

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MASS DEMONSTRATIONS IN NIGERIA: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE STATE OF THE POLITY

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Abstract

Mass demonstrations which exploded during the twentieth century have reflected the key aspect of a state's political life as well as the bond between the leaders and their citizenry. These demonstrations in form of general strikes and rallies have always been employed by activists and union leaders to press home their demands and grievances. However, the advent of information technology via the use of social media platforms have added more colouration to the strategies adopted for mass actions. In view of the aforesaid, the study examines the relationship between social media and mass demonstrations using #OccupyNigeria and #EndSARS protests as case studies. It also explored the outcome of such relationship and how the relationship will further engender true democracy in the future. The study adopted secondary method of data collection through the use of newspapers, online journals, government publications and library materials. Findings revealed that the advent of information technology in Nigeria via the use of social media platforms such as: whatsapp, twitter, facebook, instagram etc. marked a paradigm shift in the political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of the country. This is because the outcome influenced policy reforms, fostered international recognition and solidarity, served as a voice to the voiceless and finally, bridged the gap between religious and ethnically diverse groups towards the actualization of a common goal. The study therefore concludes that with proper regulation of these various social media platforms, the attainment of a true democracy will be imminent.

Keywords: Social media, Mass demonstrations, #OccupyNigeria, #EndSARS, Nigeria, Democracy.

Introduction

Mass demonstrations which exploded during the twentieth century reflected the key aspect of a state's political life as well as the bond between the leaders and their citizenry. These leaders are bequeathed with the responsibility of making and carrying out binding policies for the benefit of their citizenry. Therefore, protests play an important role in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural life of any society. Historically, protests have often inspired positive social change and improved protection of human rights, and they continue to help define and protect civic space in all parts of the world. Mass demonstrations encourage the development of an engaged and informed citizenry and strengthen

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representative democracy by enabling direct participation in public affairs. These movements equally enable individuals and groups to express dissent and grievances, to share views and opinions, to expose flaws in governance and to publicly demand that the authorities and other powerful entities rectify problems and also be accountable for their actions. This is especially important in cases where the interests of the masses are otherwise poorly represented or marginalized (Human Right, Article 19, 2016).

However, democratic governments around the world often regard mass demonstrations as either an inconvenience to be controlled or a threat to be extinguished which is not meant to be so. In most of the developing world, citizens are often confronted with myriad threats and challenges on their wellbeing and survival. These include: poverty, high rate of unemployment, violence, deprivation of resources, lack of opportunity, marginalization and the denial and suppression of basic rights and freedom. While military dictatorships of the past are today replaced by democratic institutions, marginalized voices are still being suppressed; a viable system for these voices to express their grievances is often nonexistent or ineffective (Hari, 2014). Under these conditions, social protest has become an indispensable alternative for people to voice their opinions, visions of society, grievances and demand in strong terms, for change in their destiny (Shigetomi, 2009). In other words, mass demonstration is the last resort for the common man.

Although, the advent of globalization in the 21st century which ushered in the innovative use of ICT or digitalization in the modern world, especially in Africa, enabled the use of social media as channels of communication and expressions in political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of human dealings and engagements. Social media has also gained so much popularity amongst individuals due to the accessible means of self-expression and communication, especially on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube, and Instagram (Ajisafe, & Ojo, et al 2021). Social media in the same vein has assisted mass demonstrations to thrive through the dissemination of information to press home their demands which to a large extent has influenced government decisions and policy making processes. The usage of social media as an instrument for mass demonstrations has been an intense academic debate among intelligentsias. To this end, the precise objective of this work is to examine the impact of social media on mass demonstrations in Nigeria, using #OccupyNigeria# and #EndSARS# protests as case studies with a view to analysing the similarities between these protests.

Mass Demonstrations in Nigeria: A Historical Overview

The origin of mass demonstrations in Nigeria started during the pro-independence movement era. Extant literatures have it that these movements later metamorphose into early political parties and its leaders transformed in the new post independence political elites (Hari, 2014). Mochizuki (2009) affirms that the youth movements of the African colonies emerged and grew within the era of nationalism. According to him:

It started from the early resistance and protest movements directed against colonial authorities. These nationalists' thought and activities developed throughout the early twentieth century up to the independence era, they

focused on mobilizing racial awareness and national consciousness, especially in the cities. These youths as well as women were the most vibrant agents in colonial politics. In many West African countries, youth action led the independence movement. Such movements included students and intellectuals, both of which categories advocated social change and development.

During the 20th century, organized labour in Nigeria has historically been at the forefront of any protest against unfavourable government policies. Some of these groups include: Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) and Afro-beat superstar, Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti who through his music, protested against social ills, corruption and military oppression to keep agitations and resistance alive in people's conscience. Tar (2009) opines that the reactions of the Nigerian state to these protests, especially during the days of military dictatorship was characterized by violent repression and police brutality often leading to deaths of protesters, imprisonment of protest leaders, labour leaders and proscription of labour movements. In addition Aborishade (2012), a civil rights activist explain the strategies used by the Nigerian state in repression of social protest. He states:

Policing of protests by the state in Nigeria is done largely by relying on physical and non-physical violent control strategy. The former strategy involves using direct physical force on protesters, including the employment of poisonous tear-gas, harassment, arrest, detention, torture and all kinds of inhuman treatment. The non-physical strategy involves the use of draconian laws, rules and regulations which hinder the free exercise of universally recognized fundamental rights of assembly and action.

As much as 20th century mass demonstrations utilised the use of orthodox methods through rallies, strikes, boycotts, music etc., the #OccupyNigeria# and #EndSARS# protests had more publicity in the dawn of the 21st century due to the invention of social media platforms, thereby adding more beauty to the strategies adopted by mass demonstrators.

#OccupyNigeria# Protest: A Brief Background

#OccupyNigeria Protest which began on 2nd January, 2012, was a reaction to the removal of fuel subsidy by the federal government of Nigeria led by President Goodluck Jonathan. Mass demonstrations took place in 40 cities in the country with the adoption of non-violent means such as: rallies, strikes and obstruction of traffic, towards pressing home the movement's demands. The major reason for this outburst by Nigerians was the incessant massive corruption and lack of accountability in the petroleum sector which has made most Nigerians to perceive the subsidy as perhaps the only tangible benefits they received from the state hence the outrage and mass disapproval towards its removal (Adigun, 2018). In view of this, many saw the protest as an opportunity to participate in politics for the first time.

Even though mass demonstrations did not take place in all the cities in the country due to the existing security challenges bedeviling the country, non-orthodox means were utilised, i.e.

the adoption of #OccupyNigeria through social media platforms such as Twitter, Blackberry messenger, Facebook, and Whatsapp by online activists to align with the nationwide movement to emphasize its position on the exploitative and dehumanizing policies of the Federal government. The unprecedented use of these social media platforms did not only promote unity and equality among protesters from different ethnic groups but has created a forum for the voices of the downtrodden to be heard and has equally become a significant feature of mass demonstrations in recent times (Calhoun, 2013). The spill-over effect of this was witnessed during the #EndSARS protest of October, 2020.

The Nigerian youth #EndSARS# peaceful protests: An Overview

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad, popularly known as SARS, was established as a special police unit in 1992 to tackle incessant incidents of armed robberies and kidnappings for ransom by criminal elements operating across Nigeria. It was originally set up to operate independently in order to target criminal groups, the unit's success hinged on its anonymity and mode of operation. 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. However, over the years, 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 killings (Acled, 2021). This action led to a loud outcry in 2017 when Segun Awosanya and other activists started #EndSARS on Twitter demanding that the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) be scrapped. Although this online agitation didn't gather enough momentum until October 3, 2020 when footage of alleged SARS officers shot a young Nigerian at Wetland Hotel in Ughelli, Delta State and drove off in his car emerged on social media. The incident sparked fierce reactions within the country and outside the country, thus leading to nationwide protests on October 7, 2020 by young Nigerians in several cities against the modus operandi of SARS (Ochi & Mark, 2021).

The Use of Social Media for Mass Demonstrations: A Paradigm shift in the State of Polity

This section will expatiate how the use of social media platform have marked a paradigm shift in the state of polity by citing three instances.

Information Technology Era

Since the innovative emergence of ICT or digitalization in the modern world, especially in Africa, the use of social media as channels of communication has found expressions in political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of human dealings and engagements (Ajisafe, & Ojo, et al 2021). Prior to this time, the state has solely being in-charge of piloting the affairs of its citizenry and matters relating to the state are solved within the confines of the state. However, the advent of information technology which brought about deep interconnectedness among people, led to the demise of a state's territorial integrity, and as such made what originally would have been a national issue, an international affair. This interconnectedness was facilitated through the use of social media platforms such as:

Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube, Telegram, Tik-tok and Instagram. The aforesaid media platforms made mass agitations such as the #OccupyNigeria and #Endsars protests in Nigeria in recent time a historic one due to their outcomes despite claiming lives and properties.

Increased Awareness and International Solidarity

Furthermore, through the usage of social media platforms, mass demonstrations in Nigeria in recent times has witnessed a new turn in the existence of seemingly charismatic leadership in the form of celebrity musicians with international reputations. Unlike in the 20th century when few celebrities like Fela Kuti through his music exposes the woes of the government. Protests in recent times have gained global support and has turned to become the biggest movement for a future democratic Nigeria. For instance, the #EndSARS protest was made possible after celebrities in the country such as: Folarin Falana also known as Falz, DJ Switch, Seun Kuti, Burna Boy, Runtown, Wizkid, Davido, Don Jazzy, Psquare, Adekunle Gold, Simi, olamide, Tiwa Savage, Ycee, Nigerian comedian, Mr. Macaroni, TV host, Toke Makinwa and a host of others decided to join the protest against police brutality, corruption among other things. The spill-over effect of the move by Nigerian celebrities attracted solidarity from international celebrities like John Boyega, Beyonce Knowles, Rihanna, Trey Songz, Big Sean, Chance the Rapper, Estelle, Nasty C and many more who lend their voices to the raging protest via their social media handle (Okanlawon, 2020).

Due to the significant role of social media, The United Nations, on October 21, 2020 responded to the cold blooded killing of innocent lives of Nigerian youth protesters by Nigerian Police and Army on October 20, 2020. The U.N. Secretary-General, Anthony Guterres called for the instant end to the police brutality and the unjust killing of Nigerian youths who are tired of the harassment and were protesting peacefully within their rights. The statement was echoed by the U.S. elect president, Joe Biden, who gave a speech that the Nigerian president and Nigerian Army should end the brutality and work towards a more inclusive country that is sustainable for its citizens (Raimi, & Okoyen, 2021). The profound act of using online platforms for social movement, social mobilization, agitation for good governance, and respect for human rights in Africa, marked a paradigm shift in what was obtainable in the country apriori.

Probes, Inquiries and Policy Reforms

Consequently, studies have shown that social media can function as a transformative agency for productive policymaking processes and good governance as well as an agency for socio-economic and political development (Ajisafe, & Ojo, et al 2021). Therefore, mass demonstrations in recent times have led to immediate response from the government through policy reforms.

#OccupyNigeria# Policy Reforms

The #OccupyNigeria protest of 2012, Although was an eight-day protest unlike its counter #EndSARS which lasted for two weeks, received immediate responses to their demands. On June 28, 2012 the minister of petroleum resources, Mrs Diezani Alison-Madueke made a

major policy announcement when she presented the report of a technical committee of the ministry to the President at the State House which is now known as the Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB) with the objective of promoting “transparency, simplicity and openness” in the oil industry (PIB, 2012: 14). With the introduction of the bill, many experts opined that it will bring about a lasting solution to the challenges of corruption in the sector (Channels Television, 2021). In addition, the protesters equally agitated for a probe into the fuel subsidy scheme which attracted the attention of the Nigeria House of Representatives led by Aminu Tambuwal. The House of Representatives launched a full probe by setting up an investigative panel to look into the allegations of fraudulent practices in the subsidy scheme and prosecution of individuals found culpable (Adigun, 2018). According to Comrade Achike Chude, Vice Chairman, Joint Action Front (JAF) noted that one of the importances of the protest was its ability to compel the Nigerian government to respond positively (Nwachukwu, 2012).

The #EndSARS# Policy Reforms

The #EndSARS protest on the other hand received also an immediate response like its counterpart. According to Premium Times, (November 9, 2020) , the government tasked all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) with setting up panels of inquiry into public complaints relating to police brutality and harassment. Although before then, the announcement on 11 October 2020 that the police unit had been again disbanded was viewed with skepticism because the government has disbanded the Special Anti-Robbery Squad multiple times within the last five years; first in 2014, then in 2015, and again in 2017 and also the establishment of the yet to be deployed Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) squad in place of the disbanded SARS two days later also demonstrated to supporters the government’s lack of political will to address unlawful imprisonment, extortion, and extrajudicial killings (Vanguard, 13 October 2020). During the white paper Press release by the Lagos government on November 30, 2021, 11 out of the 32 recommendations made by the panel were accepted; six others were also accepted but subjected to modifications, while one was rejected outrightly. The document further stated that the remaining 14 recommendations were not within the purview of the state government and such was considered. Some of the recommendations made by the Panel include:

- Disciplinary actions on the officers who refused to honour the summons of the panel in order to frustrate the investigation.
- Disciplinary actions on all officers and men of the Nigerian Army that were deployed to the Lekki Toll Gate on October 20, 2020.
- The release of all protesters arrested during the #EndSARS protest and prosecution of any offender.
- The fulfillment of the commitment made by the government to foot the bills of victims of #EndSARS protesters hospitalized etc. (Channels, November 30, 2021).

Based on the foregoing, it is therefore apt to state that social media indeed has led to a drastic paradigm shift in the relations and communication engagement between the governments and her citizenry. As such, the usage of the internet and social media platforms have become an

integral part of private and public governance in recent times. As Ojedokun and Ogunleye (2021) noted: "social media continues to be useful in mobilizing and drawing citizens to focus on issues that are perceived as important and in priming public opinion among many Africans to get engaged in the political process of governance and democratization".

Conclusion

The forgoing study expatiated the significance of social media to mass demonstrations in the 21st century Nigeria. Prior to the advent of information technology, orthodox means such as: rallies, strikes, boycotts etc. have always been the hallmark of mass agitations in the country. But the dawn of information technology via the help of social media platforms such as: twitter, whatsapp, instagram, youtube, telegram, facebook and tik-tok in Nigeria have witnessed a whole new turn in social protests and has also marked a paradigm shift in the state of polity in terms of gaining international recognition and solidarity, bringing together culturally diverse groups who were originally at logger heads due to ethno-religious tension that usually plague the framing of Nigeria's domestic security and political issues for the actualization of a common goal. It is also note worthy that the 21st century mass demonstrations in Nigeria have created a room for the downtrodden to air their views and grievances. Finally, it has marked the rebirth of youths with vision and innovation towards the better of the country. However, proper regulations of these platforms need to be put in place for the attainment of a true democracy in the future.

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