SARS activity protesters insisted that the notorious police unit be entirely disbanded and wide-ranging reform of the force follow. Protests continued accordingly, and the Nigerian government maintained a pattern of violent repression including the killing of demonstrators. There were international demonstrations in solidarity with those happening in the country, and the movement grew increasingly critical of Muhammadu Buhari's government response to the protests”.

Findings



During the course of this research, this study found out the following :

- 80% of respondents in the study have social media accounts and they used their accounts to participate in the END SARS movement.
- New media and other online channels allow political participants to get involved in politics and express their opinion openly.
- Social media is an avenue for passing information, sensitization, and creating awareness on certain socio-political issues as it affects the citizens.
- Social media influencers with large following were at the forefront of passing information, sensitization and creating awareness on the ENDSARS movement.
- Shared experiences by other individuals made most respondent participate in the ENDSARS movement.

Discussion

Government should make policies that promotes the continuous engagements of its citizens especially the youths on social media by all its institutions and agencies.

- Political parties and leaders should also promote continuous engagements of youths online as a way to understand their opinion as well as mobilize them towards certain social and political issues.
- Government should make sure they promote an enabling atmosphere for youths to share their opinions on social media without fears of being victimized.
- Social Media Influencers should make it as a point of duty to fact check information they share so as not to mislead their numerous followers and to enable them properly educate others with total confidence.
- Citizens should also make it a duty to verify information posted on social media channels so as to enable them take proper decisions about various subject matters.

Conclusion

The political stability and development of any political system or country is directly related to the level of the awareness and positive involvement of the citizens in civic and political matters. This is the reason why it was posited that democracy demands from the common man a certain level of ability and character: rational conduct and active participation in the government. Globalization and advent of social media has brought about a change in the way a lot of activities are carried out even in politics and political participation. Social media has been seen to play a positive impact in citizen participation in governance especially among youths. It has been seen to help in the mobilization, education, and exchange of experience about social and political issues affecting citizens in the society. Social Media therefore, plays an important role in citizen participation in governance.



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