The Impact Of Social Media On The Sociopolitical Orientation And Consciousness Of Nigerians: An Appraisal Of The #Endsars Protests In Nigeria.

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Abstract: The basic thrust of all public protests is to create a means for people to object to, or complain in a public way about a repulsive situation, condition, or something they perceive as wrong, with a view of aggregating and building support to correct it. Strictly speaking, the means of most public protests involve the occupation of public spaces, rallies, marches, petitions, and etcetera. In contemporary times however, the internet has opened new means of public protests, particularly, via various social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, among others. Sequel to the above, this work therefore examines the impact of social media on the socio-political orientation cum consciousness of Nigerians during the #EndSars protest. Communication theory was adopted as the theoretical framework while documentary data was generated and analyzed using content analysis. This paper observed that the social media impacted on the sociopolitical consciousness of the people by providing opportunity for reorientation of attitudes, beliefs, sentiments, and values of the people towards their socio-cultural environment, thus, leading for greater awareness and mass involvement in processes that can midwife desired change. Conversely, the utilization of social media during the course of the #EndSARS protests, has advertised the porousness of such platforms, and has brought the question of its regulation to the fore. This is primarily consequent upon its tendency to encourage instant reports of fake news, panic messages, and unreliable or unconfirmed information and updates. The study suggests measures like equipping relevant agencies and journalists with technical capabilities in cyber security and cyber intelligence in regulating the shortfalls of Social Media.

Keywords: Social Media, Protest, Sociopolitical Orientation

I. Introduction

Basically, protests are often aimed at stopping or reforming laws or public polices, and are therefore usually directed at the government. It is more or less a subset of the entire gamut of civil unrest; however, while a public protest is within the confines of the law in Nigeria- as guaranteed in sections 39 and 40 of the CFRN, 1999 (as amended), and as seen in the case of Hadiza Bala Usman v. Commissioner of Police; and as also by extension, guaranteed in international laws such as Article 21 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Article 11 of the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights; other civil unrest such as riots are unlawful, and in fact, criminal. This is as provided in sections 69 and 71 of the Criminal Code in Nigeria.

To be sure, Nigeria has witnessed plethora of civil unrest springing across several regimes and administrations, some of which are 'the April 1978 Ali Must Go Protests', 'the May 1989 SAP Riots', 'the July 1998 Protests after the death of MKO Abiola', 'the Occupy Nigeria Protest of January 2012', and of recent, 'the October 2020 ENDSARS Protests'- which is herein being appraised.

II. Theoretical Framework

In analyzing this study, the Communication theory was adopted consequent upon its relevance to the subject matter, specifically in relation to the impact information circulation played in shaping the people's consciousness and sociopolitical orientations during the #EndSARS protest. According to Emekwue : 2002, the theory is also known as cybernetics(Science of Communication), and is primarily centered on information circulation and the effects in a political system.

To be sure, the theory was popularized by Nobert Wiener and Karl W. Deutsch in 1948 and 1966 respectively; laying the theoretical foundations for the multidisciplinary application of cybernetics in studying the flow of information in systems with feedback loops, be they biological, mechanical, cognitive, or social.

Along this line, Wiener, 1948 contends that information sent and responded to (feedback); and the level of functionality of the mediums for such information circulation, impact largely on the quality of the system, thereby either promoting or denigrating the system's maintenance. Similarly, Emekwue : 2002 while lending credence to Deutsch, 1966, observes that the quality of feedback as necessitated by the communication mechanisms, shapes the effectiveness of the system in pursuing its goals and maintaining itself to receive and absorb shocks and strains, and thence accommodate changes and variations affecting values, such as social orientations and political decisions.

In the line with the forgoing, the relevance of the communication theory to this study is hinged on its explication of the role cybernetics (technological and internet- oriented platform such as the social media), played in serving as a medium of steady communication of information to the people which ultimately shaped their consciousness and sociopolitical orientation, spurring them to action. The #EndSARS protests therefore became a feedback from the people in reaction to the plethora of information in relation to police brutality being disseminated through the social media. This ultimately led to change in certain policies in general, and the disbandment of the Special Anti Robbery Squad (SARS), in particular.

III.   Method of Data Collection/ Analysis

This study employed documentary method of data collection. Contents of documentary materials related to the subject matter such as newspapers, published articles and so on were examined.

In addition, this work utilized content analysis as the method of data analysis. This method helped in making replicable and valid inferences by interpreting textual materials and systematically evaluating them. The meaning were extracted and based on logical chain of evidence, inferences were drawn upon and conclusion made.

IV.   Summary Account of the #End SARS Protest

In 1992, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police was formed as a dedicated Police unit to combat armed robbery and other serious crimes. The squad functioned under different conditions from the regular police, wore plain clothes, carried specialist weapons, operated mostly covertly in unmarked vehicles and were also used as a rapid response team (Ruppei & Arowobusoye, 2020). However, SARS has over the years metamorphosed into a force associated with harassment of innocent citizens, extortion at gunpoint, and extrajudicial killings of suspects (Ojewale, 2020).

Complaints about SARS are not new. People have been speaking out online since 2017 about the unit, and there have been several, unsuccessful attempts by the government to scrap it, but the catalyst for the recent nationwide protests came in early October when a video that showed a SARS officer shooting a young motorist in Ughelli, in Delta state, then pushing his body out of the car and driving off with the dead man's Lexus SUV. Within days, crowds of young people gathered in Nigerian cities to demand the abolition of SARS. It sparked the use of the #EndSARS hashtag and the youths decided to hold an offline march to air their grievances.

The protesters' demands at the beginning were straightforward: The federal government should abolish SARS, provide justice to victims of police brutality, and reform the police. This year's protests follow on previous activism and government announcements that SARS would be demobilized in 2014, then again 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2019 yet, SARS officers continued to act with impunity, committing armed robberies, rapes, other acts of torture and extrajudicial killings like the one in Delta State (Abosede, 2020).

Amnesty International documented 82 cases of police brutality in Nigeria between 2017 and 2020. In a damning report published in June 2020 the human rights organization said people in SARS custody were "subjected to a variety of methods of torture including hanging, mock execution, beating, punching and kicking, burning with cigarettes, water boarding, near-asphyxiation with plastic bags, forcing detainees to assume stressful bodily positions and sexual violence."(Busan, 2020).

Protesters faced teargas, water cannons, and live ammunition during their peaceful marches. However, participants erected tents and DJ booths at various sites across the country. Some camped overnight outside the Lagos State Assembly, while others chanted 'Solidarity forever,' sang the national anthem repeatedly and held multi-faith prayer sessions as well as a "festival of lights," to honor the dead, held at the now infamous Lekki toll gate.

The End SARS protests began with a focus on police brutality, but have extended to other dimensions of corruption, human rights violations and underdevelopment in Nigeria. The Worsening economic conditions and bleak projections for the future have only fanned the flames. The country has barely recovered from the economic recession that started in 2016, and the fall in global oil demand (and compounded by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic) sparked more economic crisis, institutionalized corruption, and state profligacy have drawn more Nigerians into poverty.

The foregoing coincided with eight months of closure of educational institutions due to strikes held by university lecturers, leaving many young people alienated and angry. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, as of the second quarter of 2020, the unemployment rate in Nigeria stood at a staggering 27.1 percent and the underemployment rate at 28.6 percent. Of the 21.7 million unemployed, young people (aged 15 to 34) account for a whopping 34.9 percent. They also account for 28.2 percent of the 22.9 million underemployed Nigerians. Youth were already incensed by reports of high-level elites' corruption, galloping inflation, and

unprecedented levels of unemployment, and now the government has announced increases in the price of fuel and an electricity tariff (Ojewale, 2020).

The End SARS protests sought to make Nigerian citizenship mean something tangible and worthwhile for young people. It attracted massive global support with solidarity protests in UK, US, Germany, and other parts of the world. Celebrities such as Kanye West, John Boyega and Rihanna among a host of others gave their support, shining a global spotlight on the #EndSARS hashtag. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey tweeted about the movement, while his platform gave verified blue tick status to some who were prominent in it and created an #EndSARS emoji symbol.

In addition, the movement provided free medical assistance for those injured in the protests and rapid response volunteer legal assistance to help free those arrested, while also doing some CSR along the way, including raising money to buy prosthetic limbs for two amputees who joined the marches on crutches. There was no discernible leadership in the decentralized structure of the movement and the young people were quick to reject any person who tried to insert themselves as a leader because they feared being compromised.

On October 11th, the government disbanded SARS and set up a new team, purportedly not including former SARS officers, which is called the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), currently in training. It is questionable if this new arrangement will result in a positive change, as a restructuring and reorientation of the policing system towards an improved security sector and governance reform is needed.

On Tuesday, October 20, men in army uniforms and other police units opened fire with live ammunition and killed protesters at the Lekki Toll gate in Lagos ostensibly to enforce a 24-hour curfew imposed by the state governor earlier that day. It is pertinent that those responsible for the egregious human rights abuses, particularly the killings of protesters, are held accountable by the government (Ruppei & Arowobusoye, 2020). Figures from Amnesty say that at least 12 people died.

Following days of silence, President Buhari addressed the nation on Thursday but failed to address Tuesday's military attack on peaceful protesters. The speech was poorly received and many said it failed to show empathy or any accountability for the deaths of Nigerians.

V.   The Role of Social Media in the Mobilization, Coordination, and Sustenance of the #End SARS Protests.

Strictly speaking, the means of most public protests involve the occupation of public spaces, rallies, marches, petitions, and etcetera. In contemporary times however, the internet has opened new means of public protests, particularly, via various social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and suchlike. This development is accompanied with certain attendant impacts on the sociopolitical orientation of Nigerians. Accordingly, it created a milieu for the manifestation of sociopolitical consciousness, particularly among the young populace; as it facilitated the dissemination of information in relation to the protest in real time.

Connections can be drawn between the movement for Black lives in the United States and the End SARS protests in Nigeria — both were triggered by the impunity of police violence upon marginalized communities; both movements featured dramatic outpourings of young people who had been written off by established politicians as disaffected or lazy; both movements made savvy use of social media.

The #EndSARS protest morphed organically as young people shared documented, particularly graphic images of alleged atrocities of SARS officials on social media platforms. The outcry become more vociferous from online hash tags into street protests in what feels like a tipping point for a generation of young Nigerians. The young people utilized social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp to rally, mobilize, organize, and sustain waves of protests to locations across the country. For instance, when dozens of people converge at a location to host their own protests, they share their location on Twitter asking for "reinforcements"—a move that has seen crowds go from a few dozens to hundreds within hours in some places.

Alternatively, strategic locations are pre-identified online with people then encouraged to come out and protest. In one such cases, thousands of young people responded to calls to come out before 6am on Oct. 12 to shut down Lekki toll gate—a key transit point between Lekki, an upmarket Lagos neighborhood, and the city's main business district. The move resulted in miles-long lines of traffic jams and severe disruptions to activity in the city. It also proved effective as it forced the Lagos state governor to show up and address the protesters in person a few hours later (kazeem, 2020).

The Nigerian youths made concerted effort in pushing the #EndSARS hash tag tweets to enable the movement gain International recognition. These revelations provoked public protests throughout the major cities, followed by vociferous outrage on social

media channels. In fact, according to (Kazeem, 2020), about 28 million tweets bearing the ENDSARS hash tag were accumulated on Twitter alone. This development as occasioned through the social media, instantly launched the happenings thereof to the international community, and consequently, Nigerians in diaspora and other sympathizers engaged in solidarity protests in major cities of the world, for example, the premier league footballers in England and American hip hop stars, International political figures like Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, lent their voices in condemning the Federal Government violent crackdown of protesters while foreign media organizations such as BBC, CNN, Al jazeera, and New York Times covered the social protest event.

VI.   The Impact of Social Media on the Sociopolitical Orientation and Consciousness of Nigerians at the Course of the #EndSARS Protests

Basically, the sociopolitical orientation and consciousness of the people reinforce the level of political mobilization and participatory democracy in a state. Accordingly, (Cox et al, 1998), observes that such orientation and the attendant mobilization underscore "the process by which a passive collection of individuals in a society is transformed into active group in the pursuit of common goals or coerced into political participation". Such orientation and mobilization of people through the instrumentality of the media has been argued to carry with it the power to promote individual participation, and the more intense, more effective and more convincing it is; the more it gets people to participate in the process by virtue of raising more consciousness, (Goldstein & Ridout, 2002). The participation comes in various strata, and involves the input-output mechanisms typical of a political system, wherein the people through such participatory mechanism and feedbacks, react to government policies, actions and inactions. The social media has fueled these workings by serving as a platform for regular information that creates the needed consciousness and participation.

To be sure, access to information is sine quo non in a democracy because knowledgeable people who are well informed are those whose consciousness and sociopolitical orientations are shaped through such information. From the events of the #EndSARS protests, clearly the social media readily plays a vital role in this regard. Specifically, it exposed people, particularly the young populace to social and political information. Just as in rhyme with (Gil De Zunga, Molyneux & Zheng, 2014), such platforms provide a tool for participation, while at the same time providing opportunity for interaction between the political elite and the people, and making the political system seem more accessible to the citizens, (Odunlami, 2014).

Most information in relation to the police brutality in Nigeria and the repulsive activities of the Special Anti-robbery Squad (SARS) were revealed through the social media. In fact, as stated earlier, the protest is traceable to the Twitter campaigns of 2017 and October 2020 against the police brutality. The social media thence provided the channels for the publicity of the protests, and the mobilisation of more participation. This confirms the findings of various studies (Kalyango & Adu-Kumi 2020, Bae 2014, Ogochukwu 2014, and etcetera) that overtime social and political participation can stem from steady and undiluted access to sociopolitical information. Accordingly, the more exposed the people are to news and information about public policies, activities of government and its agencies, the more they will participate thereof, (Bae, 2014).

Along this line, the major attribute of social media is the choice which it offers individuals to access the social and political information they like, bypassing the gatekeeper role of traditional media, (Policy and Legal Advocacy Center, 2011). Supporting this observation, (Bae, 2014) noted that giving the high level of penetration of sociopolitical information on social media, and the limited control over the flow of information on it, young people can easily encounter both socially and politically engaging information online. As evident throughout the #EndDSARS protests, such information and ready online channels for publicity, in turn holds the potential of impacting on the sociopolitical consciousness of the people by opportunity for reorientation of attitudes, beliefs, sentiments, and values of the people towards their socio-cultural environment, thus, leading for greater awareness and mass involvement in processes that can midwife desired change.

In line with the foregoing, and as early as 2001, (Barkar 2001) drew attention to how the internet was used by individuals, institutions, and nations alike to represent their culture and to promote national identity. In fact, he argued that the internet holds the potentials of reinforcing nationalistic feelings and more mass participation. This observation has been brought to limelight through the preponderance of social media platforms in contemporary times. To be sure, sequel to the recent #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, it is evident that the social media has both direct and positive impact as it appears not to have only reinforced nationalistic feelings among Nigerians, but has also been instumental in tilting the political culture of Nigerians from parochial and subject to participant orientation, as far more of the young populace became involved in the protestation.

In other words, through the instrumentality of social media platforms, notably Twitter and Facebook, Nigerians were armed with ample awareness, and real time evidence or reports of incidences of police brutality across the country; and the aggregation and building of support to correct it were visibly seen across the country, thus, spurring the hitherto seeming inactive Nigerians to

action. People thence moved from the level of little or no awareness of the system, to the level of active participation in the processes that may culminate the desired result. Essentially, as (Chikendu, 2002), observed in relation to participant culture, such orientation avails the people the full grasp of the in-put and out-put structures of their sociopolitical environment as a whole. This was evident at the course of the #EndSARS protests, as people took activist role for themselves by protesting against police brutality. Clearly, this became achievable consequent upon the peculiarity of social media outlets which differ radically from traditional or orthodox media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasting, and suchlike.

VII. The Implication of the use of Unverifiable Information on Social Media during the #EndSARS Protests

Information and communication technology has changed rapidly over the past 20 years with a key development being the emergence of social media. It has become powerful tool for communicating rapidly and without intermediary gatekeepers, like editors (**Adepetun, 2020).**

On September 2020, a statistical report on why People share Information on Social Media was published by Simplilearn. They posit that 84% people share information to support a cause or issues they feel strongly about ; 94% share to pass valuable information and 49% of these respondents influence action about products by sharing; 68% use social sharing to build image and demonstrate who they are and what they stand for; 78% share to interact, grow, get a sense of fulfillment, nurture relationships and stay in touch with others, and 69% share to participate and feel involved in things happening in the whole world (Simplilearn, 2020).

The method of obtaining information from social media comes with risks as the medium often struggles to mitigate fake news. For example, former Zamfara Senator, Kabiru Marafa opined that the #EndSARS protest is driven by Southerners looking to discredit Buhari rather than the legitimate grievances of the youth (Iroanusi, 2020). People have been fed with information and mis-informed via the online space and atimes, without proper checks and balances, lots of people have taken decisions rather rashly, which they later regretted. Checks showed that properties including government establishments, prisons, broadcast stations, newspaper house, police stations, hospitals, bus stations and buses, banks, to mention just a few were severely damaged during the #EndSARS crises. Shopping malls, grocery stores, ATMs were looted to the peak by hoodlums wielding dangerous weapons. These attacks have put thousands of people into serious problems, especially debts, and scars, which they will live with for the rest of their lives.

Indeed, the events of October, 2020 in Nigeria with the popular hashtag #EndSARS have influenced opinions, and subsequently threw up both substantiated and unsubstantiated information in the online space. The tagging of shooting of protesters in Lagos at the Lekki toll gate as "Lekki Massacre" triggered the huge unrest, and subsequently led to wanton destruction of lives and properties in retaliation by hoodlums, who hijacked the entire process for their gains. There were massive destruction of lives, properties, and investments belonging to State government. Also, those perceived to be owned by some certain political figures in the state were not spared, they were brought down to ashes. There were trouble spots in virtually all the states of the federation, which the social media and menace of fake news contributed significantly to their destructions as a result of mis-information.

The pandemonium has again stressed the need on the regulation and sensitization of the usefulness of Social media. Prior to now, there have been moves on the part of the Federal Government to regulate the social media space, targeted at curbing the spread of fake news. The Minister of Information, Alhaji Lai Mohammed last year, 2019 stated the government's discomfort with the use of social media in the country, with a consequent proviso that the sector must be sanitized.

VIII. Recommended Measures that can be considered to Regulate the Ostensible Pitfalls of Social media

Conversely, the utilization of social media during the course of the #EndSARS protests, has advertised the porousness of such platforms, and has brought the question of its regulation to the fore. This is primarily consequent upon its tendency to encourage instant reports of fake news, panic messages, and unreliable or unconfirmed information and updates. Little wonder, (Kalayango, 2011), observed that there are attempts by dictatorial regimes to control the social media space with legal and extralegal measures. He opined that they fear the dawn of a new social media environment where citizens can mobilize themselves to overthrow governments. Such fears have undoubtedly come to limelight in Nigeria, as the dismantling of the Special Anti-robbery Squad- a government security agency within the Police Force was borne out of the sociopolitical consciousness and mobilizations occasioned through the social media, a clear demonstration of such possibility.

The call for the regulation of social media has undoubtedly been met with square refusal from a vast majority of Nigerians, as it negates certain fundamental rights that are already guaranteed, particularly in section 39 of the CFRN, 1999 (as amended), which provides for both freedom of expression and the entitlement to mediums of information dissemination, without interference.

Interestingly, section 1, subsection 3 of the same constitution provides that if any law is inconsistent with the provisions of the constitution, the constitution shall prevail, and that other law shall, to the extent of the inconsistency, be void. Little wonder the Anti-social Media Bill introduced at the Nigerian Senate on 5th November, 2019, was botched.

Nevertheless, Uwaje, a former President of the Institute of Software Practitioners of Nigeria (ISPON), speaking to The Gardian, described the social media as organized crisis. According to him, it is estimated 3.43 billion people will be using social media networks by 2023, a figure representing 44 per cent of the estimated 7.79 billion global population. He said the core challenging issues of social media is about Human Attitude. He avers that is why it has become imperative to involve Sociologists in the mainstream of re-imagining the structure and content administration on platforms. For him, Sociologists should be involved in the analytic roadmap for repositioning the New Media to deliver maximum benefit to society (Adepetun, 2020).

Also, according to the Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Jidaw Systems, Jide Awe, there is need to prioritize and embark on practical digital literacy for all. In order to seize opportunities and overcome such challenges of the digital age, citizens must be equipped with digital education and 21st century transferable skills. In addition to the use of common digital tools and applications, communications, team work, creativity and most especially critical thinking skills. Cyber security and technology ethics must be part of such digital literacy. All these non tech skills are particularly important to ensure social media and technology is utilized and developed in a secure and responsible manner (Adepetun, 2020).

Relevant government agencies must themselves get up to speed in terms of social media savviness to influence in ways that are sincere, honest, empathetic and credible. They must facilitate the transparent and free flow of information to promote public interest on social media and counteract harmful practices and undue and unfounded speculation. And these relevant agencies will need to be equipped with technical capabilities in cyber security and cyber intelligence.

More so, promote and generate interest in ethical and responsible social media and technology practices, for example, encourage ethical online content creation and the ethics of social media in programmes for journalists. Appropriate action should be taken against ethical violators and mischief makers. Government should get proactive with the governance of social media by engaging with relevant stakeholders in the technology community, civil society and youth groups as well as the social media platforms to dialogue and agree on common and innovative approaches as well as on data protection and privacy issues.

IX. Conclusion

It has been said that information is power. Without a means of distributing information, people cannot harness the power. One positive impact of social media is in the distribution of information in today's world. Platforms such as Face book, LinkedIn, Twitter and others have made it possible to access information at the click of a button.

Along these lines of thought, it is not extraneous to admit the proneness of social media to fallacious information, however, the same can equally be seen in traditional media; moreover, the Cybercrime Act of 2015, and laws against libel and slander as contained in sections 373 and 375 of the Criminal Code already provide a viable and reasonable option for redress in the face of any fallaciousness of information from the social media. To be sure, the impact of social media on the sociopolitical orientation and awareness of Nigerians appears to outweigh the inadequacies thereof.

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