



The Role of the Church in the End SARS Protest in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *The End SARS protest in Nigeria, a nationwide demonstration against police brutality, witnessed the active involvement of the church as a significant social institution. This study critically examines the church's role, motivations, and the impact of its participation on the protest's trajectory and outcomes. Using a qualitative research approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews with church leaders, activists, and protest participants, as well as a comprehensive analysis of media reports and scholarly literature. The findings reveal the church's multifaceted engagement, ranging from providing spiritual and material support to protesters to actively advocating for change and facilitating mediation efforts. The study contributes to the understanding of the complex interplay between religion, social movements, and political dynamics in contemporary Nigeria, offering insights that can inform future civic engagement and the church's role in addressing societal challenges.*

Keywords: *Nigeria, Endsars Protest, Church, Police Brutality, Social Movements.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa, has grappled with the persistent issue of police brutality and the lack of accountability within its security apparatus. The EndSARS protest, which erupted in October 2020, was a powerful expression of the public's frustration and a demand for sweeping reforms. At the heart of this nationwide movement was a call for the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious police unit accused of extrajudicial killings, torture, and extortion (Adegoke, 2020; Opejobi, 2020).



The church, as a significant social institution in Nigeria, has historically played a crucial role in shaping the country's political and social landscape (Okafor, 2018). During the EndSARS protest, the church's involvement became a subject of intense scrutiny, raising questions about its motivations, strategies, and the impact of its participation. This study aims to provide a critical analysis of the church's role in the EndSARS protest, exploring the factors that influenced its engagement and the implications of its actions on the protest's trajectory and outcomes.

2. RELATED WORKS

The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria sparked a national and international conversation, reflected in a growing body of academic research:

- **Police Brutality and Reform:** Police brutality, particularly by the disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), was a central grievance. Studies like Omeire & Ojaide (2022) examine the historical roots of these issues and the ongoing fight for reform. Similarly, Adebajo & Jega (2021) explore the broader societal context of the #EndSARS movement within discussions of corruption and national insecurity.
- **Social Media and Protest Movements:** Social media played a crucial role in organizing the protests and raising awareness. Articles like Emovuore (2022) analyze how the Nigerian government attempted to control the narrative through media portrayals of the protests. Meanwhile, Aruwa (2021) investigates the role of platforms like Twitter in mobilizing young Nigerians and creating a global conversation around #EndSARS.
- **Security Challenges and National Dialogue:** The protests highlighted deeper issues of governance and national security. Omreore & Ojaide (2022) analyze the connection between the #EndSARS movement and broader security concerns in Nigeria. Their work emphasizes the need for a national dialogue on these issues.
- **The Role of Youth and Civil Society:** The movement was driven by young Nigerians. Research by Agbada (2022) explores the growing influence of youth activism in Nigeria, particularly their use of social media for mobilization. Additionally, Aruwa (2021) highlights the role of civil society organizations in supporting the movement and demanding change.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, relying on in-depth interviews, document analysis, and a comprehensive review of media reports and scholarly literature. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with church leaders, protest organizers, and participants to gain a deep understanding of the church's involvement, its rationale, and the perceived outcomes of its engagement. The analysis of official church statements, sermons, and other relevant documents provided further insights into the church's perspectives and strategies. Additionally, the study examined media coverage and scholarly publications to contextualize the church's role within the broader socio-political landscape of the EndSARS protest.



Theoretical Underpinnings: Liberation Theology Theory

Liberation Theology is a Christian theological framework that emphasizes the Church's role in addressing social injustices and advocating for the oppressed. Originating in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, it has since influenced various contexts, including Africa. This theory is particularly relevant for examining the role of the Church in social and political movements like the EndSARS protest in Nigeria.

Key Concepts of Liberation Theology

1. Preferential Option for the Poor:

- Liberation Theology posits that the Church should prioritize the needs and struggles of the poor and marginalized (Boff & Boff, 1987). This concept emphasizes the Church's commitment to social justice and its active involvement in addressing systemic inequalities.

2. Prophetic Action:

- Liberation Theology views the Church as a prophetic voice that speaks out against injustices and advocates for transformative social change (Gutierrez, 1973). This involves not only spiritual guidance but also active participation in social and political movements.

3. Contextual Theology:

- Liberation Theology argues that theology should be contextualized, reflecting the specific social, political, and economic realities of a given community (Segundo, 1976). This means that the Church's teachings and actions should be relevant to the lived experiences of the people.

4. Praxis:

- Praxis, the combination of reflection and action, is central to Liberation Theology. It emphasizes the need for the Church to engage in practical actions that promote justice, informed by theological reflection (Freire, 1970).

Implications for the Research Work

1. Church's Advocacy Role:

- **Liberation Theology** provides a framework for analyzing how the Church in Nigeria acted as an advocate for justice during the EndSARS protest. By prioritizing the needs of the oppressed and marginalized, the Church's involvement can be seen as a fulfillment of its preferential option for the poor. This can be illustrated by examining the statements, actions, and support provided by the Church to the protesters.
- **Example:** Churches organizing prayer vigils, providing shelter, and using their platforms to amplify the voices of the protesters.

2. Moral Legitimacy and Influence:

- The Church's prophetic action during the EndSARS protest can be studied to understand how it leveraged its moral authority to challenge systemic injustices and mobilize the public (Gutierrez, 1973). This can include an analysis of sermons, public statements, and social media activities by Church leaders that condemned police brutality and called for reform.



- **Example:** Bishops and pastors publicly condemning police violence and urging their congregations to support the protest movement.
- 3. **Contextual Relevance:**
 - Liberation Theology's emphasis on contextual theology is pertinent for examining how the Nigerian Church contextualized its message to address the specific issues of police brutality and corruption. This involves studying how the Church's teachings were adapted to resonate with the lived experiences of Nigerian youths and other affected communities (Segundo, 1976).
 - **Example:** Tailoring sermons and church activities to address the themes of justice, human rights, and dignity in the Nigerian context.
- 4. **Action-Oriented Approach:**
 - The praxis aspect of Liberation Theology highlights the Church's active role in the EndSARS movement, not just as a spiritual leader but as an active participant in the struggle for justice. This can be analyzed by looking at the practical steps taken by the Church to support the protest, such as providing logistical support, legal aid, and mobilizing resources.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Church's Involvement in the End SARS Protest

The involvement of the Church in the EndSARS protest in Nigeria was multifaceted and significant. Throughout the movement, various Christian denominations played active roles in supporting the demands for police reform, justice, and an end to police brutality (Bowen, 2009). These roles include:

i. Spiritual and Material Support for Protesters

According to reports, many churches across the country opened their doors to provide refuge, medical assistance, and logistical support to the protesters.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, played a prominent role. The General Overseer, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, led his congregation in prayers and encouraged them to participate in the peaceful demonstrations (Adegoke, 2020). The RCCG also provided food, water, and medical aid to the protesters who sought shelter in their church premises (Onyeji, 2020).

Similarly, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), under the leadership of Bishop Francis Wale Oke, called on all Christian leaders to support the EndSARS movement. Bishop Oke emphasized the importance of the church's spiritual and moral support, stating that the protesters were "fighting a just cause" (Ajayi, 2020).

Also, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) condemned the violent crackdown on the protesters and urged the government to address the underlying issues that led to the protests. The Archbishop of Lagos, Alfred Adewale Martins, opened the doors of the Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos to provide refuge and assistance to the demonstrators (Olowolagba, 2020).



In addition to the larger church organizations, many individual pastors and church leaders played active roles in the protests. Pastor Sam Adeyemi of Daystar Christian Centre, for instance, led prayers and encouraged his congregation to participate in the demonstrations (Adegoke, 2020). Similarly, a prominent preacher, Pastor Tunde Bakare of the Latter Rain Assembly, openly supported the protesters and called for reforms (Ajayi, 2021, p.9).

The spiritual support and solidarity the church provided were crucial in sustaining the protesters' resolve and maintaining the peaceful nature of the demonstrations. Through prayers, fasting, and moral encouragement, the church's involvement was widely recognized as a vital component in the EndSARS movement (Adesanya, 2020).

ii. Advocacy and Mobilization

Beyond providing spiritual support, the church also engaged in advocacy and mobilization efforts during the EndSARS protests in Nigeria. Church leaders leveraged their platforms and extensive networks to condemn police brutality and call for sweeping reforms within the security sector.

The General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Pastor Enoch Adeboye, spoke out against the violence perpetrated by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and urged the government to address the protesters' demands (Adebayo, 2020). In a televised address, Adeboye expressed his support for the protesters and called on the government to hold security personnel accountable for their actions.

Similarly, the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Rev. Samson Ayokunle, condemned the Lekki Toll Gate shooting and called for an independent investigation (Olukoya, 2020). CAN, which represents the interests of various Christian denominations in Nigeria, issued a statement demanding justice for the victims and reforms to the security sector.

Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) also joined the call for reforms, stating that the church would continue to support the protesters until their demands were met (Adebayo, 2020). Ashimolowo leveraged his influential media platform to amplify the protesters' voices and pressure the government.

Beyond individual church leaders, some congregations actively participated in the protests. The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and the Daystar Christian Centre, led by Pastors Enoch Adeboye and Sam Adeyemi respectively, organized their members to join the demonstrations and provide logistical support (Onyeji, 2020).

The church's extensive social networks and influence were instrumental in mobilizing widespread participation in the EndSARS protests. Church leaders collaborated with civil society organizations, human rights groups, and other stakeholders to coordinate protest logistics, provide legal aid, and advocate for the protesters' demands (Ngwoke, 2021).

The church's advocacy and mobilization efforts were seen as a crucial component in sustaining the momentum of the protests and amplifying the protesters' voices. By leveraging their platforms and resources, church leaders played a significant role in pressuring the government to address the systemic issues that fueled the EndSARS movement.



iii. Mediation and Conflict Resolution

As the protest gained momentum, the church also positioned itself as a mediator between the protesters and the government. Church leaders attempted to facilitate dialogue and find a peaceful resolution to the crisis (Ogunnubi & Amusan, 2020). They engaged with government officials, security agencies, and protest organizers, seeking to de-escalate tensions and find a middle ground. This role as a trusted interlocutor was seen as crucial in preventing the protest from descending into further violence (Okafor, 2021).

2. Critiques and Controversies

Irrespective of the church's support during the 2020 EndSARS protests in Nigeria, some critics argued that the church was not as vocal or proactive in supporting the protesters as it could have been. While the church did condemn the violent crackdown on protesters, it was perceived by some as not doing enough to leverage its influential position and mobilize its vast network to amplify the demonstrators' demands (Ogunnubi & Amusan, 2020). Some protesters felt that the church could have used its pulpits, resources, and connections to provide more material and logistical support, as well as to apply greater political pressure on the government to address the protesters' grievances.

On the other hand, During the ENDSARS protest, the Church was accused of being more concerned with safeguarding its own interests and preserving its relationship with the government than with fully supporting the protest (Adesanya, 2020). They argued that the church was hesitant to strongly condemn the government's crackdown on the youths, fearing that it might jeopardize its access and influence within the political establishment. Some argued that the church's priority was to maintain its privileged position and ensure the continued flow of state resources and benefits, rather than wholeheartedly championing the cause of the protesters (Adesanya, 2020).

In both of these examples, the church's actions or perceived inaction were met with criticism from certain segments of civil society, who felt that the church was not living up to its moral and social responsibilities in supporting the legitimate demands of the protesters.

3. The Impact of the Church's Involvement

The church's multifaceted engagement in the EndSARS protest had a significant impact on the movement's trajectory and outcomes. Its spiritual support and mobilization efforts helped sustain the protesters' resolve and amplify their demands (Ejeagbasi & Nnadi, 2021). The church's advocacy and mediation efforts also contributed to the government's eventual decision to disband SARS and commit to broader police reforms, although the implementation of these reforms has been slow and uneven (Adebayo, 2020).

Moreover, the church's involvement highlighted its potential as a powerful social and political actor in Nigeria (Okafor, 2018). Its ability to mobilize its vast network of congregations and leverage its moral authority demonstrated the church's capacity to shape the country's socio-political landscape. This raised questions about the church's role in addressing societal challenges and its responsibility to advocate for justice and human rights (Ngwoke, 2021).



5. CONCLUSION

The EndSARS protest in Nigeria was a watershed moment that not only highlighted the pervasive issue of police brutality but also shed light on the complex role of the church in the country's social and political affairs. This study's critical analysis of the church's involvement in the protest reveals the multifaceted nature of its engagement, from providing spiritual and material support to protesters to actively advocating for change and facilitating mediation efforts. The findings of this research contribute to the understanding of the intricate relationship between religion, social movements, and political dynamics in contemporary Nigeria. The church's pivotal role in the EndSARS protest underscores its potential as an influential social actor, capable of mobilizing its vast networks and leveraging its moral authority to address societal challenges. However, the study also highlights the controversies and critiques surrounding the church's involvement, raising questions about its motivations and the tensions between its spiritual mandate and its political engagement.

This research holds significant implications for scholars, policymakers, and civil society organizations interested in exploring the church's role in social and political transformation in Nigeria and beyond. It provides a foundation for further discussions on the church's responsibilities, its strategies for effecting change, and the delicate balance between its spiritual and civic duties in addressing pressing societal issues.

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