

#EndSARS, #BlackLivesMatter, and the 21st Century Model of Protest

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In 1992, facing rising rates of crime in the country, Nigeria established a specialized police force, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), to bring justice to the country. The squad was afforded special privileges: it would act independently of other police forces, be given almost unchecked policing powers, and be composed entirely of plainclothes officers. With this unprecedented power, the agency acted with impunity, quickly accumulating accusations of harassment, extortion, and even extrajudicial killings. Though many in the country had expressed discontent with SARS for years, large scale mobilization did not occur until early October 2020, when videos of violent harassment and killings by SARS agents went viral. The hashtag #EndSARS took over Nigeria, and soon, the world. In response to the criticism, the president disbanded SARS almost immediately. However, protestors noted that the agency had disbanded three times before, but was reinstated each time. So, intense criticism continued. Moreover, Nigerian protestors have moved past the single demand to end SARS and are instead fighting for a broader liberation from the underlying problems: police brutality, stifling corruption, and excessive state power. While this movement (noted as #EndSARS for this article) in Nigeria warrants in-depth discussions in and of itself, a comparative analysis of the nature of the movement more broadly provides interesting contributions to understanding the state of protest in the 21st century as a whole.

More specifically, studying the similarities between #EndSARS and #BlackLivesMatter is invaluable. The first unifying factor between them is the common goals of the two demonstrations: addressing militarized policing and state-sponsored, discriminatory violence. The protests continue full-force in Nigeria even after the disbanding of SARS primarily because protestors view the oppressive system as encapsulating more than just one department or one policy. They argue that police in general in Nigeria have acted with impunity for far too long, and the government must be held accountable. Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement was born out of frustrations of racially biased policing, brutality, and incarceration. In both movements, therefore, the goal is to challenge the discriminatory, violent actions of the state. Indeed, both #EndSARS and #BlackLivesMatter organizers have acknowledged the deep connections between the objectives of the movements, saying that one can not support one without supporting the other.

Because of the similar goals, the two movements also share commonalities in their organization, demands, and composition. Among the most striking similarities, and perhaps the most telling about protest in the 21st century, is the organization of the movements themselves. Black Lives Matter is noteworthy in that it is entirely decentralized. By this, I mean that there is no sole organization that speaks for the whole movement, no individual leaders, and no organizational hierarchy. The fight against police brutality and corruption in Nigeria follows a very similar structure. These organizational structures (or lack thereof) are very intentional; in contrast to the unified, centralized movements of the past, Black Lives Matter and #EndSARS fight localized battles and have wide-ranging agendas. These require flexibility and democracy in mobilization that would be hampered by an overly rigid organizational structure. For instance, the Black Lives Matter Global Network has the broad goal “to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities...” Thus, demonstrators are connected by a common goal, but tailor demands to best fit their community’s needs and situations. Different subsets of Black Lives Matter advocate for slightly different policies, including local reforms like banning chokeholds, national moves like demilitarizing the police, and still larger actions like transformative education and urban policy. Similarly, in Nigeria, far from

the targeted protests against SARS during early October, current demonstrations are calling for a variety of reforms ranging from progressive economic policy to radical challenges to the state. The wide range of demands in both movements and low barrier of entry (because of a lack of hierarchy) have united large numbers of supporters behind common demands, fostered intersectional activism, and created coalitions transcending traditional divisions. Black Lives Matter has gained support across demographic groups, including whites and other people of color, and has even had countless solidarity demonstrations in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Similarly, protests against SARS have transcended deep divisions in Nigerian society. Christians march alongside Muslims; LGBTQ+ individuals march alongside cisgendered heterosexual traditionalists; young people march alongside the generations past.

Finally, it would be disingenuous to explore either movement without highlighting the role of social media and the internet. In fact, social media was integral to the formation of both movements. Both movements were initially created as hashtags on social media and spread rapidly alongside troubling video accounts of violence: countless videos of police-killed Black people for #BlackLivesMatter and an unknown man shot and left for dead by SARS agents for #EndSARS. Moreover, the recent surge of support for Black Lives Matter was spurred by another harrowing video of a police killing, this time of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers. Given that social media allows people to share ideas in outlets not controlled by the government and form agreement across boundary lines difficult to cross in real life, the internet has been indispensable to the momentum of both movements. The immense pressure put on governments by record-setting crowds of demonstrators is almost entirely due to the advent of social media. Especially for issues that primarily affect marginalized populations, due to pre-existing power relations, the government is less moved by their organization and easily, often violently, quells such demonstrations. In these cases, the ability to reach broader audiences on social media lends support to the mobilization efforts of marginalized organizers. Some in Nigeria have even noted that celebrities' support on social media successfully pressured their government. In brief, social media has been integral to these modern movements every step of the way.

All in all, both #BlackLivesMatter and #EndSARS appear to provide a blueprint for protest in the 21st century: decentralized, intersectional organization, broad demands, and the use of the internet. This new blueprint admittedly has its own problems—performative activists on the internet give the impression of support but do not show up to demonstrations, the presence of large numbers of protestors no longer pressure the government like they used to, and many other criticisms—but both #EndSARS and #BlackLivesMatter have already had some promising results. In the United States, Louisville, Kentucky lawmakers passed Breonna’s Law banning no-knock warrants following the death of Breonna Taylor; cities and states across the country are reallocating police funds to social services; and other reforms at the subnational and national level appear imminent. In Nigeria, youth voices have been increasingly powerful, being included in national panels on police brutality, and current president Buhari’s political support has decreased drastically. Although organizers, academics, and politicians alike continue to debate whether this new system of protest will be successful at addressing long-standing, systemic issues in the long term, it has proven effective at forcing the government’s hand in the short term.

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