Governance, COVID-19 and Youth Uprising in Nigeria: From Peaceful to Violent Engagement

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Abstract

This study provided a historical account of youth uprising in Nigeria since the return to civil rule in 1999 and demonstrated how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the strategies of youth social movement in Nigeria. It does so within the context of the following questions: Why did the passage of age reduction bill fail to end violent youth movements across Nigeria? How did the COVID-19 pandemic deepen the adoption of violence as a strategy for youth led social movement? The study employed the process tracing technique (Collier, 2011) and relied on secondary sources for data collection. The study is anchored on the Frustration-Aggression theory to present two key arguments: The age reduction bill increased the space for youth political participation but did not translate to enhanced governance needed to address frustrations which drives youth uprising in the country. Secondly, the ineffective governance of COVID-19 palliatives and lockdown measures associated with the pandemic interacted with entrenched economic and political frustration of the youth to trigger adoption of violent engagement strategies by the youth as exemplified by the #EndSARS protest. The study contends that youth-led social movement in Nigeria has oscillated from peaceful to violent engagement in reaction to the character of governance at every epoch.

Keywords: COVID-19; Youth; Social Movement; Governance

Introduction

Governance is used to refer to the way in which a government performs its functions as well as the process of social engagement between the rulers and the ruled in a society (Nnoli, 2003). Given that the powers of the government relative to the people is usually overwhelming due to the control the rulers have over the apparatus of government including the monopoly over the use of force, the masses have various instrumentalities at their disposal to balance the powers of government and to ensure their voices are heard. One of such instrumentalities at the disposal of the popular masses is social movement.

Social movements have been aptly defined by Ndongo (2014, p. 31) as "collective protest action targeting a given adversary". The current decade has seen rise in social movements across West Africa mainly driven by the youth. Between 2005 and 2014 alone, about 40 African countries have experienced various forms of youth-led protests (Branch and Mampilly cited in Chaturvedi 2016). There is a consensus among writers that this increasing youth-led social movement in Africa is connected to the economic hardship and marginalisation they suffer in their countries (Chouli 2015; Alwazir 2016; Chaturvedi 2016; Akor 2017). Information and communication technology (ICT) has also been identified as being significant in shaping youth responses to globalisation by serving as a tool for mobilisation and providing the space for youth to influence discourses on governance (Iwilade 2013; Bruijn & Both, 2017).

The youth led social movements have turnout successful outcome in some instances. For instance, the Not-Too-Young-To-Run (NTYTR) movement in Nigeria succeeded in getting the government to amend the law thereby reducing the age limit for elective positions to accommodate younger generation. Similarly, under the umbrella of Balle Citoyen (Citizens Broom) in 2014, Burkinabe ousted the former President Blaise Compaore from office over an attempt to amend the constitution to enable him contest for election in 2015. Again, in Senegal, between 2011 and 2012 youths indulged in both violent and peaceful demonstration to resist attempt by incumbent President Abdoulaye Wade to actualize his third term presidential ambition. Thus, through movements such as *Y'en A Marre* ("Fed Up!"or "Enough is Enough!") aimed at resisting the third term presidential bid of President Abdoulaye Wade, the youth contributed to the defeat of Wade at the polls in 2012 (Diome, 2014; Gueye, 2013).

While existing scholarship tends to focus so much on the successes and otherwise of youth led social movements, it is germane to interrogate the connection between governance and youth led social movements with particular attention to how the character of governance informs the oscillation in the strategies adopted by youth-led social movements. This study contributes by demonstrating that youth uprisings have continued to oscillate from peaceful to violent engagement depending on the character of governance and how it is able to address or frustrate the aspirations of the youth with regards their political inclusion and material condition.

The study relied on documentary approach involving use of secondary sources. Thus, data for the study are largely qualitative data obtained from credible journals, text books and official publications. We adopted process tracing technique (Collier, 2011) to provide diachronic analysis of youth led social movements in Nigeria. Process tracing technique involves two connected activities – description and sequence. Description involves analysis of trajectories of change and causation which provides explanation for the phenomenon of under investigation, while sequence gives close attention to sequences of independent, dependent and intervening variables (Collier, 2011; Okoli, 2020). Thus, process tracing technique enabled analysis of the critical junctures in social movements particularly as it concerns the oscillation from peaceful engagement to violent engagement

Perspectives on Governance and Social Movement

Chouli (2015) demonstrated that the 2014 uprising in Burkina Faso is one slice of a whole uprising connected to the historical struggle by the masses to alleviateeconomic hardship and political misrule. Chouli was able to narrate attempt by a class of military officers to hijack the insurrection and take over government. Despite this attempt for a class analysis of the insurrection, the study could not underpin the role of youths in the insurrection. Contrary to the framing of political protests in as a phenomenon taking place in both rural and urban areas, Chaturvedi (2016), presented the political protests in Africa since the 1990s as urban based activities undertaken by proletariats existing in urban slums and making their living from the informal sectors of the urban centres. The author conceptualized these urban proletariats as symptoms of unemployment and poverty associated with capitalism, who have congealed into an army of dissatisfied masses willing to revolt against economic reforms that entrenchhardship. Based on the 2012 Occupy Nigeria Movement against increase in the price of fuel (premium motor spirit), Chaturvedi contends that protests by urban proletariats in reaction to the hardship caused by economic reforms are not necessarily an attempt to overthrow the state but to reshape the relationship between the state and the protesters (urban proletariats) and the state in order to improve the wellbeing of the latter.

Drawing from the experiences and responses of youth in Chad and Mali, Bruijn and Both (2017) treated globalisation as an enabler of youth protests across Africa south of Sahara by revealing the role of information communication technology (ICT) in

information sharing and mobilisation for protest among the youth. Through the internet and social media, youth are able to share information on their state of marginalisation and political oppression by the state, and are also able to compare their deprivation with the experiences of youth in other parts of the world where access to basic amenities like education and healthcare better. According to the writers, it is these 'feelings of marginality' and 'hopelessness' (p.789) among the youth shared through the internet that stimulate organized action by the youth contesting the legitimacy of their states. Meanwhile, the work of Bruijn and Both present example of 'unsuccessful' protests by youth by demonstrating how the authoritarian regimes in Chad and Mali are able to defeat the youth through support provided by external agents who support the authoritarian regime in the fight against 'terrorism' in the states but ignore demand by the youth for better livelihood.

In another development, Alwazir (2016) analyzed how demand for socio-economic welfare and anti-corruption crusade gave rise to the 2011 youth protests across Yemen. The study revealed that youth protest is not a one-off activity by showcasing how the 2011 protests led by the youth further gave birth to localised movements carried out by various youth groups – the Marib Cause which mobilised youths in Marib to demand resource redistribution, and the Al-watan which emerged as a political party. The author revealed how the frustration arising from removal of oil subsidies by the Yemeni state in the face of deteriorating social amenities led to some members of the Marib Cause joining some armed militia groups such as Ansarullah in order to take up arms against the state for socio-economic neglect and marginalisation.

Iwilade (2013) advanced compelling argument to demonstrate that globalisation and specifically the 2008 global crisis was at the root of youth protests in Africa in the last two decades. According to the writer, unlike previous protests in Nigeria, the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protest was a resistance to globalisation driven state policies which was remarkable in the sense that it demonstrated a shift from protests led by adult interest groups to protests led by youth seeking to renegotiate their place within the political milieu in which they are dominated and excluded. Like, Bruijn and Both (2017), Iwilade underpinned the central role of social media, which are products of globalisation, in facilitating the protests. Meanwhile, in line with Chaturvedi (2016), Iwilade framed the

protest as an urban based protest driven by middle-class urban youth socialized into the globalized youth culture. Again, the skills of these youth in social media contributed to the non-violent nature of the protest in that through the social media, the youth adopted humour, music and dancing to express their grievances and renegotiate their place and space. Akor (2017) agreed that the social media was a strong force in the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protest which challenged the patrimonial system in which the youth is excluded economically, politically and otherwise. However, the author argued persuasively that the dynamics of the protest and the manner in which the youth were excluded from the negotiation that ended the protest reveal the neo-patrimonial character of the Nigerian state where, despite pretending as independent actors, the youth remain subalterns to dominant political groups.

Engels (2015) analysed the protests in Burkina Faso since 2008 as one continuous chain of protests linked to each other and targeted against neoliberal political and economic structures of globalisation. While the 2008 protest was triggered by food price increase, the 2014 protest was triggered by attempt by President Compaire to constitutionally extend his tenure in office. The writer appropriated the concept of 'popular classes' to contend that all poor masses irrespective of demographic differences participated in the riots, but still averred that the youth were active in the protests. Like Chaturvedi's analysis of the 2012 protest in Nigeria, the study further shows the dominance of the informal sector proletariat in the protest. In contrast to Akor's analysis, Engels is able to demonstrate that unorganized riots by subalterns (including youth) provide a building block on which other organized groups can pursue and even achieve economic and social justice in favour of the popular classes.

Altogether, these studies focus on mere description of the social movements without providing teleological analysis of youth movements to demonstrate the trend of oscillation in such movements. Again, some of the studies present a benign analysis of the outcome of the movements by assuming that each movement builds up to earlier movements to liberate the popular classes. Some others treat each movement as an isolated case without presenting analysis of how the entrenched frustration in the socio-economic and political milieu incubate aggressive social movements particularly the

youth. This study therefore attempts to address this yawning *lacuna* in existing scholarship.

Understanding Youth Violent Movement from the Lenses of Frustration Aggression Theory

The study adopts the frustration aggression theory to explain the link between governance and social movement in Nigeria. The theory is traced to the works of Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939) and further extended by more recent scholars like Breuer and Elson (2017). The theory views frustration as an event resulting in the termination of reinforcement that has previously maintained a behavior. Other key assumptions of the theory relevant to this study are:

- The occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration
- In addition to aggression, frustration can engender increase of prejudice
- Strong aggressive reactions are those directed towards the perceived sources of the frustration

In the light of the basic assumptions of the frustration aggression theory, the violent movement by the Nigeria youth is explained from the context of the frustration suffered by the Nigerian youth particularly the deprivation and worsening material conditions of the youth connected to the implementation of neoliberal policies by the Nigerian government since the return to civil rule in 1999. Although the NTYTR movement exemplified attempts by the youth to resort to peaceful engagement, but the resort to violence as showcased by the #endsars movement points to the entrenched frustration of the youth in the Nigerian system and the continuous emergence of violent movements by the youth to vent their frustration against the Nigerian state perceived as the source of their frustration.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion
Youth Movement in Nigeria: From Spontaneous Violent Movements to Organized Peaceful Social Movements

The 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement as a form of youth led violent movement

The 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement was a response to the fuel subsidy removal by the federal government. It needs to be noted that with return to civil rule in 1999, Nigeria pursued neoliberal economic reforms as a development strategy for addressing the mounting external debt, unemployment and poverty in the country. Accordingly, the

National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) was articulated and adopted in 2004 to provide the framework for the country's neoliberal reforms. The NEEDS, which stands on four pillars (wealth creation; employment generation; poverty reduction and value reorientation), emphasized minimal role of the state in the economy and private sector led development through privatization, deregulation and liberalization (Nigerian National Planning Commission [NPC], 2004). The pursuit of neoliberal economic reforms created conditions that facilitated capital accumulation by local elites and foreign interests but worsened the material conditions of the masses through retrenchment, alienation from material sources of livelihood, increase in the price of essential commodities.

With regards to the downstream subsector of the oil sector, Nigeria aggressively pursued removal of subsidy from kerosene, gas and petrol. The removal of subsidy from petrol usually elicits the highest resistance from the masses. Thus, on 1st January 2012, in line with the neoliberal economic reforms of President Goodluck Jonathan's led administration the federal government of Nigerian announced removal of subsidy from petrol which automatically increased the official price from 65 naira per litre to 141 naira per litre. This raised transport fares by about 300 percent and trapped most people who had travelled for the yuletide celebration in their hometowns (Akor, 2017). This announcement, the attendant increase and artificial scarcity of the product created widespread backlash against the government leading to spontaneous and sporadic protests across major cities in the country. Youth poured into the streets and demanded for reversal of official price of petrol to 65 naira per litre. The protests were characterized by road blocks and demonstrations led mostly by the youth in collaboration with other CSOs under the moniker of 'Occupy Nigeria'. The country's labour union – Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) – declared full strike and agreed to negotiate with the government on behalf of the masses.

Evidently, the Occupy Nigeria movement exemplified the adoption of sporadic violence as a strategy by youth to resist hardship imposed on them by neoliberal economic policies of the government. A review of the outcome of these modes of engagement revealed that youth have not only remained the major victims of such violence but in most cases failed to achieve the objective of the protest or any meaningful
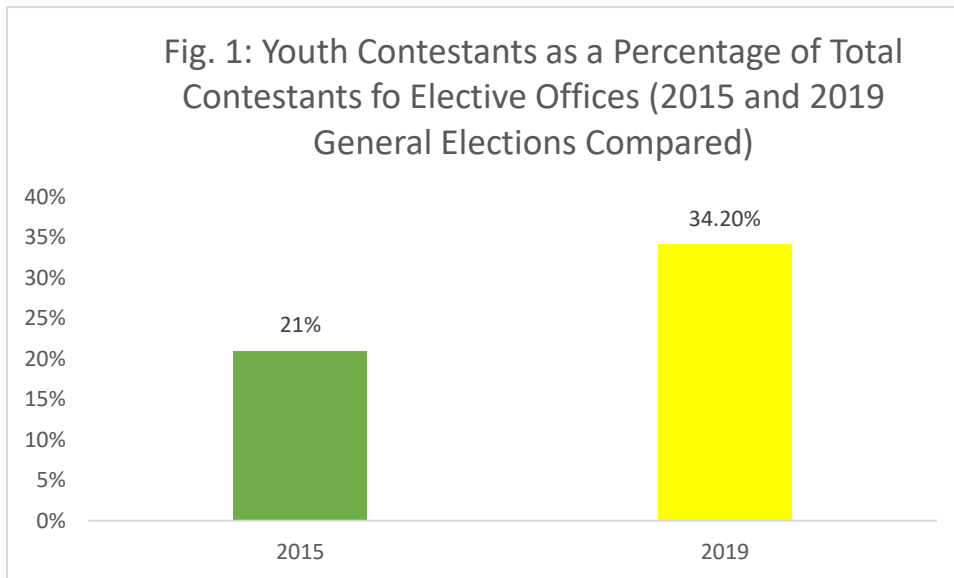
result to ameliorate the economic hardship which triggered such movement. For instance, despite the protest against fuel price increase over the years, available data demonstrate that successive regimes have continued to increase prices of petrol particularly since 1999 from when it increased from 20 naira to 165 naira in 2021.

The Not-too-young-to-run movement as a form of peaceful movement by the youth

While, the Occupy Nigeria movement was triggered by the perceived economic hardship connected with fuel subsidy removal, by 2016, the youth led another movement aimed at addressing the political exclusion of youth from governance. This time the movement was more organized and was carried out under the banner of Not-Too-Young-To-Run (NTYTR). The NTYTR was conceived in 2016 as a movement driven by Nigerian youth seeking for reduction in constitutional requirement of age limit for contesting political positions in Nigeria. This movement was powered by a Nigerian-based organization known as the Youth Initiative for Advocacy Growth and Advancement (YIAGA Africa), which facilitated the formation of the NTYTR movement and sustained the campaign towards the passage of NTYTR Bill.

The movement successfully actualized the objective of promoting a legal framework that would deepen youth representation in political offices when on 31st May 2018, the NTYTR Bill was signed into law in Nigeria. The signing of the NTYTR Bill into law translated to reduction of age limit required for contesting various political positions. Age requirement for the position of President/Vice President was reduced from 40years to 35years, that of senate and state governors was reduced from 35years to 30years, age for state assembly was reduced to 25years. This led to increase in number of youth contesting for various political offices as shown in figure 1. Table 1 further showed that the percentage of youth who contested for various political offices was quite high during the 2019 election.
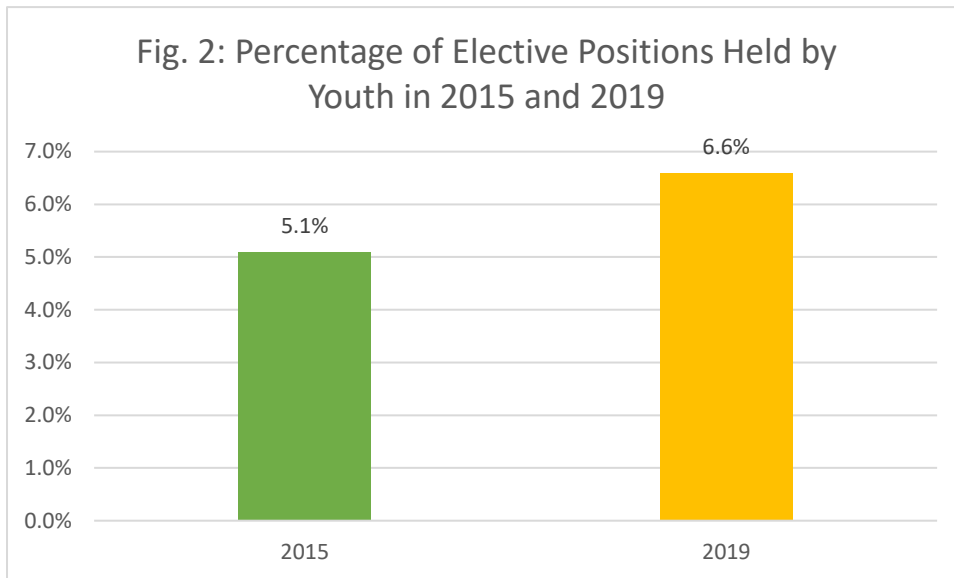
Fig. 1: Youth Contestants as a Percentage of Total Contestants fo Elective Offices (2015 and 2019 General Elections Compared)

Source: YIAGA Africa (2019): How Youth Fared in the 2019 Elections. Abuja: YIAGAAfrica

Table 1: Breakdown of Youth Candidacy in 2019 General Elections

S/No.	Elective Offices	Total Candidates	Youth Candidates	Youth as a % of total
1	Senate	1904	253	13.5%
2	House of Representatives	4680	1262	27.4%
3	State House of Assembly	14138	5914	41.8%
4	Governorship	1059	104	9.8%

Source: YIAGA Africa (2019): How Youth Fared in the 2019 Elections. Abuja: YIAGAAfrica

Further, the age reduction bill also saw increase in number of elective positions held by the youth post 2019 election. Figure 2 showed that the percentage of elective public offices held by the youth increased from 5.1% in 2015 to 6.6% in 2019 (YIAGA Africa, 2019).

Fig. 2: Percentage of Elective Positions Held by Youth in 2015 and 2019

[Bar chart: 2015 = 5.1%, 2019 = 6.6%; y-axis from 0.0% to 7.0%]

Source: YIAGA Africa (2019): How Youth Fared in the 2019 Elections. Abuja: YIAGAAfrica

What is remarkable about the NTYTR movement is that it adopted peaceful strategies of engaging relevant stakeholders throughout, from the inception of the movement till the time the age reduction bill was signed into law. Yet, the achievements attributed to the movement are outstanding in the area of youth political education and inclusion in governance.

Governance, COVID-19 Pandemic and Resurgence of Violent Youth Led Movement

The reduction in age for contesting political offices and the consequent increase in youth representation in governance did not translate to improved governance needed to enhance the material conditions of the youth. Thus, despite reduction of age for contesting political offices and the increase in number of youths holding political offices due to the NTYTR movement, poverty and unemployment among youth remained high, corruption particularly grand corruption among elites remained high in Nigeria. For instance, youth unemployment in Nigeria has continued to soar. Available statistics as presented in table 2 and figure 3 showed that the number of unemployed persons increased from 5.534 million persons in the first quarter of 2015 to 23.187 million persons in the fourth quarter of 2020. Quarter four, 2020 unemployment statistics showed that the unemployment rate stood at 33.3% (23,187,389 out of labour force of 69,675,468), an increase from the 27.1% recorded in Q2, 2020 (NBS, 2021).

Table 2: Nigeria Unemployment Statistics, 2015 to 2020

Year/Quarter	Fully Employed	Unemployed	Working Age Population ('000)
2015-Quarter1	55,694	5,534	102,824
2015-Quarter2	54,376	6,063	103,568
2015-Quarter3	55,217	7,518	104,314
2015-Quarter4	54,506	8,036	105,023
2016-Quarter1	53,978	9,485	106,001
2016-Quarter2	57,347	11,895	106,690
2016-Quarter3	57,574	11,897	108,033
2016-Quarter4	57,923	11,680	108,592
2017-Quarter1	53,829	11,926	109,439
2017-Quarter2	52,676	13,585	110,287
2017-Quarter3	51,061	15,998	111,134
2017-Quarter4	51,166	17,671	112,119
2018-Quarter1	51,154	19,251	113,169
2018-Quarter2	51,174	20,344	114,311
2018-Quarter3	51,327	20,928	115,493
2020-Quarter2	35,585	21,765	116,871
2020-Quarter4	30,572	23,187	122,049

Source: Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (2021)

Corruption has also worsened in the country thereby further obstructing delivery of public goods and services. Corruption manifests in all sectors of Nigerian economy and remains a major obstacle stifling development in the country. Over the years Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) has continued to score and rank Nigeria poorly in its assessment of corruption in the country. Table 3 showed that as of 2020, Nigeria's position has continued to worsen as the country ranked 146 out of 180. One disturbing form of corruption is the corruption within the security sector particularly the Nigeria Police which has gained notoriety in extortion of youth and abuse of their human rights sometimes under the guise of clamping down cyber criminals among those labelled *yahoo boys*. The *yahoo boys* is label used to refer to crop of young boys involved in forms of criminality particularly internet frauds.

Table 3: Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), 2013 to 2020

Year	Rank out of 180 countries	Score out of 100%
2013	114	25
2014	136	26
2015	136	26
2016	136	28

2017	148	27
2018	144	27
2019	146	26
2020	149	25

Source: Transparency International (2021)

The trend of deterioration is the same in the area of governance. The 2020 Ibrahim Index for African Governance which assesses governance performance in African countries with regards to delivery of public goods and services and public policy outcomes shows that Nigeria has continued to perform poorly in overall governance and with specific regards to all the four key performance indicators used to assess governance as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Ranking and Scores of Nigeria in 2020 Ibrahim Index for African Governance

Governance Index	Rank out of 54 countries	Score out of 100%
Participation, Rights and Inclusion	32	43.6
Security & Rule of Law	34	44.3
Human Development	37	46.5
Foundations for Economic Opportunity	28	47.8
Overall Governance Index	**34**	**45.5**

Source: 2020 Ibrahim Index for African Governance

These deficits in governance were exacerbated by the onslaught of COVID-19 to deepen the frustration of the youth especially against the government perceived as the source of youth frustration. The first round of COVID-19 impact monitoring conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) demonstrated that by April 2020 only 43% of persons surveyed reported that they were working, meaning that about half of those who were working before the start of the COVID-19 outbreak had stopped working following the outbreak.

The accentuated hardship and frustration occasioned by the COVID-19 created the space for emergence of violent social movements among the youth. The #EndSARS movement stands out as one of such violent movements experienced in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. It needs to be noted that the #EndSARS movement started in 2017 as a social media campaign demanding for police reform and more specifically, disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit by the government. Although the renewed #EndSARS movement which commenced on 4th October 2020 was

triggered by a viral video showing extrajudicial killing of a youth and confiscation of his Lexus SUV by the SARS unit in Delta State, the movement gained support of the popular masses particularly the youth who were frustrated and disenchanted with the governance in the country. Even though the protest started as a peaceful movement, it turned violent across many cities in the country when the security agencies reportedly shot at peaceful protesters at the Lekki Toll Gage. The violent response by the state gave room for the protest to be hijacked by more radical youth including criminals who used the opportunity to set up fires across major streets, destroyed public properties, torched and looted businesses including banks. Many of the protesters joined the movement to demonstrate their grievances with governance and economic hardship in the country. A survey conducted by Africa Polling Institute (API) (2020) showed that 60% of respondents agreed the #EndSARS movement was an outcry against poor governance in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, in the midst of the violence associated with the #EndSARS, the country experienced another violent movement by the youth. This time, the violence was targeted at the COVID-19 palliatives alleged to have been hidden away by the political elites across the country. The looting of COVID-19 palliatives further showed the level of hunger among the people and their distrust for the government at all levels. Based on the foregoing, this study locates the #EndSARS movement and the associated violence within the context youth social movement occasioned by governance deficit and economic deprivation suffered by the youth. The study therefore makes two key submissions about the violence associated with the recent #EndSARS protest and looting of COVID-19 palliatives:

- The oscillation of youth social movement from peaceful to violent movement as exemplified by the recent #EndSARS protest is connected to the entrench political and economic deprivation suffered by the youth which became exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic to accentuate their of frustration and their angst against the government.
- As a corollary to the above, state's ineffective response to COVID-19 evidenced by poor administration of COVID-19 palliatives in the midst of worsening material condition of the popular masses mobilized the youth to resort to violence against the state.

Conclusion

The study examined the connection between governance, administration of COVID-19 palliatives and the incidence of youth uprising in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study contends that youth-led social movement in Nigeria has oscillated from peaceful engagement to violent engagement in reaction to the character of governance at every epoch. The age reduction bill increased the space for youth political participation but did not translate to enhanced governance needed to provide economic opportunities for the youth in the country. Secondly, the ineffective governance of COVID-19 palliatives and lockdown measures associated with the pandemic interacted to trigger adoption of violent strategies to engage the government. With the continuous deterioration of governance and worsening of material condition of youth, the country may experience increase violent social movements. Attempts by the state to deploy force in repressing such violent movements will lead to more radicalization of youths.

Policy Recommendations and Implementation Strategies

Civil Society Organizations: CSOs should deepen support and capacity building for youth groups to adopt non-violent engagement strategies. The CSOs should strive to create platforms which bring together youth groups and government for peaceful engagement.

The Government: There should be more transparency in government particularly in the areas of revenue mobilization and allocation. Government should create channels that facilitate peaceful engagement with youth and involve youth in the process of governance. The material conditions of the youth should be enhanced by creating enabling environment which enable small and business scale enterprises to thrive through providing tax holidays and eliminating extortion by government agents.

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