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**Olubunmi Fatai ADESANMI**

Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Administration and Management Sciences  
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye.  
adesanmi.olubunmi@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng; bunmiadesanmi@yahoo.com;

**Rotimi ADEFORITI**

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences  
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye.

### **Abstract**

Police brutality in Nigeria constitutes a violation of fundamental human rights and reflects broader governance failures. Existing studies have largely focused on the EndSARS protests, the role of social media in youth mobilisation, and the political economy of the demonstrations. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining how persistent police brutality reflects systemic governance deficits and how the protests represented broader demands for accountability, the rule of law, and good governance rather than merely police reform. This study addresses this gap by examining the nexus between police brutality, the EndSARS protests, and the quest for good governance in Nigeria. The study relies on secondary data analysed through historical analysis. It identifies persistent patterns of police misconduct, including extrajudicial killings, torture, inhuman treatment, extortion, sexual abuse of female suspects, fabrication of evidence, and unlawful detention. The findings reveal that endemic police brutality is symptomatic of weak institutional accountability, poor adherence to the rule of law, and wider governance deficiencies, which collectively fuelled the EndSARS protests. The study concludes that, despite prevailing socio-economic challenges, the protests constituted a significant platform through which Nigerian youths demanded accountable governance, respect for human rights, institutional reforms, and greater government responsiveness.

**Keywords:** EndSARS, Good Governance, Police, Police Brutality, Rule of Law.

### **Introduction**

From the emergence of the nation-state to the present day, the primary responsibility of government has remained the protection of the lives and property of its citizens. The police institution is the principal agency established to discharge this responsibility. The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, later adapted into the Constitution of the United States of America and subsequently influential in many democratic systems, provides that "every member of society hath a right to be protected in the enjoyment of life, liberty and property" (US, 1776). Similarly, the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria emphasises that the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary responsibility of government. The right to state protection did not originate in America but was inherited from English constitutionalism, with its roots in the common law tradition and natural rights theory (Heyman, 2003). According to Edward Coke, the relationship between the sovereign and the subject is founded on a "mutual bond and obligation", whereby the subject owes allegiance and obedience, while the sovereign is bound to govern and protect the people.

This reciprocal relationship is rooted in both natural law and consent. The doctrine later evolved into the concept of an "original contract" between the ruler and the people, under which the latter

promised obedience in exchange for protection. Consequently, where the ruler fails to protect the rights of the governed, the reciprocal relationship is deemed to have broken down (Miller, 1982). This obligation requires the state not only to enact laws through the legislature but also to enforce them through the executive and its agencies, particularly the police. While executive authority under the early English Constitution was vested in the monarch, Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended) vests it in the President. As the chief executive, the President is constitutionally charged with protecting the nation and its citizens by faithfully executing the laws (FGN, 1999 Constitution).

The principal institutions responsible for maintaining law and order are the police and the courts. The police are government officials entrusted with the enforcement of the law and the maintenance of public order in Nigerian society. To discharge these responsibilities effectively, they are legally empowered to use reasonable force where necessary (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2003). However, the exercise of this power is regulated by constitutional provisions, statutory laws, international conventions, police regulations, and professional codes of ethics. Despite these safeguards, police officers in many societies often exceed the limits prescribed by law in the use of force, resulting in what is commonly described as police brutality.

Although the use of force is an essential component of policing, it is neither absolute nor unrestricted. It is circumscribed by legal provisions, ethical standards, professional codes, and societal values designed to prevent abuse. The popular dictum that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" underscores the rationale for establishing rules governing police engagement, law enforcement, and crime control. Nevertheless, some police officers disregard these legal and ethical restraints in the discharge of their duties, resulting in the unlawful brutalisation of citizens.

Police brutality in Nigeria is almost as old as the Nigeria Police Force itself. The history of policing in the country is replete with instances of both physical and psychological abuse against citizens. Indeed, there appears to be little distinction between the military and democratic eras regarding the prevalence and severity of police brutality. The persistent use of excessive force, intimidation, torture, and other unlawful practices extends far beyond officially sanctioned policing procedures. More troubling is the perception that these abuses often occur with the tacit approval or indifference of government authorities.

The establishment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was intended to combat the rising incidence of armed robbery in Nigeria. Over time, however, the unit deviated significantly from its original mandate and became widely associated with widespread human rights violations. Officers attached to SARS were repeatedly accused of extrajudicial killings, torture, extortion, unlawful arrests and detention, framing innocent citizens to extort money from them or their families, and conducting unlawful searches of homes, mobile phones, and laptops without judicial authorisation. Many of these abuses were reportedly perpetrated under the guise of official duty and frequently followed by attempts to conceal the unlawful conduct. The persistent harassment, intimidation, extortion, maiming, and killing of innocent Nigerians, particularly young people, by SARS officers eventually culminated in the nationwide EndSARS protests, through which Nigerian youths demanded an end to police brutality and greater government accountability.

Against this background, this paper examines police brutality in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the activities of SARS. It also analyses the immediate and underlying causes of the EndSARS protests and critically evaluates the government's response within the broader context of the quest for good governance.

### **Conceptual Discourse: Police, Policing, Police Brutality and Good Governance**

The police institution is the primary mechanism through which modern states ensure the security of lives and property. The word *police* is derived from the Greek words *polis* (city) and *politeia* (public order and welfare), reflecting the historical responsibility of maintaining public safety. Similar community-based policing arrangements existed in pre-colonial African societies. For instance, among the Mairi people of the old Kanem-Bornu Empire, the *Zubban*, comprising morally upright and courageous members of the community, was responsible for crime prevention and the maintenance of public security (Dlakwa and Okafor, 1997).

Over time, policing evolved from community-centred security to an institution symbolising state authority. In contemporary societies, the police are the principal agency responsible for law enforcement, crime prevention, the protection of lives and property, and the maintenance of public order (Goldsmith, 2010; Nsereko, 1993). Wolfe and Piquero (2011) observe that, as agents of formal social control, the police ensure compliance with the law while safeguarding public peace and security. In Nigeria, these responsibilities are codified in Section 4 of the Police Act, which mandates the Nigeria Police Force to prevent and detect crime, apprehend offenders, preserve law and order, protect lives and property, and enforce all applicable laws.

To perform these functions effectively, the police are legally empowered to use reasonable force and, where necessary, carry firearms and other security equipment. However, the use of force is regulated by constitutional provisions, statutory laws, professional ethics, and international human rights standards. Police brutality arises when officers exceed these lawful limits through unlawful killings, torture, extortion, arbitrary arrests and detention, intimidation, or other forms of abuse. Rather than protecting citizens, such conduct undermines public trust and confidence in the police. Consequently, the Nigeria Police Force has frequently been criticised for harassment, victimisation, and human rights violations (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2005).

## **Good Governance**

Governance refers to the manner in which political authority is exercised in managing a country's affairs and resources for development. The World Bank (1991) defines governance as the exercise of political power in managing a country's economic and social resources, encompassing the political system, policy formulation and implementation, and institutional effectiveness. Similarly, Landell-Mills and Serageldin (1991) view governance as the process through which a state is administered and regulated, while Nazrul Islam and Om Prakash Mathur (1995) emphasise accountable institutions, democratic principles, and effective state–society relations.

Good governance extends beyond the exercise of power to include transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, equity, and adherence to the rule of law. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) associates good governance with democratic governance characterised by public participation, accountability, transparency, and the effective management of public resources (Bilney, 1994). Likewise, the World Bank (2003) identifies inclusiveness and accountability as its defining attributes, while Genyi (2013) emphasises efficient problem-solving, conflict resolution, and inclusive development.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) identifies the core elements of good governance as the rule of law, transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, consensus orientation, effectiveness and efficiency, and equity and inclusiveness. Similarly, the World Bank (1989) highlights an efficient public service, an independent judiciary, respect for the rule of law and human rights, accountability in public finance, and a free press as key indicators of good governance.

These principles provide a useful framework for assessing governance in Nigeria. Persistent police brutality, particularly the human rights abuses associated with the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), reflects serious deficiencies in accountability, the rule of law, transparency, and respect for fundamental human rights. Consequently, police brutality constitutes not only a law enforcement challenge but also a manifestation of broader governance deficits.

## **Police Brutality**

Although the police institution is indispensable to the maintenance of law, order, and public safety, its operations are susceptible to abuse because they are carried out by fallible individuals, with citizens often bearing the consequences (Amnesty International, 2019; Nsereko, 1993). While policing is essential to democratic governance, a police state is not. In a police state, the safeguards that ordinarily protect citizens during law enforcement and criminal investigations are routinely disregarded, creating an environment of impunity and persistent violations of fundamental rights.

The term *police brutality* was first used by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1872 in connection with the beating of a civilian detained at Harrison Police Station. It generally refers to the use of excessive or unnecessary force by law enforcement officers beyond what is permitted by law. Such conduct often results in physical and psychological harm through intimidation, violence, and other actions that fall outside officially sanctioned policing procedures and rules of engagement. Muscato (2021) defines police brutality as the unwarranted use of violent tactics by police officers that violate an individual's civil and human rights.

Amnesty International (2021) similarly regards police brutality as a grave human rights violation encompassing beatings, racial abuse, maiming, unlawful killings, torture, excessive use of batons, improper arrest procedures, and the indiscriminate deployment of riot control agents during protests. Excessive use of force invariably infringes upon the rights to liberty, security, equality before the law, and freedom from discrimination. Such abuses may be perpetrated by rogue officers acting independently or with colleagues, or may occur with the tacit approval or acquiescence of senior police authorities.

In democratic societies, legal frameworks, institutional oversight, and professional standards are designed to prevent abuses of police power while enabling effective law enforcement. These mechanisms seek to balance public security with the protection of fundamental rights and provide appropriate remedies where violations occur.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is anchored primarily on the Frustration–Aggression Theory, with support from Social Identity Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a useful framework for explaining police brutality, the EndSARS protests, and the quest for good governance in Nigeria.

The Frustration–Aggression Theory posits that aggression and collective protest arise when individuals or groups are persistently prevented from achieving legitimate expectations or satisfying basic needs (Mack, 1990). The theory assumes that prolonged frustration generates resentment, which may eventually manifest in protest or other forms of collective action. Although critics argue that not every frustration results in aggression, the theory remains valuable in explaining popular reactions to perceived injustice and state repression.

Applied to this study, the persistent violations of citizens' rights by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), including unlawful arrests, extortion, torture, and extrajudicial killings, created widespread frustration among Nigerian youths. These repeated abuses, coupled with perceived government inaction and weak institutional accountability, transformed accumulated grievances into the nationwide EndSARS protests. The protests therefore represented not merely opposition to police misconduct but also a broader demand for justice, accountability, and good governance.

The study also draws on Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel (1978, 1981), which explains how individuals derive part of their identity from membership of social groups. The theory argues that people are more likely to engage in collective action when they perceive their group to be treated unfairly or when existing social arrangements are considered illegitimate (Cairns, 1994). Perceived illegitimacy weakens acceptance of the status quo and strengthens solidarity among affected groups seeking social and political change (Tajfel, 1978).

Within the context of the EndSARS protests, Nigerian youths developed a shared identity based on common experiences of police harassment and brutality. This collective identity transcended ethnic, religious, and regional divisions, facilitating nationwide mobilisation against SARS and broader governance failures. Consequently, while the Frustration–Aggression Theory explains the emergence of public discontent, Social Identity Theory provides insight into how that discontent evolved into coordinated collective action demanding police reform, respect for human rights, and accountable governance.

## **Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)**

Section 194 of the 1979 Constitution established the Nigeria Police Force as a national institution with jurisdiction throughout the federation. To enhance operational effectiveness, the Force is organised into departments, commands, units, and specialised squads, each assigned specific responsibilities. One of such specialised units was the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), established in 1992 under the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department (SCIID) to investigate and prosecute violent crimes, including armed robbery, kidnapping, car theft, cattle rustling, and offences involving illegal firearms (NPF, 2000).

Although SARS was created to combat violent crime, the unit gradually departed from its statutory mandate and became widely associated with serious human rights abuses. Rather than enhancing public safety, SARS attracted widespread allegations of unlawful arrests and detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, extortion, sexual violence, illegal searches, and other forms of police brutality, particularly against young Nigerians. These persistent abuses significantly eroded public confidence in the police and ultimately triggered the nationwide EndSARS protests.

## **Indicators of Police Brutality in Nigeria**

The slogan, "*Police is your friend*", reflects the expectation that the police exist to protect citizens and safeguard public order. In practice, however, the activities of SARS undermined this ideal, leading many Nigerians to perceive the police as agents of intimidation rather than protection (Omilana, 2019). Although police operations are regulated by the Constitution, the Police Act, international human rights instruments, and professional codes of conduct, numerous officers, particularly those attached to SARS, routinely exceeded the lawful limits of force. The manifestations of police brutality include extrajudicial killings, torture and inhuman treatment, extortion, coercive interrogation, sexual abuse of female suspects, fabrication of evidence, and unlawful detention.

## **Extrajudicial Killings**

Extrajudicial killings involve the unlawful execution of suspects without judicial process. Under Nigerian law, no law enforcement officer has the authority to determine guilt or impose punishment. Nevertheless, SARS officers were repeatedly accused of killing suspects in disregard of due process and the rule of law (Segun, 2016).

## **Torture and Inhuman Treatment**

The Nigerian Constitution guarantees the dignity of the human person and prohibits torture and degrading treatment. Despite these protections, numerous victims of SARS reported severe physical abuse, torture, prolonged detention, and degrading treatment. Proceedings before the Judicial Panels of Inquiry revealed cases involving permanent disabilities, including the loss of limbs, eyesight, and livelihoods. Human Rights Watch (2020) also documented allegations of rape of female detainees and sexual abuse of male detainees while in police custody.

## **Threats and Extortion**

Threats and intimidation became common features of SARS operations. Officers frequently conducted arbitrary raids on clubs, hotels, student hostels, cinemas, and checkpoints under the guise of searching for criminals, particularly suspected internet fraudsters, with the primary objective of extorting money from victims (International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2018). Many detainees were compelled to withdraw or transfer money before securing their release, while vehicles, mobile phones, laptops, and other valuables were confiscated without lawful authorisation or proper documentation.

## **Fabrication of Evidence and Unlawful Detention**

SARS officers were also accused of planting firearms, ammunition, illicit drugs, and other incriminating materials on innocent citizens to justify arrests and extort money. Victims were often subjected to torture and intimidation to obtain false confessions before being detained without due process. Allegations further suggest that evidence of these abuses was frequently concealed through the destruction of records and other attempts to obstruct accountability (Taiwo, 2018).

## **EndSARS Protest: Youth Reaction to Police Brutality**

The EndSARS protests emerged as a response to the persistent human rights abuses perpetrated by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). From the early 2000s, SARS officers were repeatedly implicated in extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, torture, rape, extortion, and other violations of fundamental rights. The rise of internet fraud (popularly associated with *Yahoo boys*) provided further justification for indiscriminate profiling and harassment of young Nigerians, while allegations of abuse continued largely unchecked.

The perceived failure of successive governments and police authorities to investigate, prosecute, or sanction offending officers fuelled widespread public frustration, particularly among young people. The movement gained momentum in 2017 through the **#EndSARS** campaign on social media, where victims and activists documented alleged abuses and demanded the disbandment of SARS. A petition signed by over 10,000 citizens was subsequently submitted to the National Assembly calling for the dissolution of the unit.

Following the circulation of a video allegedly showing the killing of a young man by SARS officers in October 2020, the online campaign rapidly evolved into nationwide peaceful protests. Demonstrations spread across major cities in Nigeria and attracted financial and moral support from Nigerians in the diaspora and sympathisers abroad. Although initially directed at the disbandment of SARS, the protests soon evolved into a broader movement against police brutality, injustice, corruption and poor governance.

The protesters articulated five principal demands: the release of all arrested protesters; justice and compensation for victims of police brutality; the establishment of independent panels to investigate and prosecute police misconduct; psychological evaluation and retraining of former SARS officers before redeployment; and improved welfare for police personnel. Collectively, these demands reflected not only calls for police reform but also broader demands for accountability, respect for human rights, and institutional reform.

The government's response was mixed. While the Federal Government announced the dissolution of SARS, security agencies continued to disperse protesters in several locations, resulting in reports of arrests, injuries, and fatalities. Financial restrictions were also imposed on some prominent protesters through court-authorized freezing of bank accounts, a move widely criticised by civil society organisations as an attempt to weaken the movement. At the same time, several state governments acknowledged the legitimacy of the protesters' grievances. For example, the Lagos State House of Assembly adopted resolutions calling for an investigation into SARS abuses, the protection of protesters, an end to police harassment, and comprehensive police reforms.

Although the immediate demand for the dissolution of SARS was met, the EndSARS protests transcended police reform. They became a nationwide expression of youth dissatisfaction with governance, highlighting persistent concerns over the rule of law, accountability, respect for human rights, and the responsiveness of public institutions.

## **EndSARS Protests: A Call for Good Governance?**

The demands and conduct of the EndSARS protesters demonstrate that the movement was neither a revolutionary campaign nor a quest for regime change. Rather, it represented a collective demand by Nigerian youths for good governance, accountability, respect for human rights, and adherence to the rule

of law. Nigeria's governance challenges have long undermined its development potential, with weak institutions, poor accountability, and inadequate protection of citizens' rights remaining persistent concerns. Governance entails the exercise of public authority in the formulation and implementation of policies, the management of public affairs, and the promotion of accountability (Douglass, 2011; Maserumule and Gutto, 2008). Central to this process is the rule of law, which requires that all persons and institutions, including law enforcement agencies, operate within the confines of the law (Dicey, 1889/2022; Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi, 2005). Similarly, the World Bank (1989) identifies respect for the rule of law and human rights as indispensable elements of good governance.

The activities of SARS fundamentally contradicted these principles. Established to combat violent crime, the unit became widely associated with unlawful killings, torture, extortion, arbitrary arrests and detention, illegal searches, and the profiling of young Nigerians based on their appearance, possessions, or lifestyle. Rather than protecting citizens, SARS frequently violated the very laws it was established to enforce, thereby eroding public confidence in the police and exposing broader failures of governance.

The immediate trigger for the nationwide protests was the circulation in October 2020 of reports and videos alleging the killing of a young Nigerian by SARS officers in Delta State, alongside other widely publicised incidents of police violence, including the killing of the musician DJ Slick. These incidents reinforced long-standing grievances over police brutality and government inaction, transforming public frustration into nationwide demonstrations demanding institutional reforms.

The events of 20 October 2020 at the Lekki Toll Gate, where security forces allegedly opened fire on protesters following the imposition of a curfew, further deepened public perceptions of injustice and governance failure. Regardless of the differing narratives surrounding the incident, it became a defining moment in the EndSARS movement and reinforced calls for accountability, justice, respect for human rights, and institutional reforms. Consequently, the EndSARS protests should be understood not merely as a reaction to police brutality but as a broader expression of youth dissatisfaction with governance and a demand for a more accountable, lawful, and responsive Nigerian state.

### **Conclusion: EndSARS and Policy Implications**

This study has demonstrated that the EndSARS protests, championed largely by Nigerian youths, were conceived and conducted primarily as a peaceful movement against police brutality and a broader demand for good governance. Although the protests culminated in the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the achievement came at a considerable human and material cost. The movement underscored the perception that meaningful institutional reforms in Nigeria often require sustained public agitation, particularly where entrenched interests resist change.

One of the most significant responses by the Federal Government was the directive that all states establish Judicial Panels of Inquiry to investigate allegations of police brutality and recommend appropriate remedies. Most states complied by constituting panels to examine complaints, determine the extent of human rights violations, and recommend compensation and other remedial measures where appropriate. The reports of these panels largely corroborated the widespread allegations of abuse advanced by the protesters, although implementation of many of the recommendations has remained uneven across the states.

Beyond the immediate dissolution of SARS, the EndSARS protests drew global attention to the persistent problem of police brutality and the broader governance deficits that sustain it. The movement demonstrated that effective policing cannot be separated from the principles of accountability, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental human rights. Ultimately, the quest to end police brutality in Nigeria is inseparable from the broader quest for good governance. Sustainable reforms therefore require not only restructuring and professionalising the police but also strengthening democratic institutions, enforcing accountability mechanisms, and ensuring that the rule of law governs both citizens and those entrusted with enforcing it.

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