

From Twitter to the Streets

Assessing the 2020 #EndSARS Protest in Nigeria with a Threefold Criteriology of Dissent

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Abstract

One of the most tweeted events of 2020 is the #EndSARS protest that was carried out by Nigerian young people against police brutality. Yet the protest did not only happen on digital media. It eventually became evident on the streets, taking different dimensions including religious highlights. Apart from narrative accounts of the 12-day event that was brutally suppressed on 20 October 2020, there is yet to be any analysis of the critical aspects of the protest that attracted so much global interest. This article critically examines the #EndSARS protest within the background of a threefold criteriology of dissent, namely intentionality, criticality and publicness, as proposed by Ronald Collins and David Skover. Additionally, the article pays attention to the moral and epistemological components of dissent. The central objective is to provide a philosophical understanding of dissent and to determine how this is demonstrated in a complex society like Nigeria.

Keywords

#EndSARS – Nigeria – dissent – protest – intentionality – criticality – publicness

1 Introduction: Dissent and a Threefold Criteriology

The 2020 #EndSARS was a 12-day peaceful protest led by young people across Nigeria and in diaspora against police brutality. The protest was in many ways a typical instance of dissent within a democratic institution. Yet it was marked by the complexity that Nigeria represents: the ethnic, political and the religious elements were all present. This article integrates these elements in critically examining the philosophical underpinning of the protest, using as its framework the threefold criteriology of dissent by Ronald Collins and David Skover. Before laying out this criteriology, a fundamental understanding of dissent itself emerges when we consider the two Latin roots that constitute its etymology. The first is *dissentire* meaning “to differ in sentiment”, and the second is *dissidere* which means “to sit apart or disagree.”¹ Dissent simply means to hold or to express a different opinion. Put in the context of popular opinions of institutions or metanarratives, dissent suggests a marginal position that often radically challenges the *status quo*. The radicality of dissent lies in its power to disbalance, disrupt or re-center the center in a way that seeks to bring about transformation within political, economic, social or religious establishments. A simplistic understanding of the meaning of dissent might render it synonymous with mere disagreement, which “occurs when two or more thinkers’ beliefs differ over the truth or the justification of some proposition.”² Yet, disagreement is quite different from dissent although closely related to it. While disagreement can be un-voiced or expressed in a non-communicative manner, dissent emerges as “one way in which disagreement is made public.”³ Since dissent addresses “disagreement with an established or institutional view,” then it “requires, at least, a communicative act.”⁴ Consequently, Barbara Falk, while re-echoing Collins and Skover, suggests that “dissent should be intentional, not accidental; critical rather than laudatory; public rather than private.”⁵

Collins and Skover’s consideration of intentionality, criticality, and publicness as the three key elements of dissent is important in providing a stable

1 Graham Patrick McDonough, *Beyond Obedience and Abandonment: Toward a Theory of Dissent in Catholic Education* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), 146.

2 Casey Rebecca Johnson, “Introduction”, 1–9 in Casey Rebecca Johnson, ed., *Voicing Dissent: The Ethics and Epistemology of Making Disagreement Public* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3.

3 Ibid., 4.

4 Ibid.

5 Barbara J. Falk, “The History, Paradoxes, and Utility of Dissent: From State to Global Action,” 23–50 in Ben Dorfman, ed., *Dissent! Refracted: Histories, Aesthetics and Cultures of Dissent* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016), 24.

framework for any analysis of the paradoxical nature of dissent. The choice of the threefold paradigm in this article is particularly because it generates a lot of epistemological insights as I shall show later on. Firstly, the criterion of *intention* implies that dissent does not just happen spontaneously. It is well planned; and often it emerges as an eruption of a protracted disagreement or discontent that has existed within an institution with a demand for change. When and where the opportunities for change, reform, or transformation are made extremely difficult or impossible, in some cases, dissent from the margins is more likely to happen. Even where the disagreement emerges from the center, it immediately takes a marginal position once expressed publicly, as long as it challenges the *status quo*. Of course, this does not discountenance the fact that in such a case the dissenting party might only be slightly or temporarily a minority. Intentionality emerges when there is “a knowing determination or resolve to think, believe, speak, or act in a certain way, with a reasonable awareness and understanding of the probable significance, import, or consequences” of such act(s) of dissent.⁶ Thus, dissent is not accidental and differs from unreasoned or un-calculated spontaneous reaction or on-the-spot agitation.

Secondly, in addition to being intentional, dissent is *ipso facto*, critical. The critical nature of dissent lies in the radical expression of alternative view or position, which is undergirded by a logic that seeks to challenge the *status quo*. It reflects in expressing “an unfavourable evaluation, adverse judgment, or disapproving opinion of a law, policy, practice, or position established by an authority structure,” and it does not matter if the authority is of the political, cultural, legal or religious institution.⁷ The logic behind dissent contends with the logic upon which the center is constructed, and as such threatens the legitimacy of the center. Paradoxically, it may sometimes be a logic that challenges either the inflexibility of, or the shift at, the center.

Thirdly, dissent is a public act and as such cannot be “confined to the private realm”.⁸ By the very fact of challenging established institutions of authority, dissent is by necessity public in nature. It does not matter how big or small the size of the institution. Within the space of desired transformation or change, dissent takes a public nature. Often, this is preceded by private, internal agitations that are disregarded or brazenly ignored. Its public nature also attests to the radical and disruptive nature of dissent. While accepting that “there is no clear-cut line between resistance and dissent”, one should acknowledge that

6 Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *On Dissent: Its Meaning in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

7 Ibid., 4.

8 Ibid.

“what makes resistance *political*, however, and perhaps *transforms* it into dissent, is its purposeful and public nature.”⁹

Analyzed with respect to these three characteristics of intentionality, having a critical orientation, and publicness, the #EndSARS protest shows a certain distinctiveness in the historical line of protests in Nigeria: NAMELY. In this way, #EndSARS redefines or expands the content of the threefold criterion for its own context. I shall first situate the protest within the history of protests in Nigeria beginning from the colonial period before delving into the analysis of the three criteria in relation to #EndSARS.

2 Situating the #EndSARS Protest in Nigeria's History of Dissent

Situating the #EndSARS protest within the history of dissent in Nigeria is not aimed at providing an exhaustive chronological historical account, but rather intends to highlight the non-isolated nature of the 2020 protest. Consequently, the approach taken in the present study is hermeneutical rather than historical *per se*.

The colonial conquest of what is today known as Nigeria was never a history of domination over a willing people. It was rather a horrendous account of exploitation and forceful suppression of any opposition. From the conquest of Lagos in the west—the gateway for the ferrying of extracted goods and captured slaves, the killing of Caliph Attahiru who represented the greatest threat to British rule in the north, the betrayal and exiling of Jaja of Opobo in the south, to the routing of the Aro in the east, the territorial boundaries of Nigeria were marked with the blood of dissidents. Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton highlight the role of violence in British rule in Nigeria. Violence was “the single most important factor” that made it possible for the British to assume and maintain political control over the territory.¹⁰ Indeed, any attempt “to refuse to play by the British rules was to sign one’s own death or deportation warrant.”¹¹

Notwithstanding the British guns and canons, the locals resisted at every turn. In fact, several of these “resistance movements organized themselves from a more grassroots level.”¹² Notable instances include the Brass people who were unanimously opposed to the trade policies of the Royal Niger Company

9 Falk, “The History, Paradoxes, and Utility of Dissent,” 25.

10 Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106.

11 Ibid., 107.

12 Ibid., 108.

as well as the Igbo Ekumeku movement that operated a very decentralized network. Falola and Heaton note how the Ekumeku movement was able to put up the longest resistance against the British for over two decades. Their decentralized system implied that the resistance remained “even in circumstances where their leaders had been neutralized.”¹³ One could argue that the pluralistic nature of people within the territory contributed to the number of dissenting voices, and so, to the number of resistances against the British. Consequently, the British adopted the principle of ‘indirect rule’, thereby turning the locals against one another, as a way of maintaining conformity.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this method did not always yield the intended results at all times.

The legitimacy of ‘indirect rule’ was seriously undermined, for instance, in the wake of the famous 1929 Women’s War in the east. The unjust taxation of the British via their cronies was the causative factor behind the uprising. To suppress the dissent, the British troop murdered 55 women and incarcerated many others.¹⁵ This event remains a significant watershed in the history of dissent in Nigeria notwithstanding that it happened prior to the emergence of any form of national identity.

With the formation of Labour Unions, Civil Unions and Political parties in the 1920s and 1930s, a national identity started to emerge. This would later lead to more coordinated forms of protest. Falola and Heaton record that about 121 trade unions were already registered by 1946. Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti with her Abeokuta Women’s Union (originally founded in 1944 as Abeokuta Ladies’ Club) was one of the prominent faces of dissent by unions against British taxes. She was equally at the forefront of the agitation for women representation.¹⁶ The General Strike of 1945 led by Michael Imoudu over demand for wage increase of rail workers remain equally important. By 1949, the British forces would commit another massacre of miners at Enugu who had used civil disobedience to protest poor wages (Iva Valley Massacre).¹⁷ Together, these instances

13 Ibid.

14 Obaro Ikime, “Reconsidering Indirect Rule: The Nigerian Example,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 4, no. 3 (1968): 421–438; Hiribarren, Vincent. “L’héritage spatial de l’*Indirect Rule* au Nigeria,” *Hérodote* 159, no. 4 (2015): 13–26.

15 Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 133. See also, Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock, *The Women’s War of 1929: A History of Anti-colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2011). For an account of series of resistances by women in southern Nigeria, see Charles Ukeje, “From Aba to Ughorodo: Gender Identity and Alternative Discourse of Social Protest Among Women in the Oil Delta of Nigeria,” *Oxford Development Studies* 32, no. 4 (2004): 605–617.

16 Ibid., 140.

17 Carolyn A. Brown, “We Were All Slaves”: *African Miners, Culture, and Resistance at the*

“marked the rise of a new force in the nationalist struggle for Nigerian unity and self-governance.”¹⁸ Even when these protests were led by locals who were considered illiterate, they were always marked by an articulate purpose and boldly expressed publicly.

The same trend of resistive actions marks the history of post-colonial Nigeria down to the present day. Significant among these would include the Nigeria-Biafra (Civil) War (1967–1970) that was as a result of the secession of the old Eastern Nigeria following political disagreements and the killings. Biafra was a symbol of a sectional (ethnic) dissent within larger Nigeria, led by Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. The perceptions of injustice and marginalization which led to the war has continued to date, thereby producing new voices of dissent led by individuals like Raph Uwazurike of the *Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra* (MASSOB) and Nnamdi Kanu of the *Indigenous People of Biafra* (IPOB), each with his own agenda. There are equally other dissidents in other parts of Nigeria. Examples would include the figureheads of the Niger Delta agitation such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Isaac Adaka Boro, Henry Okah, Asari Dokubo and others. We also have dissident groups and individuals that fought the military government from 1983 to the return of civilian rule in 1999, particularly the leadership of the *National Democratic Coalition* (NADECO).

Prior to the 2020 #EndSARS protest, there have been other forms of protests including the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls campaign that followed the April 14 kidnap of the 276 girls from Government Secondary School in Chibok, and critiqued the Government’s ineptitude in handling the crisis and rescuing the girls. At present 112 girls are yet to be rescued. However, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign did not upset the Nigerian polity as much as the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protest. The Occupy Nigeria protest of 2012 is a conceptualization of citizens’ dissatisfaction with the removal of fuel subsidy by the government of president Goodluck Jonathan. The issues here are not just as simple as stated because Nigerians have always considered cheaper fuel price as the only benefit they get from the government. Even the arguments of the government for its actions were not convincing enough due to lack of trust. More still, the timing of the decision was ill-advised. Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo observes that, “at the heart of the social protest that grounded national economic activities for more than two weeks in Nigeria, from January 2 to 16, were feelings of discontent with governance failures, institutional corruption, and the insensitivity of

Enugu Government Colliery, Social History of Africa Series (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003).

18 Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 144.

the political class to the poverty condition of the people.”¹⁹ There was clearly an accumulation of citizens’ anger, which had reached the limits of its elasticity. The government of the day had ran out of sufficient social capital to assuage the people at that point. Adebayo also alludes to some external causes of the protest when he recognized that the protest was inspired by emerging global events and trends, which Nigerians were very attuned to. Although Adebayo did not provide further explanation, one locates this global influence in the Occupy Movement that started with the occupation of the Zuccotti Park in Downtown Manhattan by activists. This event which happened on 17 September 2011 barely 3 months before the Occupy Nigeria proved very influential in the 2012 protest. In so many ways, the #EndSARS protest recalls the energy of the 2012 Occupy Nigeria, except that it was this time led by the young people, and for more fundamental reasons than the removal of fuel subsidy.

Fundamentally, every society has its own share of dissent, expressed in intellectual, academic forms or in performative actions like strikes, protests, rallies and other forms of civil disobedience. The uniqueness of the #EndSARS protest is that it evokes the religious component of Nigeria’s reality in amplifying the voice of what was rather a socio-political dissent. Both Christian and Islamic elements were made visible at the protest ground. I shall return to this point later.

3 #EndSARS Protest and the Threefold Criteriology

In simple terms the #EndSARS protest was a demand for the disbandment of the *Special Anti-Robbery Squad* (SARS) unit of the *Nigeria Police Force* (NPF) by the young people of Nigeria. This was as a result of multiple incidences of police brutality, in the forms of torture, extortion, molestation, abuse, and even extra-judicial execution, which carried out largely by the SARS unit of NPF. Amnesty International (AI) reported 58 cases of torture in its 2016 report,²⁰ and at least 82 cases between 2016 till 2020. The AI June 2020 Report indicates that “most victims are young men between the ages of 18 and 35, poor and from vulnera-

19 Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo, “Occupy Nigeria Movement, Organized Labour Unions, and Oil-Subsidy Struggle: An Analysis of Processes in Media(ted) ‘Revolution’ and Its Demise,” 37–56 in Baris Çoban, ed., *Social Media and Social Movements: The Transformation of Communication Patterns* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 45.

20 Amnesty International, *Nigeria: “You have signed your death warrant”: Torture and Other Ill Treatment in the Special Anti-Robbery Squad*, Index: AFR 44/4868/2016 (London: Amnesty International Ltd, 2016).

ble groups, and are tortured either to extract information and ‘confessions’ or as punishment for their alleged offences.”²¹ Despite the efforts of human rights organizations such as Amnesty International to seek an end to such impunity and justice for victims, it is most debilitating to note that none of the officers who were found culpable got prosecuted or penalized. Thus, when the protest finally broke out on 8 October 2020, it moved beyond the backdoor advocacy of human rights activists and the chilling stories on social media platforms by victims, to a collective public disapproval of the continued brutality of the security forces. Analysis of the structure of the #EndSARS protest through the lenses of intentionality, criticality and publicness can deepen the analysis of the nature of the people’s discontent with SARS.

3.1 *Intentionality: #EndSARS and the Case of a Clear Agenda*

The #EndSARS protest was never a random agitation that lacked proper articulation. It was rather a well-intentioned protest that carefully outlined its demands in a 5-point schema that showed a proper understanding of the enormity and complexity of the issues at hand and what needs to be done to fix the problem. And as we clearly know, intent is at the core of dissent.²² The demands, which were signed by ‘a Nigerian youth’ was released on 11 October 2020 with the hashtag #5for5, include the following:

1. Immediate release of all arrested protesters
2. Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families
3. Setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct (within 10 days);
4. In line with the new Police Act, psychological evaluation and retraining (to be confirmed by an independent body) of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed;
5. Increase police salary so that they are adequately compensated for protecting live and property of citizens²³

The agenda was deliberately articulated in a style that was reminiscent of the Twitter generation, easy to read, easy to understand, easy to share. Copies of

21 Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Time to End Impunity: Torture and Other Violations by Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)*, Index: AFR 44/9505/2020 (Abuja: Amnesty International Nigeria, 2020), 9.

22 Collins and Skover, *On Dissent*, 6.

23 “Five Demands from #EndSARS Protesters,” 12 October 2020, *Vanguard Newspaper*, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/10/five-demands-from-endsars-protesters/> (accessed 19 May 2023).

were made in the various local languages and distributed nationwide in order to widen the range of inclusivity. While some considered the demands as simplistic given the complexity of the problem and the degree of non-governance in Nigeria, the youths responded by arguing that the #5for5 is but a short term programme for the needed reform in the Nigerian democracy. In fact, they would later come with a 7-point list that anticipated a long-term reform process in the areas like cost of governance, constitutional reforms, and reforms in education, health, youth affairs and public office sectors.²⁴ It is clear that the central intention of the protest is a demand for a new and better Nigeria where there is social justice and respect for human rights.

Another aspect of the intentionality factor of the protest is the seemingly leaderless strategy. One of the features of the Occupy Movement is the “lack of recognizable leaders.”²⁵ The question of leaderless movements has long been interpreted from different, and sometimes, opposing angles. For every form of protest or dissent, the question has always been “who is the leader?” The 2012 Occupy Nigeria protest was basically led by the Nigerian Labour Congress. At some point, opposition politicians came in to advance their cause. In the 2020 #EndSARS protest, the leadership remained intangible, much in line with the original Occupy Movement, which dismantles the traditional understanding of leadership. In fact, “the leadership displayed within the context of the #EndSARS movement turns the question away from ‘who is leading?’ to ‘what exactly is leadership?’ and ‘what does leadership accomplish?’” argues the Staley School of Leadership Studies.²⁶ Leaderless movement therefore does not imply lack of leadership but rather a more decentralized, diffused kind of responsibility towards a common purpose. This was evident in the efficiency with which the #EndSARS protest was organized, in terms of crowdfunding, provision and distribution of protest kits, mobility and feeding, mobilizing

24 This was contained in an online petition that was signed by over 13,000 Nigerian youths. See, Nimot Adetola Sulaimon, “#EndSARS Protesters Highlight 7 Demands for Buhari,” 16 October 2020, *PM News*, <https://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2020/10/16/endsars-protesters-highlight-7-demands-for-buhari/> (accessed 14 May 2023).

25 Kavada, “Creating the Collective,” 873. In his doctoral dissertation, Amir Elmi Keshtiban examines the question of leaderlessness of these groups in detail, and suggests that this might provide “a new template for twenty-first-century political activism”. See, Amir Elmi Keshtiban, *Leadership, Leaderlessness and Leaderless Groups: The Case of the Occupy London Movement* (University of Essex: PhD Thesis, 2018).

26 Staley School of Leadership Studies, “#EndSars: Direction, Alignment, and Commitment via a Hashtag,” *The Loop*, 27 October 2020, <https://blogs.k-state.edu/leadership/2020/10/27/endsars-direction-alignment-and-commitment-via-a-hashtag/> (accessed 19 May 2023).

lawyers to rescue detained protesters, provision of security to forestall the attack by hoodlums that were allegedly sponsored by government, and other logistics. At the helm of this organization is the Feminist Coalition, a group of young Nigerian feminists that had hitherto existed only on Twitter.²⁷ Of course, one of the limits of this leadership model, however, is that it makes negotiation a bit difficult, yet the 'leaderlessness' was an intentional strategy to prevent the intimidation of individuals by the government forces.

Against any claim of spontaneity, the #EndSARS protest was well-organized and was already an outcome of a protracted disagreement between the young people and the state agents. In the scope of the disagreement, protracted cases of police brutality became the provocateur of the 12-day protest. And despite the attempt by the government to suppress the protest by the use of military onslaught against the peaceful and unarmed youths, the dissent has only been driven underground and would eventually re-emerge unless the demands are attended to convincingly.

3.2 *Criticality: #EndSARS and the Urgency of Survival*

As Collins and Skover argues, "there must be something confrontational in a dissenting expression or act".²⁸ Yet mere confrontation does not amount to the degree of criticism that dissent requires. It must be a level of confrontation that insistently demands change of the *status quo*. This is where the criterion of criticality is linked with intentionality. In criticizing the status quo, the dissenter challenges and questions it, and even demands for its reform, where important. In case of the #EndSARS protest, the excesses of the security forces constituted a matter of life and death for the young people. The confrontation, which the protest represented, became as it were the last resort in the failure of appeal to civility and legal processes. But, beyond the agitation for survival, the young people approached the protest with a certain degree of reasonableness.

The fundamental aspect of the rationality that drove the protest was the understanding that the social contract that existed between the people of Nigeria and the government is faulty. Over time there have been promises to reform the SARS without any concrete actions. As such the criticality is intensified

27 Shayera Dark, "Female Leadership in Nigeria's EndSARS Movement Helped it Grow, then Gave it Staying Power," 3 November 2020, *Quartz Africa*, <https://qz.com/africa/1925923/female-leadership-in-nigerias-endsars-protests-was-vital/> (4 June 2021); Azeezat Olaoluwa, "End SARS Protests: The Nigerian Women Leading the Fight for Change," 1 December 2020, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55104025>, (accessed 24 May 2023).

28 Collins and Skover, *On Dissent*, 12.

by the components of doubt and disbelief. Commenting on the cynicism that formed the background of the agitation, acclaimed author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote in the *New York Times*, “because Nigerians are so accustomed to the two-faced nature of their governments, to promises destroyed even before being made, it is unsurprising that the protesters distrust the government and are demanding clear actions rather than words.”²⁹ And being conscious of potential consequences of their dissent, the protesters framed their demands and all of their actions within the ambience of the law. The following two examples illustrate the point well.

First there was an understanding that any confrontation with a government that often disregards the social contract would result in a total breakdown of law and order. Already there are concerns among scholars about the possibility of criticism becoming violent in the process of expressing dissent.³⁰ In a deliberate effort to avoid such a scenario, the #EndSARS protesters opted for a non-violent demonstration notwithstanding the many instances of provocation by state agents. At a point, the organizers had to contract private security firms to guard protesters since the police failed to protect them contrary to the provision of the law. According to the Nigerian legal norms, the right to public dissent, in the forms of peaceful assembly and protest, is provided by Section 40 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) as amended in 2010: “Every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other persons, and in particular he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his interests.” This section of CFRN (which unfortunately is drafted in a non-inclusive language) indicates that dissent is not only about a difference of opinion, but recognizes the particular interest of the dissenter, the right which ought to be protected by the security agents. This provision is also guaranteed by Article 11 of the *African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights* (African Charter) to which Nigeria is a signatory. The protesters remained very peaceful until the fateful night of 20 October 2020 when the government sent soldiers to shoot at protesters at the Lekki Tollgate, a terrible assault that forcibly brought the agitation to an end.

Second is the understanding that central to the protest is the common good which ought to be taken up in a fragmented format. As such the protesters were able to make the critical connection between the act of police brutality and the

29 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “Nigeria is Murdering Its Citizens” 21 October 2020, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/21/opinion/sunday/chimamanda-adichie-nigeria-protests.html%20> (accessed 25 May 2023).

30 Collins and Skover, *On Dissent*, 18.

possible causes. The result is a realization that the police itself is equally a victim of the failed system. Hence, they had to include in their list of demands, the legitimate welfare of the police personnel, their monetary remuneration as well as their psychological wellbeing. Without these essential provisions, the quality of policing in Nigeria would remain abysmal. This move was quite strategic because it provided security operatives with the insight that the protest is equally for their benefit and for the generality of all Nigerians. Better police are to the advantage of the entire society. This explains why the protesters quickly rejected the hurried and ill-conceived renaming of the SARS unit to *Special Weapons and Tactics Team* (SWAT) within 6 days into the protest on 14 October. Such a change in name does not translate to any “fundamental difference” and lacks the “new thinking and fresh orientation” that the protesters demanded.³¹ Indeed, the confrontation that characterized the botched #EndSARS protest was highly critical of any half-measures, deceptions and pretensions of the government, and was intent on achieving the intended objective of true reform.

3.3 *Publicness: #EndSARS and the Betrayal of the Shadows*

For many years, the victims of the SARS suffered in silence in the ‘torture chambers’, some were silenced forever with police bullets, and many others intimidated to disappear into the shadows. The #EndSARS protest was breakaway from the stranglehold of the pain, fear and trauma that were nursed in silence. Of course, the protest would not have been considered as a form of dissent if it lacked this public character. To be able to emerge from the shadows, it became clear that the normal procedure of appealing to judicial processes and back-door advocacy channels had become obsolete, insufficient and ineffective. More so, the publicness was necessitated by the outrage in the face of unbearable dehumanization that is capable of destroying the very fabric of the society.

In considering the public nature of dissent, Collins and Skover offers us three important reasons why dissent must be manifested publicly. The first reason is that in the absence of “a certain degree of public recognition, intentional criticism is likely to be completely ineffective.”³² No political or social form of dissent can happen in private. When confronting an established institution of power for a change or reform in the system, any private act or disagreement could as well be considered as a form of friendly constructive criticism. In the case of police brutality in Nigeria, most of the laudable advocacy acts of

31 Editorial, “SARS: Beyond Name Change,” 18 October 2020, *Business Day*, <https://businessday.ng/editorial/article/sars-beyond-name-change/> (accessed 25 May 2023).

32 Collins and Skover, *On Dissent*, 21.

the Nigerian realtor and human rights activist, Segun Awosanya (Segalinks), amounts to a reform from within. It must be noted that Awosanya was the first to convene an #EndSARS protest as early as 2017.³³ He had since then done a lot of work behind-the-scenes for both the police and the community. The second reason is the fact that there are adverse consequences that result from dissent. There is always a price to pay when one decides to speak truth to power. However, “such dissent is valued precisely because one steps up and assumes the risk.”³⁴ But why should one risk the punishment of dissent, and how is this risk linked to the criterion of publicness? One quick answer is that while the risk is an essential component of the public nature of dissent, it also elicits a moral debate on the subject matter or dissent. The #EndSARS protesters faced the consequences of challenging the Nigerian state as they were subjected to water cannons, tear gas, destruction of their properties, and even bullets. There were also economic as well as emotional costs to the protests. Even in the aftermath of the protest, some participants continue to be persecuted by the state through blocking of bank accounts, seizure of travel documents, and surveillance leading to exile. The third reason is that “the notion of personal integrity—that is, assuming ownership of one’s views” is implied in a public confrontation of institutions.³⁵ While this third point might be challenged by the ‘leaderlessness’ of the protest, it is on record that most protesters were proud to have participated in the event. For them, it is a matter of being part of history, of standing for something right and of finding their voices—tagging themselves the ‘*Soro Soke* generation.’³⁶

Strategy-wise, the #EndSARS protest, beyond expressing public disagreement in the streets across Nigeria, equally leveraged on two factors to amplify their voices in the public. The first was the use of digital media. All social media platforms were buzzing with #EndSARS hashtag and with that the protesters attracted the support of celebrities, politicians and faith leaders all over the world. The efficacy and efficiency with which the protest was organized were as a result of the social media. Every news media wanted to interview the protesters and there were countless zoom meetings during and after the

33 Njideka Agbo, “Nigerian Presidency Has Received the #EndSARS Petition—Segun Awosanya,” 11 August 2018, *The Guardian Newspaper*, <https://guardian.ng/life/nigerian-presidency-has-received-the-endsars-petition-segun-awosanya/> (accessed 25 May 2023).

34 Collins and Skover, *On Dissent*, 21.

35 Ibid., 22.

36 Cf. Motunrola Bisi-Afolabi, “Fela’s Republic and the #EndSARS Protests: How Nigeria’s Youth Found their Own Voice,” *The Republic* 4, no. 4 (2020), <https://republic.com.ng/october-november-2020/felas-republic-endsars-protest/> (accessed 5 June 2021). *Soro Soke* is a Yoruba expression that means ‘speak out!’

protest. The second is the recruitment of Nigerian diaspora which organized massive protests across major cities of the world. Additionally, young Nigerians in strategic positions abroad contributed significantly to fund raising, advocacy and publication efforts in major international news outlets.

Having analyzed the #EndSARS protest in the framework provided by Collins and Skover, it is expedient to account for the moral, epistemological and religious core of the protest in defense of its multiple dimensions.

4 Exploring the Moral Pivot of Public Disagreement

Rational dissent does not occur simply on the basis of scholarly disagreements, according to which the legitimacy of plural voices is guaranteed. Sometimes intellectual disagreements, even when public, can stop at this level. Yet most radical forms of dissent, such as the #EndSARS protest, happen on the grounds of the morality of a particular course of action. Intellectuals often seek “to express the modes of thought we maintain through which we discern right and wrong, past and future, destiny and the wrong way or false step.”³⁷ But questions remain: Is the action morally right or wrong? Does the continual subjugation under a particular rule or law or regulation accord with the framework of *my* conscience? The fact is that every institution—political, cultural, social, legal or religious—in accepting the reality of dissenting voices ought to constantly maintain what Stephen Carter considers as a “public moral dialogue”³⁸ since most dissents touch on the question of morals and morality. In the case of #EndSARS the moral question is never in doubt given the subject matter of police brutality. Analyzing the importance of dissent in the area of moral education, Graham McDonough, insists that,

Considering questions like: ‘Is dissent *required* in order to promote justice; is this *means* of expressing dissent the most justifiable in these circumstances; and is the *content* of this dissent morally correct?’ is an important philosophical starting place for dissenting subjects and groups. If the above set of questions cannot be answered positively, then the value of the dissent is seriously eroded, mitigated or neutralised. Dissent might be required to remedy injustice, but if the remedial means would use pro-

37 Dorfman, “Intellectuals and Dissent,” 202.

38 Stephen L. Carter, *The Dissent of the Governed: A Meditation on Laws, Religion, and Loyalty* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 98.

paganda and violence for its cause, the lack of a strong factual base and peaceful approach quickly taints its (prescriptive) moral adequacy.³⁹

By implication, the moral adequacy of dissent lies not only in its disapproval of unjust structures and institutions, but must provide a legitimate means of expressing its discontent. In other words, once the option of violence is taken up by dissenters as a means of registering displeasure with any (morally wrong) law, the ethical or moral value of the dissent is compromised. The #EndSARS protesters properly understood the implication of such moral compromise and did everything within their power to avoid any resort to violence despite obvious provocations.

To probe further, could there be other illegitimate means of publicly addressing disagreement that do not involve violence? What happens when justice cannot be guaranteed by the legitimate structures of expressing dissent in the society? These questions capture the tension between violent and nonviolent forms of dissent. Even supra-legal actions, which involve “a public appeal to some morality that is said to be higher than law”⁴⁰ can either be violent or non-violent. Various forms of civil disobedience by the civil rights movements in the 60s were both nonviolent and illegal. To highlight the ambivalence of supra-legal actions, Yale law professor, Stephen Carter refers to a possible motive at play in this context when he indicates that “not only will nonviolent action sometimes be less effective than violent action, but [...] nonviolent action at times entails greater social costs than violent action.”⁴¹ It all goes back to the age-long long question in Scholastic philosophical ethics of whether an unjust law (such as the one that commands engagement in an unjust war) should be obeyed.

With regard to the proper response to unjust laws, there exists within the Catholic social tradition, the concept of ‘conscientious objection’ which is predicated on the formation of the right conscience, and an appeal to a higher moral order or command. In this tradition, one learns that “where citizens are oppressed by a public authority overstepping its competence, they should not protest against those things which are objectively required for the common good; but it is *legitimate* for them to defend their own rights and the rights of their fellow citizens against the abuse of this authority, while keeping within

39 Graham P. McDonough, “Why Dissent is a Vital Concept in Moral Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 39, no. 4 (2010): 421–436; 430.

40 Stephen L. Carter, “Dissent of the Governors,” *Tulane Law Review* 63, no. 6 (1988–1989): 1325–1362; 1327.

41 *Ibid.*, 1328.

those limits drawn by the natural law and the Gospels.”⁴² Legitimacy in this case, is drawn not only from the legal principles of the state but from higher moral authorities that are provided, in this instance, by the natural law and the Gospels. In fact, there is a great deal of theological debate on the concept of *conscientious objection* beginning from Augustine and Aquinas to the Spanish Francisco de Vitoria, Francisco Suárez, and the Dutch Protestant Hugo Grotius with variations of positions. These principles are equally expressed in official social teachings of the church and have guided decisions of Catholics in practical moral situations like war, euthanasia and decisions on abortion.⁴³

Yet from another dimension, the accent to a higher moral compulsion to dissent in the face of unjust legal conditions uncovers a tacit subjection to the existing laws as a way of making the intentionality of dissent public. It goes this way: Once I am opposed to an unjust law and consequently dissent by a public act of disobedience, three things happen. First, my act of public disobedience already constitutes an act of dissent. Second, my recognition that my action is subject to punishment under the laws of the institution *is* intentional in itself. Third, the intention is aimed at turning the punishment as a way of raising my dissent unto a second level of publicness; a publicness that might trigger a *public moral dialogue*. Ironically, therefore, legal penalty constitutes a public action that highlights the moral questions behind the dissent.

Punishment is a social act. It is not simply something that the society does, but something that the society does *to* someone, and in a just society, the fact of punishment is difficult to ignore because the subject of the punishment is a real person. The punishment itself sparks a dialogue. the loving and faithful acceptance of it shows the highest respect for the rule of law and also for the moral vision of the rest of the society, the rest of the people.⁴⁴

The idea of a ‘just society’ here must be distinguished from the morality of the law that necessitated the punishment of dissent. The presumption of a ‘just

42 Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* [GS] (7 December 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed 26 May 2023), § 74. Italics mine.

43 cf. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, § 51; GS § 79; Roger Bergman, “Conscientious Objection to Unjust War: From Augustine to John Paul II,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 14 (2017): 28–43.

44 Carter, “Dissent of the Governors,” 1347.

society' rests on the universal character of human beings to seek moral goodness, and as such, to be morally discerning beings. This does not in any way foreclose the fact that opinions would remain divided to some extent. Yet, the dialogue on the moral content of an act of dissent as well as the law remain a matter of public discourse and scrutiny. Little wonder the #EndSARS protest generated a lot of debate particularly in the event of the use of lethal force against protesters by state agents. The dire consequences of confronting the political establishment on moral grounds ironically created a second level of publicness.

Nonetheless, one might wonder if this implies that every act of dissent is a morally good act, irrespective of the violent or nonviolent means of expressing or exercising it. In the public debate that followed the #EndSARS protest, opinions remain divided. Some who opposed the protest have blamed the #EndSARS protesters of being responsible for the evil that befell them given their strategy of non-representation. This raises another set of questions that go beyond the issue of leadership or lack thereof. Put simply: When is dissent good? When is dissent bad? Exploring this concern would require examining the epistemological value of dissent.

5 On the Epistemological Value of Dissent in a Political Institution

Most political philosophers have long considered the question of epistemology when confronted with disagreements and lack of consensus on intellectual discourses.⁴⁵ Does disagreement within a group suggest the lack of knowledge among the disagreeing parties? Is the lack of knowledge, partial or total? Since epistemology not only deals with the presence or absence of knowledge, but equally of the *how* or mode of knowing, could disagreement therefore suggest a wrong way of knowing? A wrong way of knowing, in a given case, might imply a sound argument with a false premise or a correct premise with a faulty logic. It could also emerge from lack of clarity about the subject matter under discourse, in which the partial knowledge becomes detrimental to any consensus-

45 Cf. David Chalmaers, "Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?" *Philosophy* 90, no. 1 (2015): 3–31; Herman Cappelen, "Disagreement in Philosophy; An Optimistic Perspective," 56–74 in Guiseppina D'Oro and Søren Overgaard, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Daniel Stoljar, *Philosophical Progress: In Defense of a Reasonable Optimism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Tooma Lott, "Disagreement and Knowledge: The Case of Plato's *Alcibiades*," *Trames* 24 (74/69), no. 3 (2020): 403–421.

building effort. In some other cases, the confusion on the nature of the subject matter may be as a result of the multiple dimensions of the subject matter in question. Disagreement, on one instance, might be about concrete facts, while on another instance, might focus on fundamental issues. In a situation, for instance, where the disagreement is about the nature of policing (#EndSARS), as the primary subject matter, the focus of a discourse may either be on the cases of police brutality, the welfare and training of police (facts) or on the nature of the policy document on policing in Nigeria (fundament). Sometimes the nature of the *fundament* affects the *facts*, such that disagreements at one end might lead to disagreements at the other end. Depending on the epistemological framework an individual operates, arguments may become conflated in the process due to divergent epistemic backgrounds.

When disagreements mature to dissent of a public nature as in the 2020 #EndSARS protest, an epistemic field is created in line with the three criteria that I had laid out earlier on. Epistemologically, the *intentionality* of an act of dissent in view of transformation rests on a claim to a higher or clearer knowledge about the target subject matter within the institution. The understanding of the equality of all men and women became the rationale behind the *Civil Rights Movements* in America or the contemporary *Black Lives Matter Movement*. In the case of #EndSARS the sanctity of life and the entire charter on human rights charter constitute the fundamental knowledge upon which the agitation rests. These claims to knowledge are *critical* because they are perceived to have consequence on how people within the community behaves, believes or understands the world around them. The re-shaping or reconstructing of knowledge systems which most acts of dissent seek to achieve is part of an epistemological field of concern. Meanwhile, to characterize dissent as *public* in this sense would not only be restricted to its disidentification as a private matter—in which case it is brought to the open. But it also implies a transfer of such ‘discovery’ of ‘new’ knowledge to others. The epistemic public access serves to achieve two key objectives. The first is to appeal to a public dialogue and judgement, which resonates with what I have previously discussed on the value of punishment. The second is to form an epistemic coalition in order to build a robust movement around the subject matter of dissent. When intellectuals or influential persons champion dissent, they articulate what most people have either fully or fragmentally come to recognize. Despite the success rate of the #EndSARS protest, it is clear that a large constituency of mostly unenlightened youths were left out in the process. In fact, those that belong to this excluded section were easily recruited by the state agents to infiltrate and disrupt the protest from within. Notwithstanding the strategy deployed by the protesters to forestall infiltration, situations like this require that the key actors

carry out the epistemic labour on behalf of the many of making the dissent as inclusive as possible.

Epistemic coalition of public dissent leads to division of epistemic labour in which people “depend on one another epistemically.”⁴⁶ The understanding of epistemic labour and its division in this essay is slightly different from how it functions in many arguments regarding the epistemology of disagreements. While such literatures argue about how disagreements can lead to collective intelligence,⁴⁷ the concept is used here to highlight the implication of the ‘public’ characteristic of dissent as a way of building coalition with those who equally disagree covertly or anonymously. Those belonging to this category are people whose private opinions over a subject matter, within an institution, align with the articulations, agitations, and argumentations of a public dissenter. No idea completely stands alone. There are always corroborators, justifiers, and sympathizers of dissent protagonists; some with substantial understanding, others with partial or fragmented knowledge of the subject matter. The building of epistemic coalition is most expedient in the aftermath of the #EndSARS protest since the critical task at the center of the dissent is transformation of governance in Nigeria. Certainly, this objective goes beyond the issue of police brutality against young people, and would require the collaboration of Nigerians of all categories.

6 Conclusion

Regrettably, the 2020 #EndSARS protest came to a sad end when soldiers opened fire on the unarmed protesters, thereby unleashing a chaos that the nation is yet to recover from. This action is no different from those actions taken by the colonial forces when they turned their guns at the dissenting women at Aba in 1929 or at the poor miners at Iva Valley in 1949. There are still many residues of colonial attitude in Nigeria that have refused to give way for meaningful engagement with citizens. However, one wonders whether the #EndSARS protesters were quite presumptive of the emergence of a ‘new dawn’ in Nigeria. In other words, did the protesters overestimate the civility of what is supposed to be a democratic space? If the intentionality of the protest was intelligent enough, was it critical enough to take into serious consideration the

46 Bjørn G. Hallsson and Klemens Kappel, “Disagreement and The Division of Epistemic Labour,” *Synthese* 197 (2020): 2823–2847; 2824.

47 Ibid., 2827.

nature of the political space in which the public disagreement was to be exercised or did it just decide to dare the risk? Like I did mention in the essay, the situation was a matter of life and death and there was no other option than taking the risk. In that case, even the Lekki massacre remains an aspect of the calculated risk, one that did not 'end' the protest as it were, but rather raised the moral debate to another level. More still, the consequences of the protest not only confirmed the legitimacy of the protest but also provided a sketch board for the re-assessment and re-strategizing of dissent in Nigeria. Overall, the moral foundation of the #EndSARS protest remains very compelling in building up epistemological coalitions that are needed to achieve the targeted objectives. As for both the government and its security agencies, the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka admonishes that it is time to "commence a meaningful, lamentably overdue dialogue with society." He commands: "Do not attempt to dictate—Dialogue!"⁴⁸

48 Wole Soyinka, "DÉJÀ VU—In Tragic Vein," *Ktravula—A Travelogue!* (21 October 2020), <http://www.ktravula.com/2020/10/deja-vu-in-tragic-vein-by-wole-soyinka/> (accessed 26 May 2023).