

Tracking the Lifecycle of SARS in Ilorin: Establishment, Functionality, and Disbandment, 1992–2020

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Abstract:

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigeria Police Force established in 1992 by retired Commissioner of Police Simeon Danladi Midenda, became widely associated with human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, and extortion. Although originally created to combat armed robbery, the unit's operations gradually shifted toward targeting young Nigerians suspected of cybercrime, often based merely on the possession of laptops or smartphones. These abuses generated widespread public resentment and eventually triggered the nationwide EndSARS protests of 2020. This study adopts a historical approach to examine the evolution, operations, and eventual disbandment of SARS within the Ilorin metropolis between 1992 and 2020. Using qualitative methods, the research draws on both primary and secondary sources, including interviews with protesters and information from the Kwara State Ministry of Justice. Findings reveal persistent abuses of power by SARS operatives in Ilorin, which significantly contributed to local participation in the 2020 protests and the eventual dissolution of the unit. The study emphasizes the need for stronger governmental commitment to the protection of fundamental human rights.

Keywords: *Protest, Disbandment, Evolution, Ilorin, EndSARS, Special Anti-Robbery Squad.*

Introduction

Special Anti-Robbery Squad, SARS, is a dreaded anti-crime unit of the Nigeria Police Force founded in 1992 by Simeon Danladi Midenda, a retired Commissioner of Police who added the word "Special" to the already existing Anti-Robbery Squad, which turned out to be Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). That was how the name SARS came into the Nigeria Police vocabulary. (Nnadozie, 2017) Nnadozie further stated that Simeon Danladi Midenda was the Nigerian Contingent Commander to the United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1998.

In the early days of the unit, combat-ready SARS officers operated undercover in plain clothes and plain vehicles without any security or government insignia and did not carry arms in public. Their main job was to monitor radio communications and facilitate successful arrests of criminals and armed robbers and handle other serious crimes. For about 10 years, SARS only operated in Lagos, but by 2002, it had spread to all 36 states of the federation as well as the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. (Malumfashi, 2020) It was counted as one of the 14 units under the Nigerian Police Force Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department. Its mandate included arrest, investigation, and prosecution of suspected armed robbers, murderers, kidnappers, hired assassins, and other suspected violent criminals. Emboldened by its new powers, the unit moved on from its main function of carrying out covert operations and began to set up roadblocks, extorting money from citizens. Officers remained in plain clothes but started to carry arms in public. (Malumfashi, 2020)

Over time, the NPF has been implicated in widespread human rights abuse, extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, and extortion. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) The SARS, for instance, allegedly moved on to targeting and detaining young men for cybercrime or being "online fraudsters," simply on the evidence of their owning a laptop or smartphone, and then demanding excessive bail fees to let them go. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) These acts perpetrated by the unit motivated the movement tagged EndSARS.

The EndSARS protest movement began as a national uproar against the disbandment of Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police squad known for its brutality and breaches of human rights. It was initially used in 2018 to draw awareness about reports of SARS officials' abuse and exploitation. SARS' structure was changed by the government, but claimed human rights breaches and exploitation continued. SARS personnel shot a youngster in the streets of Delta State without provocation in October 2020, according to social media accounts. (Magdalene, 2020) Despite the fact that the Nigerian Police Force disputed the incident, popular fury intensified as more videos of police shootings were published to social media platforms. Youths gathered for support on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and within days, demonstrators lined the streets of Lagos, Abuja, and other regions of Nigeria, demanding an end to SARS. Under pressure from the demonstrators' notoriety, the Nigerian government immediately announced the disbandment of SARS. (Magdalene, 2020)

In Kwara State, it was reported that the protest was initially led by the state governor, his deputy, and other prominent personalities, who led the protesters to the headquarters of the police in the state. (Oyeleke, 2020) A further report revealed that protesters who were dominated by youths shut down business activities in Ilorin to support the nationwide movement against SARS. (Vanguard News, 2020) In fact, it was on record that many

businesses were looted in the city of Ilorin, Kwara State, during the period of the protest in 2020. Hence, the #EndSARS protest has a significant detrimental influence on the continuous existence of the dreaded team. On this basis, this study takes a historical approach to study the evolution, operations, and disbandment of SARS in the Ilorin metropolis from 1992 to 2020.

Beyond documenting the emergence and activities of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), this study argues that the crisis surrounding SARS in Ilorin was not accidental but the outcome of prolonged institutional failure, weak oversight, and the normalization of police impunity. The Ilorin experience demonstrates how localized patterns of abuse, when left unaddressed, can accumulate into widespread public resistance, ultimately aligning local grievances with a national protest movement. By situating Ilorin within the broader #EndSARS narrative, this paper advances the argument that regional dynamics significantly shaped both the character and consequences of the protests.

Research Problem

Despite the national attention on SARS, there is limited scholarly work focusing specifically on Ilorin. Most existing studies examine Nigeria as a whole, leaving a gap regarding how SARS operated, evolved, and was resisted in the Ilorin metropolis. This study addresses that gap by evaluating the lifecycle of SARS in Ilorin from 1992 to its disbandment in 2020.

Research Questions

1. How was SARS established and structured within the Ilorin metropolis?
2. In what ways did SARS operate and interact with residents of Ilorin between 1992 and 2020?
3. What human rights concerns or abuses were recorded in Ilorin during this period?
4. What factors within Ilorin contributed to the 2020 EndSARS protests?
5. What impact did the disbandment of SARS have on Ilorin socially, politically, and economically?

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- Trace the evolution and operational dynamics of SARS in Ilorin.
- Assess the nature and extent of SARS's interactions with residents.
- Identify major abuses or misconduct attributed to SARS in Ilorin.
- Examine the role of Ilorin residents in the EndSARS movement.
- Analyze the consequences of SARS's disbandment on Ilorin.

Hypotheses

1. SARS's operational abuses contributed significantly to public resistance in Ilorin.
2. The 2020 EndSARS protest in Ilorin was driven by long-term grievances, not an isolated incident.
3. The disbandment of SARS had measurable effects on security, governance, and social relations in Ilorin.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to police reform discourse by providing a city-specific historical analysis of SARS in Ilorin. It also offers empirical insights that may guide policymakers, security agencies, civil society groups, and scholars working on human rights, policing, and governance in Ilorin.

Literature Gap and Review

Existing studies (Magdalene 2020; Malumfashi 2020; Nnadozie 2017) provide national-level insights but insufficiently address localized experiences. This study fills that gap by focusing on Ilorin as a unique socio-political environment with its own policing history.

Several scholarly works have examined the operations, abuses, and public perceptions of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) within Nigeria's policing system. Nnadozie (2017) provides an insider historical account of the establishment of SARS, offering valuable insight into its original mandate and early operational structure. Similarly, Malumfashi (2020) presents a journalistic and historical overview of SARS, highlighting its transformation into a unit widely associated with brutality and abuse of power. While these studies are instrumental in understanding the origins and evolution of SARS at the national level, they adopt a largely descriptive approach and do not sufficiently interrogate localized operational dynamics.

Ogbette, Idam, and Kareem (2018) analyze the human rights implications of SARS activities across Nigeria, emphasizing systemic brutality and institutional failures within the police force. Their work contributes significantly to the discourse on police accountability but treats Nigeria as a homogeneous space, thereby overlooking regional variations in SARS operations and public responses. Likewise, Nwachukwu, Obiakor, and Thuoma (2021) examine the culture of impunity within Nigeria's security forces, focusing on the broader implications of unchecked police power, yet their analysis remains national in scope and largely policy-oriented.

Existing literature on the #EndSARS movement, particularly journalistic and advocacy-based studies, has focused extensively on the nationwide protests of 2020, the role of social media, and international reactions. While these works provide valuable macro-level perspectives, they tend to underemphasize city-specific experiences and the historical trajectories that shaped local participation in the protests.

Despite the growing body of literature on SARS and the #EndSARS movement, there remains a noticeable gap in historically grounded, city-level studies that trace the full lifecycle of SARS within specific urban contexts. This study addresses this gap by offering a focused historical and qualitative analysis of the establishment, functionality, and disbandment of SARS in the Ilorin metropolis between 1992 and 2020. By foregrounding local experiences, government responses, and public engagement, the study contributes a nuanced understanding of how national policing crises manifest and are contested at the local level.

GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF ILORIN METROPOLIS

Ilorin, popularly regarded as Al Madinatul Islam, is located in the southern boundary of the old Northern region after the River Niger towards the southwest of Nigeria. It is on Latitude 80.30° North and Longitude 40.35° East in the North-Central Geographical Zone of Nigeria. It is the capital of Kwara State and about 700 kilometers from Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria. It is also about 300 kilometers from Lagos, the erstwhile capital of Nigeria and the commercial nerve center of the nation, while it is about 160 kilometers from Ibadan, one of Africa's largest cities. (Nnadozie, 2017) ⁰

Ilorin started as a small settlement, full of forest with wild animals, and grew to become the Ilorin Emirate that is generally blessed with undulating and fertile land attractive to herders, hunters, and farmers. It is, however, dotted by a few hills and mountains, prominent among which are the scintillating Sobi Hill in Ilorin East Local Government Area and Yowere Hill in Asa Local Government Area of Kwara State. Ilorin Emirate is additionally blessed with some rivers and streams, the longest of which is Asa, while others include Moro, Osin, Orere, and Oyun.

The climate of Ilorin Emirate is endowed with healthy and friendly climatic conditions. It essentially witnesses moderate rainy and dry seasons year-in and year-out. Rainfall usually occurs between March and October, while the dry season follows from November to February with the comforting harmattan season in between.

The population of Ilorin Emirate, which consists of people from various tribal backgrounds, is about one million, which is about 50% of the population of Kwara State. The people of Ilorin are hard-working, peaceful, and friendly and are noted to be very fraternal with visitors. As hosts to the state capital, it is their friendly dispositions to residents and visitors that account for the enduring and beautiful appellation, "the State of Harmony," for which Kwara State is known and addressed. As of the 2006 census, it had a population of 777,667, making it the 7th largest city by population in Nigeria. (Nnadozie, 2017) (Nnadozie, 2017)

TRACKING THE LIFECYCLE OF SARS IN ILORIN METROPOLIS

Like in any other part of the country, SARS was established as a special police unit in 1992 to tackle increasing incidents of armed robberies and kidnappings for ransom by criminal elements operating across Nigeria. Originally set up to operate independently in order to target criminal groups, the unit relied on anonymity as a mode of operation. SARS operatives conduct covert operations in plain clothes and unmarked vehicles to support police operations responding to community distress calls on armed robberies and other serious crimes.

For about 10 years, SARS only operated in Lagos, but by 2002, it had spread to all 36 states of the federation as well as the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. (Nnadozie, 2017) (Malumfashi, 2020) It was counted as one of the 14 units under the Nigerian Police Force Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department. Although it has never been on record that the police force in Ilorin failed to fight crime or serious criminal cases, they collaborate with SARS members from other state commands where the squad has been established as a unit under the state police command. Examples of states where SARS had already been established before its establishment in Kwara State were Oyo State, Ogun State, and Osun State. Kwara State is one of the first states in the northern part of Nigeria where the SARS

unit was established, since 2002. In a report, SARS is said to have been established in Kwara State in 2000 after the success of the 1999 election. (Nnadozie, 2017) (Malumfashi, 2020) Since its inception the Kwara State Police Command usually involved the SARS team from other state commands as occasions demanded in any crime fight before SARS was fully established under the state command. (Nnadozie, 2017) (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018)

ACHIEVEMENTS AND FUNCTIONALITY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SARS IN ILORIN METROPOLIS

SARS' impact cuts across both negative and positive lines. While some believe that the unit performed well enough and aided the arrest of countless notorious criminals, others believe that the ills of the unit override its merits. There were quite a good number of benefits that came with SARS. Before the formal disbandment of the SARS from the police force, there have been some notable achievements the unit has been able to carry out in the history of her existence in the state. The achievements are majorly in carrying out their constitutional duty and mandate in the metropolis. The recorded notable achievements are highlighted and briefly discussed below:

(1) Investigation of Robbery and Arrest of Criminals of Armed Robbery Cases in Ilorin.

Throughout the time SARS operated in Ilorin, it is recorded that the unit was able to discover many criminal hideouts through thorough investigation, and consequently, many criminals were arrested in Ilorin. SARS, according to many, has over the years performed excellently well, as it has assisted in arresting some notorious criminals in different parts of the country, including Ilorin. Similar to the account of Muhammad, it is instructive to note that the same SARS many people are calling for it to be scrapped was instrumental to the arrest of most of the notorious criminals and discovering many criminal hideouts within Ilorin and other parts of Kwara State at large. (Nnadozie, 2017) (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) For instance, Teslim Mohammed, a leader of a notorious gang group terrorizing Ilorin, Ogbomoso, and Oyo, was arrested along with his group in 2016 by the operatives of the Kwara State unit of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in collaboration with the Oyo/Ogbomoso annex while planning a robbery attack with his gang members. SARS operatives discovered that hoodlums cut the gun size that would enable them to conceal it during robbery operations, but two of them, Ajibesin Solomon (22) and Adeniyi Tunde (32), were arrested while planning a robbery operation to be carried out in some parts of Ogbomoso, Oyo, and Ilorin, Kwara State. As a follow-up, the SARS operatives also arrested six other suspected gang members on April 26, 2016, at about 3a.m. They include Aliu Wale Azeez, a.k.a. AZ (28), and Teslim Mohammed (26). Olanrewaju Ajayi (23), Kehinde Abiodun (28), Adeleke Adeyemi (26), and Adamu Mohammed (23). (Nnadozie, 2017) (Magdalene, 2020) The report has it that recovered from the suspects were three cut-to-size barrel guns, three locally made pistols, 14 live cartridges, four jackknives, six cutlasses, and one saw blade. assorted criminal charms, among other items. (Nnadozie, 2017) (Magdalene, 2020)

It is also important to note that the SARS unit of the Kwara State Command of the Police has been collaborating with neighboring state police commands in arresting interstate criminal gangs. For example, a report has it that the Oyo State Police Command on May 1, 2015, says it has arrested a member of an interstate robbery gang during a routine patrol along Oyo-Ogbomoso Road. The Commissioner of Police, Mr. Mohammed Indabawa, while parading the suspects at the command headquarters in Eleyeile, Ibadan, told journalists that

Yemi Adeleke was arrested with bullet wounds in a bush after a gun battle with the police during one of their operations in the midnight of May 1, 2015. Explaining how the suspect was arrested, the commissioner revealed that "a distress call was received from the officer-in-charge of the anti-robbery section of the Kwara State Police Command that a gang of four armed robbers had robbed the home of a man at about 11pm on the 30th of April, 2015, in Ilorin, the night guard of the injured. A Toyota Highlander with Lagos number plate KJA 24 AXN, laptops, handsets, and some amount of money were taken away by the armed robbers. We also got the information that the armed robbers were heading towards Oyo State. (Nnadozie, 2017) (Oyeleke, 2020)

(2) Fight against Criminality.

According to the record available, SARS is known to be fearless when it comes to combating armed robbery and fighting head-to-head against criminals publicly. It is revealed that one of the notable operations of the team is a combat experience during a robbery attempt on GTBank headquarters in Ilorin. The incident happened in June 2018, and the team successfully quelled the robbery attempt of the robbers after engaging in a gun duel with the criminals, which led to the death of three of the robbers, and others were captured. In another development, it was reported in 2017 that suspected robber Idowu Jimoh was arrested in connection to the snatching of a vehicle belonging to one Mrs. Georgina Okoye in Ilorin, Kwara State. Also, another robbery suspect, Tajudeen Ayinde, better known as Amala, was arrested. He specialized in robbing traders in Ilorin and its environs of their valuables and cash with dangerous weapons. (Nnadozie, 2017) (Vanguard News, 2020)

Also, it is on record that in August 2014, the SARS unit collaborated with other law enforcement agents and caught up with a gang of five suspected criminals that specialized in dismantling and coupling stolen motorcycles in Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State. The report has it that a team of policemen consisting of SARS and other units in Ilorin arrested the suspects following a tip-off. The Police Public Relations Officer as of then, Mr. Olufemi Fabode, explained that the police recovered 10 dismantled motorcycles from the hideout of the suspects. Fabode alleged that the suspected criminals often stole motorcycles from their owners, dismantled and coupled them again in another form, and then sold them to unsuspecting members of the public. (Malumfashi, 2020) ^o

(3) Cultism, kidnapping, and other serious crimes curtailment in Ilorin.

The presence of SARS in Ilorin led to the discovery of many kidnapping hideouts, and the rate of cultism and cult group clashes in the metropolis drastically reduced to the minimum. In 2015, for instance, due to the unabated activities of cultists and other violent crimes, including kidnapers and armed robbers in several parts of the country, the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Idris, dispatched a special crack squad comprising SARS officers to the state to tackle the situation across the country. The situation was, a few days after, brought under control. As record may have it, SARS has been able to arrest more than three thousand suspected kidnapers across the country, and in fact, the recent successes recorded in reducing the high rate of crime and criminality, especially kidnapping and other deadly vices in most parts of the country, including Ilorin, are largely the handiwork of SARS operatives. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Nnadozie, 2017) In Kwara State, on Wednesday, the 30th of December, 2015, twenty-four persons suspected to have participated in various cult activities within the Ilorin metropolis were arrested by officers attached to the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Kwara State Police command. The suspects were rounded up in the

early hours of that day, between the hours of 3am and 6am, at their various homes. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Malumfashi, 2020) The arrest made was part of the efforts of SARS to clamp down on cultists and maintain peace and order in the state.

In another report, the two suspected ritualists who had been terrorizing the people of Tabira village near Okuta town in the Baruten Local Government council of the state were among the 40 suspected armed robbers and nine others suspected of other crimes paraded by the Kwara State Police Command on 28th July, 2014. The news report has it that the police commissioner of the state has since explained that:

On July 19, 2014, at about 9am, the fleeing suspect by the name of Manu Saho was arrested at Venra village with an unregistered Bajaj motorcycle, and when searched, a locally made gun with one live cartridge was recovered, concealed neatly in a black polythene bag in a compartment of the motorcycle, and the arrested suspects have confessed to being members of a robbery gang terrorizing the area. Also, on July 15, 2014, one Alhaji Umar Ahmed and Alhaji Mansur Bello of 29 Pelewura Way, Apapa, Lagos, reported at the SARS office in Ilorin that on July 14, 2014, at about 8.45pm along Ogbomoso/Ilorin Express Road, his Renault truck with Reg. No. Lagos KRD774XF, loaded with agrochemicals, new motor tires, incense sticks, and other valuable items totalling about N14 million, was attacked by five arrested suspects and others at large, who almost killed the escort of the truck, Hassan Mohammed. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Malumfashi, 2020)

EMERGENCE OF END SARS SAGA OR DISBANDMENT IN ILORIN

As a national issue, the saga of End SARS was a national issue and movement all over the country. End SARS, widely written as #EndSARS, was a decentralized social movement and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria. The movement's slogan called for the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police known for its long record of abuse against Nigerian citizens. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) The protests originated from a Twitter campaign in 2017, using the hashtag #EndSARS to demand the unit's disbandment by the Nigerian government. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021)

The movement experienced a resurgence in October 2020 following further revelations of the unit's abuses, leading to mass demonstrations across major cities in Nigeria and widespread outrage on social media platforms. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Magdalene, 2020) The hashtag #EndSARS accumulated over 28 million tweets on Twitter alone. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Magdalene, 2020) Solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in the diaspora and sympathizers occurred in many major cities around the world. In the Ilorin metropolis, the movement was predominantly led by young Nigerians and expanded to include demands for good governance and accountability amidst unprecedented hardship in the country. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Oyeleke, 2020)

According to a leader of the Kwara unit of the National Association of Nigerian Students, the movement for the end of SARS became prominent in the Ilorin metropolis when SARS officers were alleged to profile young Nigerian students, mostly males, based on fashion choices, tattoos, and hairstyles. They were also known to set up illegal roadblocks, conduct unwarranted checks and searches, make arrests and detain without warrant or trial, rape women, and extort young male Nigerians for driving exotic vehicles and using laptops and iPhones. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Vanguard News, 2020)

In 2017, a petition signed by 10,195 people was submitted to Nigeria's National Assembly calling for a total disbandment of SARS. A few senators backed the call for total disbandment of the unit. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Nnadozie, 2017) Consideration was given to reforming the force rather than full disbandment due to the number of cases falling. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Malumfashi, 2020) The campaigners moved from social media using the #EndSARS hashtag to organized, peaceful protests in Abuja, Lagos, Ibadan, Osun, Benin, Ughelli, Warri, Ilorin, Ogbomosho, Owerri, Jos, Kaduna, Calabar (Malumfashi, 2020), and other Nigerian cities and states. The protesters who initially started the protest threatened to continue if the government refused to disband the force, and the government's refusal to ban was the result of the continuous call for the disbandment of the unit and led to the protest across major cities in the country, including the Ilorin metropolis. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018)

The End SARS saga, which became widely spread in October 2020, was motivated by other agendas aside from the call to put an end to SARS. Particularly, the protest that was held in Ilorin was said to be peaceful, with the police force fighting against crimes and criminal activities in the metropolis before the saga in 2020. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) The saga, which originated from Lagos, spread across all states, and there were mass protests across major cities, including Ilorin. The 2020 protest is regarded as the second wave. It was reported that this second wave emerged as a result of a video that was circulated on Saturday, 3 October, 2020, showing a SARS police officer shooting a young Nigerian in front of Westown Hotel, Ikeja, Lagos State. The video trended on the Internet, and it was further alleged that the police officers took away the young man's vehicle—a Lexus SUV. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Magdalene, 2020) This trending video caused public outcry on social media, especially on Twitter, with the #ENDSARS hashtag trending, and Ilorin youth were not left out of the people trending the campaign. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Magdalene, 2020)

It was on Thursday, 8 October 2020, when nationwide protests on ENDSARS started after weeks of outrage and anger with videos and pictures showing police brutality, harassment, and extortion in Nigeria. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Oyeleke, 2020) The protests were led predominantly by young Nigerians in different cities alongside many activists and celebrities. (Malumfashi, 2020) (Vanguard News, 2020) The Nigeria Police Force disrupted the protests in some cities, throwing teargas, using water cannons, and shooting at unarmed peaceful protesters, as seen in Abuja and Osun. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018)⁰ This led to the death of Jimoh Isiaq in Ogbomosho, Oyo State. By Wednesday, 14 October 2020, the End SARS protests were still ongoing, with young people in different parts of Nigeria intensifying their calls for reforms and accountability in police operations. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Nnadozie, 2017)

The protest in Ilorin started on Monday, 12 October, 2020, when youths in Ilorin joined youths across the country to shut down business activities in Ilorin. It was reported that Nigerian youths on Monday shut down Ilorin, the Kwara State capital, and joined their counterparts from other states of the federation to protest against the activities of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (Federal SARS). Hundreds of the angry youths with various placards on ENDSARS went round Taiwo Road, Unity Road, Post Office Murtala Mohammed Way, Sawmill area, Offa Garage area, and other major streets of Ilorin to protest an abrupt end to what they described as the nefarious activities of SARS on Nigerians, particularly the

youths. The Ilorin ENDSARS saga protest of 2020 in the metropolis was targeted toward ending all forms of police brutality in the state. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Malumfashi, 2020)

At inception, the protest was rancor-free and non-violent as the police and men of DSS monitored the protest. The protest continued to the extent that protesters demonstrating against police brutality and extrajudicial killings continued across the country and marched to the governor's office on Thursday, 15 October, 2020, demanding to meet the governor in person, and based on this demand, Kwara State governor Abdulrahman Abdulrazaq on Thursday, 15 October, 2020, was reported to have joined a crowd of #EndSARS protesters as they marched to the police headquarters in Ilorin, the Kwara State capital. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Malumfashi, 2020)

The persistence of these abuses suggests that misconduct within SARS in Ilorin was not the result of isolated excesses by a few officers but rather indicative of a systemic breakdown in accountability mechanisms. The routine nature of extortion, unlawful detention, and profiling of young men reveals an operational culture that had diverged sharply from the unit's original crime-fighting mandate. This pattern reflects a broader structural problem within Nigeria's policing framework, where inadequate supervision and institutional tolerance enabled the sustained violation of citizens' rights.



Source: Ronke Sanya Idowu, "[Kwara Governor Leads #EndSARS Protesters To Police Headquarters](#)," Channels TV (Online), accessed online.

Figure 1: Photo of Governor Abdulrahman Abdulrazaq leading End SARS protesters in Ilorin. Kwara State Capital on 15/10/2020.

The rapid mobilization of residents in Ilorin illustrates how accumulated grievances can swiftly translate into collective action when a triggering national moment arises. While the

#EndSARS movement gained national visibility through social media, its local resonance in Ilorin was rooted in lived experiences of police abuse. This indicates that the protests were not externally imposed but organically embedded within the social reality of the metropolis, thereby explaining the scale and intensity of participation witnessed in 2020.

TRACKING THE REPORTED CASES OF SARS VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ILORIN METROPOLIS

SARS was created as a masked police unit to perform undercover operations against violent crimes like armed robbery, car snatching, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and the bearing and use of illegal firearms. However, like every other place in Nigeria, SARS within the Ilorin metropolis had been accused of several human rights violations, illegal "stop and searches," illegal arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, sexual harassment of women, and brutalizing of young male Nigerians. The human rights abuses were documented in trending videos on social media as well as reported in various news media. In Nigeria as a whole. A 2016 report by Amnesty International indicted SARS, maintaining that the squad was responsible for human rights abuses, cruelty, and degrading treatment. SARS abuses include the shooting of their detainees in the leg, mock executions and threats of Nigerians in their custody, and other widespread torture, execution, hanging, and physical assault. A 2020 publication by the organization documented 82 cases of abuses and extrajudicial killings by SARS between January 2017 and May 2020. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018)

In Ilorin, SARS had been accused of several human rights violations, illegal "stop and searches," illegal arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, sexual harassment of women, and brutality of young male Nigerians. The officers of SARS have also been reported to have disturbed the smooth running of the businesses of different business owners within the Ilorin metropolis. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) Despite the repeated situation, it is widely known that the Nigerian authorities have failed to prosecute a single officer from the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), despite anti-torture legislation passed in 2017 and evidence that its members continue to use torture and other ill-treatment to execute, punish, and extract information from suspects. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Magdalene, 2020) Various human rights abuses were documented in trending videos on social media. In this work, efforts were made to gather some reports related to abuse of power by the officers of SARS in Ilorin.

To start with, some cases of extortion were reportedly perpetrated by members of this unit. This case occurred not only in Ilorin but across Nigeria. SARS officers have turned their duty to protect Nigerians into an opportunity for extortion and stealing money, property, and other valuables belonging to suspects and their families. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Magdalene, 2020) In 2017, there was a report that Kwara residents lament extortion, harassment by police unit extortion and (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Oyeleke, 2020). It was reported that the residents of the state expressed their resentment against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian police force. This was due to the fact that Kwarans see that extortion of commercial drivers and harassment of commuters by SARS operatives have become rampant. In this same report, one Maroof, then the deputy chairman of one of the branches of the National Union of Transport Workers in the state, was reported to have said that no transport worker is happy with SARS because they've

become thorns in our flesh. Drivers are now at their mercy as we go about our daily business. They collect a high percentage of our charges. Along the Oro town to Omu-aran road, which is less than 30 minutes of driving, they'll collect nothing less than N100 at different checking points. And that's the same with every other route. (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) (Vanguard News, 2020)

The above stressed the fact that the operatives in the metropolis have not been performing their duties as expected. A further accusation was that "They will tell you if you can't pay the N100, they will find one fault to drag you to their station. After all, by 7:00 p.m., you won't meet them at their duty post, where they are meant to protect lives. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021)^o Traders in Ilorin have also suffered in this regard. A rice distributor, Bisi, in a news report pointed out that the SARS operatives contributed to the high cost of goods by extorting money from transporters. She was quoted to have said, "By the time our drivers get to different police checkpoints, they demand fifty naira on each bag of rice. These are what we add to our cost price, and retailers tend to buy at a higher price. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Nnadozie, 2017) There were also cases of suspected internet fraudsters who have been extorted by SARS officials. According to an informant, "They only checked phones of victims and concluded that the person is into Yahoo Yahoo. Most young guys ended up paying them 100 thousand through transfer, and then a policeman confirmed it after a bank alert was sent to his phone. They would discharge such a person without further investigation. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Malumfashi, 2020) The allegations of extortion and labelling every young man seen in a vehicle with laptop computers as a 'Yahoo boy' are increasing day by day in Ilorin.

Aside from the above, there were cases of abuse of female citizens by operators of SARS stop and search. This development was made by the then Commissioner of Police. Kwara State Command, Mr. Lawan Ado, who said that he would henceforth dismiss any male policeman caught searching a female suspect. This is to tell that the authority is well informed of the abuse of power by men of the operatives of the SARS. There was a woman, Kachi Zion, who accused four operatives of the young Special Anti-Robbery Squad of sexually harassing her along the Pipeline area of Florin. She specifically accused one of the policemen of inserting his fingers into her private part. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Malumfashi, 2020) There was a reaction to the police force incident. Okasanmi said, "The Commissioner of Police told them that this male policeman searching a female suspect is a misnomer." Most officers fail to recognize that it is robbery when policemen accost citizens and search for mobile phones or force suspects to withdraw money from automated teller machines. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018) The result of a number of allegations of misconduct against the SARS operatives in recent times brought disrepute to the image and the good name of the command and police at large.

The different misconducts attributed to the outfit in recent times, such as allegations of extortion, checking of telephone sets of citizens, laptops, and labeling every young man seen in a car as being a yahoo boy, should stop forthwith. Drunkenness, especially while on duty, is an offense against discipline and has brought some level of disrepute to the image and the good name the Kwara State command has toiled so much to maintain. In response, the police authority declared that it would not hesitate to wield the big stick on any officer whose actions or inaction would drag the jealously guarded name of the police in the mud. Lawan Ado, the then commissioner of police, after meeting with Kwara State Command's officers

and operatives of the F-SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) at the Police Headquarters in Ilorin, declared to the operatives that "enough is enough," and that "they either sit up or get booted out of the outfit." (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) The police were reminded when these issues were reoccurring that a male police officer searching a female suspect is a misnomer, and searching a telephone set belonging to accosted citizens by SARS operatives, escorting suspects to the ATM machine to collect money, or forcing suspects to make electronic money transfers is robbery. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Magdalene, 2020) People have also been calling for the action that any officer arrested doing any of the above should be dismissed and charged in court with immediate effect. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Magdalene, 2020)

The report has revealed that authorities of police have taken action on the illegal and unconstitutional acts perpetrated by SARS officers. There was the Kwara State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Lawan Ado, who said the four police officers of the special report in 2017 that the then Anti-Robbery Squad accused of sexually harassing a lady, Kachi Zion, along the Pipeline area of Ilorin, were detained. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Oyeleke, 2020) This matter was brought to the ministry of justice back then, and the major problem with the force is that they usually fail to follow up on matters regarding the excessiveness of their officials even though they normally claim that they will get to the root of the matter in most cases. (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021) (Vanguard News, 2020)

GOVERNMENT REACTION TO ENDSARS PROTESTS

At the national level, consequent upon the peaceful protests, demonstrators were not only targeted and arrested, but they were also brutalized, shot at, and, in some cases, killed by the Nigerian Police Force and the Nigerian Army, under the surreptitiously unaware yet watchful eyes of the Nigerian Government. Shortly after the protests spread across the world, the Inspector General of the Nigerian police announced the dissolution of SARS (for the fourth time in four years). (Magdalene, 2020)⁰ Notwithstanding, the protests continued partly due to the "historical dissolution," distrust of the government, and because young Nigerians demanded five actions from the government.

The ENDSARS protest demands were (i) release of arrested protesters, (ii) justice and compensation for families of victims, and (iii) an independent body to oversee prosecution of officers (within 10 days from October 11). 2020); (iv) psychological evaluation of disbanded officers before redeployment; and (v) increase of police salaries. (Magdalene, 2020) (Nnadozie, 2017)

While some of these demands were partially met, others are yet to have any clear action plan. What is, however, sure is that there is no indication that any of the demands have been fully met. It was noted that the Federal Government had directed the 36 states of Nigeria to set up judicial panels to inquire into the cases of police brutality and that a few states, including Kaduna, Delta, Ekiti, Oyo, Kwara, and Lagos State, set up judicial panels on brutality and human rights violations. In Kwara State, an advert by the government stated that the Kwara State Judicial Panel on Human Rights Abuses by the Police hereby uses this medium to officially call for petitions/complaints from the general public on any allegation of assault, human rights abuses, and extrajudicial killings by members of the Nigeria Police

Force, especially the disbanded SARS. The terms of reference for these panels are as follows:

- i. Receive and investigate complaints of police brutality, human rights abuses, violations, and/or extrajudicial killings.
- ii. Evaluate evidence presented/surrounding circumstances and draw conclusions on the validity of the complaints; and,
- iii. Recommend compensations, prosecution, and other remedial measures where appropriate.

In view of the foregoing, kindly forward 12 copies of your petitions/complaints in writing to: The Chairman, Kwara State Judicial Panel of Inquiry on #EndSARS Protest, Room 341, Governor's Office, Ilorin, Kwara State. Petitions can also be submitted through any of the following channels:

Email to: SARSjudicialpanel@kwarastate.gov.ng

WhatsApp: 09043246178

Twitter: @KwaraSARSPanel.

Date for submission: 26th October to 8th November, 2020.

We look forward to prompt responses from affected citizens in order to be able to accommodate, treat, and conclude all cases within the ninety-day period of our assignment.

Signed: Hon. Justice LB Garba (RTD)

Chairman. (Magdalene, 2020) (Malumfashi, 2020)

The above confirmed the statement of the governor when the youth was accompanied by his deputy, Kayode Alabi. Part of the notable reaction is the governor's participation in the protest. The governor joined the protest from the government along with the House floor, where the mostly young protesters had converged. He briefly addressed their protesters and then led them to request. While addressing the protesters at the police headquarters, Abdul Razaq said the young people at the police headquarters a few kilometers away have spoken loud and clear and would have their interests protected by the government. He promised the setting up of an ombudsman through which people can channel their grievances and have them attended to in the state. He said the ombudsman would be the go-between for aggrieved citizens and security agencies. (Magdalene, 2020) (Malumfashi, 2020)

On the part of the police authority in Kwara State, the commissioner of police in the state during the 2020 EndSARS Saga in Ilorin, Kayode Egbetokun, addressed the protesters by commending them for being peaceful and said specific officers mentioned by the protesters would be investigated. He was quoted to have said, "I want to assure you that the Nigerian Police is with the youth. We have heard your report against some of our officers. I want to implore you to report anything against the police in this state to me directly. I assure you that action will be taken." (Magdalene, 2020) (Ogbette, Idam, & Kareem, 2018)

Another reaction of the state government to the saga concerns the attack against the protesters; the governor visited the attack victim on Saturday, October 17th, 2020. During the visit, the governor said the state government was sad about attacks on protesters, and as such, he announced a commission of inquiry the following week. The violent attack on #EndSARS protesters in the Challenge area of Ilorin, named Sheriff Olawale, was said to be unfortunate and condemnable by the state government. The governor did not only visit the victim; he also footed the hospital bill of Mr. Sherif Olawale. He is quoted to have said:

"We will foot the bills of the injured, and we have asked the police to investigate the attack, and anybody involved should be brought to book. You would recall that the protest started in Ilorin last Monday, and they (protesters) have been coming here since then. I even led them to the police headquarters on Thursday. So, we welcome peaceful protesters. Not a single person has been touched, molested, or harmed since Monday. We were shocked today to see online that members of your team were harassed and attacked. What we asked for is peaceful expression of your demands. And that was what we were happy with since Monday. The protesters have not been violent in the state. But we can't rule out a hijack of the process, as it happened today. I don't know who is responsible for that. For me to have marched with the youths on Monday, you should know that we will not be part of any violence. I urge all of you to protest peacefully. Protest for your right peacefully, and the government will meet your demands peacefully. We have seen five-for-five, and the federal government is gradually meeting them. Not everything will be addressed in a day. But over a period of time, the federal government will meet them, as the police are under the federal government. (Magdalene, 2020) (Nwachukwu, Obiakor, & Thuoma, 2021)

The above indicated that the state government was up and doing and did not turn a deaf ear to the saga before, during, and after it. This is a clear indication that the governor wants the state to maintain its status of being a state of harmony, and the protesters peacefully conducted themselves throughout the process. The sense of belonging of the state government during the protest contributed to the peaceful protest even when it was distorted by hoodlums who intended to jeopardize the peaceful demonstration. (Magdalene, 2020) (Magdalene, 2020).

Although the establishment of judicial panels of inquiry represented a formal acknowledgment of public grievances, the limited implementation of panel recommendations raises critical questions about the depth of governmental commitment to reform. In Kwara State, the conciliatory posture adopted by the governor initially contributed to de-escalation and relative peace; however, the absence of long-term institutional reforms suggests that these responses were largely reactive rather than transformative. Consequently, the state's actions highlight the tension between symbolic accountability and substantive justice within Nigeria's governance framework.

The #EndSARS protests also produced enduring consequences for Ilorin's socio-political landscape. While economic disruptions and security challenges emerged in the short term, the protests simultaneously fostered heightened civic consciousness and political engagement among residents. This dual outcome underscores the paradoxical nature of mass protests, wherein immediate instability may coexist with long-term democratic awakening. In this sense, the Ilorin protests functioned as both a moment of crisis and an opportunity for societal reflection.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the establishment, operations, and eventual disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in Ilorin between 1992 and 2020, situating the unit's activities within the broader context of Nigeria's policing framework. The findings reveal that while SARS was initially effective in combating armed robbery in Ilorin, its operations gradually became characterized by systemic abuses, including extortion, harassment, unlawful

detention, and extrajudicial violence. These practices eroded public trust and disproportionately affected young residents, thereby intensifying grievances against the unit. The study further establishes that the accumulation of these localized abuses played a significant role in mobilizing public participation in the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Ilorin. Government responses, particularly the establishment of judicial panels of inquiry in Kwara State, reflected an acknowledgment of public discontent; however, the limited implementation of reforms suggests that these measures were largely reactive rather than transformative.

The study confirms the hypothesis that sustained police misconduct and institutional impunity within SARS significantly contributed to public resistance and the eventual disbandment of the unit. The Ilorin case demonstrates that when security institutions operate without effective oversight, localized grievances can escalate into mass protest movements with national implications.

Recommendations

The study recommends the strengthening of institutional accountability mechanisms within Nigeria's security agencies, including independent oversight bodies and transparent disciplinary processes. It also underscores the importance of human rights training for law enforcement personnel and sustained government commitment to protecting citizens' rights. Without these reforms, the conditions that led to the emergence and collapse of SARS risk being reproduced under different institutional labels.

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