

# ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS

---



## ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS

Dr. Ibraheem Mikail Abiola

Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin, Nigeria

### ABSTRACT

*The 2020 EndSARS protest in Nigeria represents one of the most significant youth-led social movements in contemporary Nigerian history. Triggered by persistent human rights abuses by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigeria Police Force, the protest rapidly evolved into a nationwide and global campaign demanding police reform, accountability, and good governance. This study examines the historical roots of police brutality in Nigeria, the socio-economic consequences of the EndSARS protest, and its influence on youth migration to foreign countries. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary sources, including academic journals, newspaper reports, and human rights publications, the study adopts structural-functional theory to analyze state failure and institutional dysfunction. Findings reveal that the protest exposed deep structural weaknesses within Nigeria's political and economic systems, worsened economic instability, and significantly intensified youth migration aspirations. The paper concludes that without meaningful police reform, youth empowerment, and economic restructuring, Nigeria risks continued brain drain and socio-political instability.*

**Keywords:** EndSARS, Police Brutality, Youth Migration, Nigeria, Protest, Governance

### INTRODUCTION

Social activism has long been embedded in Nigeria's political evolution. From early nationalist agitations against colonial domination to post-independence mobilizations against military dictatorship, corruption, and economic hardship, Nigerians have repeatedly deployed protest as a mechanism for demanding accountability and reform. During the colonial era, newspapers such as *Iwe Irohin* (1859–1867) helped cultivate political consciousness and resistance to injustice. In the post-colonial period, activism expanded into labour strikes, pro-democracy campaigns, and mass demonstrations most notably during the anti-military struggles of the 1990s and the fuel subsidy protests of January 2012. These episodes reflect a persistent tradition of civic engagement in Nigeria's political landscape.

The #EndSARS protest of October 2020 emerged within this broader historical continuum but assumed unprecedented dimensions in scale, organization, and global visibility. The movement was primarily youth-driven and targeted the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a tactical unit of the Nigeria Police Force established in 1992 to combat armed robbery and violent crime. Over

## **ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS**

---

time, however, SARS became widely accused of extrajudicial killings, torture, unlawful detention, profiling of young people especially those perceived as affluent or technologically savvy and extortion (Amnesty International, 2018). Rather than serving as a protective institution, the unit increasingly symbolized state repression and impunity.

The immediate trigger of the protest was a viral video circulated on social media on October 3, 2020, allegedly showing SARS operatives fatally shooting a young man in Ughelli, Delta State, and driving away in his vehicle. Public outrage spread rapidly across digital platforms, particularly Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, transforming an online hashtag into a coordinated national movement. Within days, demonstrations erupted across major urban centers including Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Ibadan, Enugu, and Kano. What began as peaceful assemblies demanding the dissolution of SARS soon evolved into broader calls for systemic reform, good governance, and respect for human rights?

The protests gained further international attention following the events of October 20, 2020, at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos: where, security forces allegedly opened fire on peaceful demonstrators. The incident intensified global scrutiny and amplified diaspora solidarity movements in cities such as London, Toronto, and New York. The symbolic significance of the Lekki episode transformed #EndSARS from a domestic protest into a defining moment in Nigeria's contemporary democratic history.

Beyond the immediate demand for police reform, the protest exposed deeper structural challenges confronting the Nigerian state. Youth unemployment, underemployment, rising inflation, widening inequality, and declining purchasing power had already generated widespread frustration. The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further strained livelihoods, particularly within Nigeria's large informal sector. In this context, the protest functioned not merely as opposition to police brutality but as an expression of accumulated socio-economic grievances.

One of the most consequential post-protest developments has been the intensification of youth migration aspirations, popularly described as the "Japa" phenomenon—a colloquial term denoting the desire to emigrate in search of security, economic opportunity, and institutional stability. For many young Nigerians, the protest reinforced perceptions of systemic dysfunction, weak accountability structures, and limited prospects for meaningful reform. Consequently, migration increasingly emerged as a perceived alternative pathway to personal safety and socio-economic advancement.

This study situates the #EndSARS protest within Nigeria's historical trajectory of activism and interrogates its broader structural implications. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What structural political and institutional factors precipitated the #EndSARS protest?
2. What were the short- and medium-term economic implications of the protest?
3. In what ways did the protest influence youth migration aspirations and patterns in Nigeria?

# **ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS**

---

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to scholarly discourse on protest movements, state legitimacy, and migration dynamics in post-colonial African societies. It argues that the #EndSARS protest represents not only a confrontation with police brutality but also a critical juncture revealing deeper tensions between Nigerian youths and the state tensions with significant implications for governance, economic stability, and demographic transformation.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Police Brutality and State Formation in Nigeria**

The structure and operational philosophy of policing in Nigeria have been widely examined within the broader framework of colonial state formation. Scholars argue that the origins of the Nigerian police system lie in colonial coercive apparatuses primarily designed to protect imperial interests rather than ensure citizen welfare. This historical foundation, according to Nnamani (2011), created a centralized and militarized policing culture that prioritized regime security over community service. The colonial constabulary model emphasized control, surveillance, and suppression of dissent traits that, many argue, persisted into the post-colonial era.

Agbibo (2015) further conceptualizes everyday policing in Nigeria as embedded in systemic corruption, patronage networks, and coercive extraction. He contends that policing practices often operate as informal revenue-generating mechanisms for officers, leading to extortion, bribery, and arbitrary arrests. Within this context, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigeria Police Force, became emblematic of institutionalized impunity. Established to combat violent crimes, SARS increasingly faced allegations of torture, enforced disappearances, profiling of young citizens particularly those perceived as affluent or technologically inclined and extrajudicial executions.

Human rights organizations, notably Amnesty International (2018, 2020), documented patterns of abuse including prolonged detention without trial, denial of access to legal representation, and physical torture aimed at extracting confessions. These findings point to structural weaknesses in oversight mechanisms, judicial accountability, and internal disciplinary procedures. The literature consistently emphasizes that police brutality in Nigeria is not episodic but systemic, rooted in institutional design, weak governance structures, and entrenched impunity.

Furthermore, theoretical discussions grounded in post-colonial state theory suggest that the Nigerian state exhibits characteristics of what scholars term a “weak institutional state” where formal democratic institutions coexist with informal power networks and limited enforcement of rule of law. In such contexts, security agencies often function with minimal civilian oversight, reinforcing cycles of distrust between the state and its citizens.

### **2.2 Protest and Economic Disruption**

Scholarly literature on protest movements highlights their dual character: while protests can advance democratic accountability and institutional reform, they may also generate short-term economic instability. The political economy of protest suggests that large-scale demonstrations

## **ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS**

---

can disrupt commercial activities, supply chains, and investor confidence, especially in developing economies with fragile infrastructures.

The #EndSARS protest unfolded during a period of economic vulnerability. Nigeria was emerging from a recession triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, declining oil prices, and global trade disruptions. As Africa's largest economy by GDP, Nigeria's economic stability is closely tied to oil exports, foreign direct investment, and informal sector productivity. The simultaneous occurrence of public health restrictions and mass protests compounded economic strain.

According to the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2020), Nigeria reportedly incurred losses estimated at approximately ₦800 billion during the protest period. Economic disruptions included road blockages, closure of financial institutions, reduced port activities, and suspension of retail and manufacturing operations. Critical infrastructure in Lagos the country's commercial hub was particularly affected. The vandalism and destruction of properties, including the Lekki Toll Gate, police stations, shopping malls, and warehouses, amplified fiscal losses and heightened investor uncertainty.

Beyond direct financial costs, scholars note the broader macroeconomic implications of social unrest. Protests may lead to increased insurance premiums, reduced foreign investor confidence, currency volatility, and slower post-recession recovery. In fragile economies, these effects disproportionately impact youth employment, given that young people dominate sectors such as technology startups, creative industries, retail trade, and informal entrepreneurship.

However, some scholars caution against viewing protests solely through an economic loss framework. Democratic theory argues that civil resistance can yield long-term institutional reforms that strengthen governance and economic resilience. Thus, the economic consequences of #EndSARS must be analyzed within a broader temporal lens that balances short-term disruption with potential long-term democratic gains.

### **2.3 Youth Migration and Brain Drain**

Migration scholarship provides important insights into the relationship between political instability and population mobility. Push-pull theory, as articulated by Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2014), posits that individuals migrate due to adverse conditions in their home countries (push factors) and perceived opportunities abroad (pull factors). Economic insecurity, unemployment, political repression, and human rights violations are among the most significant push factors identified in migration studies.

Nigeria has historically experienced substantial emigration flows, particularly among skilled professionals in healthcare, academia, and information technology. Prior to 2020, high youth unemployment rates, underemployment, and declining purchasing power had already fueled migration aspirations. The #EndSARS protest intensified these trends by reinforcing perceptions of state fragility, insecurity, and limited institutional accountability.

The protest functioned as both a political awakening and a psychological rupture. For many young Nigerians, the events of October 2020 symbolized a breakdown of trust between citizens and the

## **ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS**

---

state. The widely circulated narratives of police violence and alleged repression strengthened beliefs that domestic reform may be slow or uncertain. Consequently, migration increasingly appeared as an alternative strategy for personal security, economic mobility, and institutional stability.

The phenomenon popularly referred to as “Japa” reflects not merely economic ambition but also a search for predictable governance systems and rule-of-law environments. Scholars of brain drain warn that sustained youth emigration may lead to long-term developmental challenges, including loss of skilled labor, reduced innovation capacity, and weakened civic participation.

At the same time, diaspora engagement literature highlights potential positive spillovers, such as remittances, transnational advocacy, and knowledge transfer. Therefore, youth migration following #EndSARS should be understood within a multidimensional framework simultaneously reflecting domestic structural weaknesses and global mobility opportunities.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research design relying on secondary data sources, including:

- Academic journal articles
- Newspaper publications
- Human rights reports
- Government documents

The study is anchored in structural-functionalist theory, which views society as a system of interdependent institutions. When institutions such as the police fail to perform their functions effectively, systemic instability emerges.

Data were analysed thematically to identify patterns relating to police brutality, economic disruption, and migration drivers.

### **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Structural Causes of the #EndSARS Protest**

The findings reveal that SARS brutality was not incidental but systemic. The persistence of abuses despite repeated reforms indicates institutional dysfunction within the Nigeria Police Force. Colonial policing legacies, weak judicial oversight, and entrenched corruption contributed to public distrust. Youths, particularly tech entrepreneurs and creatives, reported profiling based on possession of smartphones and laptops.

#### **4.2 Economic Consequences**

The protest significantly disrupted commercial activities. Major highways and business districts were shut down for nearly two weeks. Vandalism targeted malls, warehouses, and police stations.

## ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS

---

Nigeria's economy, heavily dependent on oil exports, was already vulnerable due to COVID-19. The protest compounded:

- Declining consumer confidence
- Increased inflation
- Higher insurance premiums
- Reduced foreign investor trust

Short-term GDP losses and infrastructural damage intensified fiscal pressure on government resources.

### 4.3 Youth Migration as a Consequence

Perhaps the most enduring consequence was psychological and socio-political. Interviews and social media narratives revealed growing disillusionment among Nigerian youths.

Key migration drivers identified include:

- Fear of police harassment
- Lack of accountability
- Economic insecurity
- Loss of confidence in governance

The protest did not merely expose police brutality; it symbolized broader governance failure. Consequently, many youths began actively seeking educational and employment opportunities abroad.

### Victims of SARS among the youths and Human Right Abuse before #EndSARS protest

Names of Victims	Age	State	Date Killed	Nature of Death
Daniel Adeyuwi	27	Lagos	07-02-2006	Died in police custody after arrested on his way home
Godgift Akerete	24	Rivers	03-07-2008	Killed in police station in Porthacourt
Tony Oruama	21	Rivers	03-07-2008	Killed in police station in Porthacourt
Harry Ataria	20	Rivers	03-07-2008	Killed by police
Mbekwe Oruama	20	Rivers	03-07-2008	Killed in police station in Porthacourt

**ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS**

Chika Ibeku	29	Rivers	09-04-2009	Arrested and killed in police custody
Emmanuel Egbo	15	Enugu	25-09-2008	Killed by SARS by playing
Gabriel Ejoor	23	Rivers	09-04-2009	Arrested with Chika Ibeku
Precious Odua	21	Rivers	09-04-2009	Arrested with Chika Ibeku
Onuigbo Christian	28	Abuja	10-04-2009	Shot by police at car park
Kolade Johnson	22	Lagos	31-03-2009	Killed by police stray bullet
Mus'ab Sammani	22	Kano	4-12-2019	Killed by police during argument
Kazeem Tihamiyu	21	Ogun	22-02-2020	A professional footballer killed by police
Tina Ezekwe	16	Lagos	14-05-2020	A student killed by police
Chibuike Daniel	20	Rivers	19-09-2020	Upcoming musician killed by police

**Victims of #EndSARS Protest in the year 2020**

Names of Victims	Source	State	Date Killed	Nature of Death
Unnamed	Havard Human Right	Delta	3-10-2020	Killed by SARS
Jimoh Isiaka	Human Right Watch	Oyo	10-10-2020	Killed by stray bullet during protest

## ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS

Unnamed	Amnesty International	All	12-10-2020	At least 10 youths killed in one week
Unnamed	Nairametrics	Abuja	12-10-2020	Tear gased by police

### CONCLUSION

The #EndSARS protest represents a watershed moment in Nigeria’s democratic and socio-political trajectory. More than a spontaneous reaction to a viral incident, the movement was the culmination of years of accumulated grievances against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigeria Police Force, and against broader structural deficiencies within the Nigerian state. It exposed entrenched institutional weaknesses, persistent human rights violations, and the deep erosion of public trust in law enforcement agencies.

The dissolution of SARS and its replacement with the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit signaled a symbolic response by the federal government. However, evidence suggests that the reform was largely administrative rather than structural. The underlying issues weak accountability mechanisms, inadequate oversight structures, poor welfare conditions for officers, politicization of security institutions, and a colonial legacy of coercive policing remain largely unresolved. Without systemic transformation, institutional rebranding alone is unlikely to restore public confidence.

Economically, the protest occurred at a fragile moment in Nigeria’s post-COVID-19 recovery phase. The disruptions to commercial activity, infrastructure damage, and investor uncertainty compounded pre-existing economic vulnerabilities. Although protests are an essential component of democratic expression, their economic consequences in structurally weak economies can be significant. In Nigeria’s case, the short-term fiscal losses and business closures intensified hardship among young people the very demographic that spearheaded the movement.

Perhaps the most enduring impact of #EndSARS lies in its psychological and demographic implications. The protest deepened feelings of disillusionment among many Nigerian youths, reinforcing perceptions of insecurity, limited opportunity, and state indifference. The subsequent surge in migration aspirations popularly termed the “Japa” phenomenon reflects both a loss of confidence in domestic reform processes and a rational search for stability, safety, and economic advancement. This trend poses long-term developmental concerns, particularly in relation to brain drain, loss of skilled labor, and weakened civic participation.

At the same time, the protest demonstrated the political consciousness, organizational capacity, and civic engagement of Nigerian youths. It revealed a generation that is digitally connected, globally aware, and willing to challenge institutional injustice. In this sense, #EndSARS was not

## **ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS**

---

merely a protest against police brutality; it was a broader demand for accountable governance, economic inclusion, and structural transformation.

In conclusion, the sustainability of Nigeria's democratic development depends significantly on how the state responds to the structural issues illuminated by #EndSARS. Comprehensive police reform, economic diversification, youth empowerment, and strengthened institutions are not optional reforms but necessary conditions for rebuilding civic trust. Failure to implement meaningful change risks perpetuating cycles of unrest, accelerating youth emigration, and further weakening the social contract between the Nigerian state and its citizens.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of the findings of this study, addressing the structural roots of the #EndSARS crisis requires multidimensional and sustained reforms. The following recommendations are proposed:

#### **6.1 Comprehensive Police Reform**

There is an urgent need for deep institutional restructuring within the Nigeria Police Force beyond cosmetic changes or unit rebranding. Reform should include:

- The establishment of an independent civilian oversight commission with prosecutorial authority to investigate complaints against police officers.
- Transparent disciplinary procedures with publicly accessible reports on misconduct cases.
- Improved remuneration, welfare packages, and working conditions to reduce incentives for extortion and corruption.
- Decentralization measures that allow for community-based policing models tailored to local security needs.

Police reform must prioritize rebuilding public trust through accountability, professionalism, and respect for constitutional rights.

#### **6.2 Human Rights Training and Psychological Screening**

Institutional reform must also address behavioral and psychological dimensions of policing. The government should:

- Integrate **mandatory human rights education** into police training curricula.
- Conduct periodic **psychological and mental health evaluations** before officers are authorized to carry firearms.
- Introduce conflict de-escalation training and community engagement workshops.

Such measures would reduce excessive use of force and align policing practices with democratic standards.

## **ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS**

---

### **6.3 Youth Employment and Economic Empowerment**

Given that youth unemployment and economic insecurity amplified the #EndSARS movement, sustainable reform must include targeted economic interventions. The government should:

- Expand funding for youth-led startups, especially in technology, agriculture, and creative industries.
- Strengthen vocational and technical education programs linked directly to market demand.
- Create public-private partnerships to stimulate job creation in manufacturing and digital sectors.
- Simplify access to credit facilities for young entrepreneurs.

Reducing unemployment will mitigate migration pressures and restore confidence in domestic economic opportunities.

### **6.4 Strengthening Judicial Independence and Accountability**

Police reform is incomplete without a functioning justice system. Therefore:

- Special human rights courts or fast-track judicial mechanisms should be established to handle cases involving security force abuses.
- Prosecutorial independence must be protected from political interference.
- Legal aid systems should be strengthened to ensure that victims of abuse have access to justice.

Effective accountability mechanisms will deter future violations and reinforce rule of law.

### **6.5 Economic Diversification and Structural Transformation**

Nigeria's heavy reliance on oil revenue increases vulnerability to economic shocks. Sustainable stability requires:

- Diversification into agriculture, solid minerals, renewable energy, and manufacturing.
- Investment in value-chain development rather than raw material exportation.
- Infrastructure development to improve productivity and attract foreign investment.

A diversified economy will provide broader employment opportunities and reduce structural push factors driving migration.

### **6.6 Institutionalized Civic Engagement Platforms**

The #EndSARS protest demonstrated the political awareness and mobilization capacity of Nigerian youths. Rather than viewing protest as a threat, the state should institutionalize youth participation through:

## ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS

---

- National and state-level youth advisory councils integrated into policy formulation processes.
- Structured town hall dialogues between government officials and youth representatives.
- Digital governance platforms that allow citizens to monitor policy implementation and submit feedback.

Constructive civic engagement mechanisms will transform protest energy into collaborative governance and strengthen democratic consolidation.

### 6.7 Migration Management and Diaspora Engagement

Given the rise in youth migration aspirations, policies should aim not only to discourage irregular emigration but also to harness diaspora potential. Government initiatives should:

- Develop structured diaspora investment schemes.
- Facilitate knowledge transfer programs for skilled Nigerians abroad.
- Improve domestic conditions to make return migration attractive.

Managing migration strategically will reduce brain drain while leveraging global networks for national development.

### Concluding Remark on Policy Direction

The recommendations outlined above require political will, institutional transparency, and sustained implementation. The #EndSARS protest was not merely a demand for the dissolution of a police unit; it was a call for systemic transformation. Addressing policing reform, youth unemployment, judicial weakness, and economic dependency collectively will help restore civic trust, stabilize governance structures, and reduce the structural pressures driving youth migration from Nigeria.

### REFERENCES

- Agbiboa, D. E. (2015). Police is not work: It is stealing by force: Corrupt policing and related abuses in everyday Nigeria. *Africa Today*, 62(2), 94–126.  
<https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.62.2.94>
- Alemika, E. E. O., & Chukwuma, I. C. (2000). *Police-community violence in Nigeria*. Centre for Law Enforcement Education and National Human Rights Commission.
- Amnesty International. (2018). *Nigeria: Still no accountability for human rights violations*. Amnesty International.
- Amnesty International. (2020). *Nigeria: Time to end impunity: Torture and other violations by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)*. Amnesty International.
- Amuta, C. (2020, October 18). SARS, youth spring and beyond. *ThisDay Newspaper*.

## **ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020: A SIGNIFICANCE PUSH FOR MIGRATION OF YOUTHS TO FOREIGN LANDS**

---

Castles, S., de Haas, H., & Miller, M. J. (2014). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (5th ed.). Guilford Press.

Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry. (2020). *Economic impact assessment of the #EndSARS protests*. LCCI Policy Report.

Lyle, P., & Esmail, A. (2016). Sworn to protect: Police brutality—A dilemma for America's police. *Race, Gender & Class*, 23(3–4), 155–185.

Nnamani, S. O. (2011). Institutional mechanisms for human rights protection in Nigeria: An appraisal. *Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence*, 2, 45–60.

Olufasi, E. (2020, October 25). Travel ban, lockdown, protest... How COVID-19 and #EndSARS shaped 2020. *ThisDay Newspaper*.