



EXPLORING COVID-19 AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN AFRICA: NIGERIA AS A CASE STUDY

DAVID O. ABRAHAM

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (Romania)
neunigwithdavid@gmail.com

KABIR ABDULKAREEM

The IIE's Varsity College (South Africa)
kabir4kareem@yahoo.com

SUNDAY I. OYEBAMIJI

University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)
oyebamijis@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract: There are many dimensions to conflict in Africa. It depends on the nature of the underlying demography, heterogeneity, and historical context of the state's social and political problems. The impact of the coronavirus has greatly affected the socio-economic structure and governance system in Africa, leading to social conflicts. Moreover, the social conflict led to deaths, job losses, and human capital reductions, resulting in economic catastrophes in South Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia, among others. In Nigeria, the government was unable to cushion the impact of Covid-19, frustrated by the issues of poverty and inequality, wherein the masses were pounded with hunger and insecurity; a corrupt policing system precipitated the social unrest in 2020. Nigeria's social issues, coupled with the shock of Covid-19, cumulated into protest actions, looting, and police brutality. The government's inadequate response to the political crisis and state of unrest greatly influenced the public's belief and outlook on social concerns. The research postulates the following questions: how did the social conflict in Africa and Nigeria become overheated during Covid-19? The paper adopts a qualitative method that explores existing literature and media sources on social conflicts and Covid-19 in Africa and Nigeria. The study anchors its theoretical framework on the fragile state theory. The paper concludes that Nigeria's weakened socioeconomic structure met with the shock of the horror of Covid-19, which sparked social conflict in the country.

Keywords: Africa, Covid-19, governance, social conflict, sustainable development.

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INTRODUCTION

Social conflict in Africa is historical and becomes a subject of consideration when peace and security discussions arise. Social conflict is a complex and multi-variant of factors that contribute to conflicts across the continent (Zeleza 2008: 2-7). The factors are numerous, including ethnic and tribal divisions which arise due to historical tensions and competition for resources among the people (Zeleza 2008: 12-13). Another factor is political instability, which often has to do with weak governance, corruption, and authoritarian regimes that characterized the continent in the early 1960s to mid-1980s (Zeleza 2008: 18). Similarly, economic instability is another factor that gives rise to social conflict in Africa. Thus, when a significant portion of a population lacks basic necessities and when there are disparities in wealth and resource distribution, it can lead to civil unrest and conflict (Zeleza 2008: 22). More so, religious and ideological differences or political ideologies often commonly lead to social conflict in Africa. The colonial legacies and post-independence struggle also contributed to incessant conflicts experienced by African countries (Zeleza 2008: 14). In the recent past, poverty and the struggle for resource control and revenue allocation disparities have led African nations into conflicts. More recently, the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic shattered the already collapsed socioeconomic structure of many African countries while plunging the people into social unrest and conflicts (Aluko 2020: 2-6).

There are various angles from which the relationship between Covid 19 and conflict can be examined. “Covid-19 and Conflict” is a multifaceted topic under which various themes could be placed or discussed¹. It can be discussed along with peacebuilding, food security, civil society, democratic processes, human rights, terrorism, political stability, and socioeconomic inequalities, gender-based violence, and fragile states, among others (Ossai 2022: 1).

A number of peace writers, such as (Lehrs 2021: 1-3; Onuma, Shin, Managi 2021: 53-70; Montevecchio 2021: 37-50), agreed that short-, medium-, and long-term effects might be used to understand the influence of conflict and peace in any

region. External involvement in domestic conflicts was observed in 12 African countries in 2021: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, and Somalia (Lehrs 2021: 9; Onuma, Shin, Managi 2021: 53-70). Africa has enormous resources that, if well managed and utilized, can create favourable conditions for a long-term culture of peace and security.

The social divide between essential and non-essential concerns has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the severe effects of climate change. This is because pre-existing fragilities in governance settings have impeded national responses to crises (United Nations 2020: 23). These are significant encounters to the continent's development. At the same time, cross-national and ethnic conflicts, identity politics, and exclusionary perceptions of citizenship continue to influence political, economic, and social experiences in many parts of Africa (United Nations 2020: 23).

Nigeria, one of the most populous countries in Africa, is a perfect representation of conflict in Africa as the issue of insurgency has recently dominated parts of its territory. This insurgency in Nigeria's north-eastern states has grown to be one of Africa's most violent areas, as well as a major conflict on a global scale (United Nations 2020: 20-23). The selection of Nigeria from the continent is a representation of social-political conflict phenomenon in Africa. This allows the systemic qualitative analysis of the multifaceted social issues bedevilling the continent. The country's conflict is a phenomenon in that the typology and approach to social issues represent a common prototype of African conflict. The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the approach of governments' responses to socioeconomic and political affairs have contributed to the problem of sustainable development (Yusuf et al. 2022: 1-2).

Nigeria's ability or inability to contain the spread of the coronavirus within its borders has broader implications for the entire continent as Africa's most populous democracy and largest economy (Yusuf et al. 2022: 2). Meanwhile, the virus threatened to aggravate the country's already-existing security issues, making an effective pandemic response more difficult (Yusuf et



al. 2022: 13-14). In addition to the studies already conducted, this study investigates the socio-economic effect of Covid-19 and social conflict in Africa, with a careful cross-examination of the Nigerian case. It assists in ascertaining the answer to whether the pandemic has either a positive or negative effect on the subject of peace and conflict.

The paper examines the nexus between social conflicts and Covid 19 in the African context. It discusses the impact and prevalence of Covid-19 in some parts of Africa. The study provides a brief discourse on the state of conflict in Nigeria prior to the outbreak of Covid 19. It examines the interlocking issues of Covid 19 and social conflict in Nigeria, looking at how Covid 19 crisis overwhelmed the numerous socio-political conflicts in the country. It explores how the effects of Covid 19 has impacted the issues of social conflicts and its political exploits in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The fragile state theory is the framework for this study. Fragile state is often associated with a lack of will or capacity of a state to perform its basic functions (Ferreira 2015: 1-5). Fragile state is referred to a country characterised by weak capacity or legitimacy that leaves citizens vulnerable to a range of shocks (Ferreira 2015: 29-32). According to Mcloughlin, a country is fragile if it lacks the ability to provide security and basic services to its citizens, whereby decreasing vulnerability and increasing resilience to internal and external shocks (Mcloughlin 2012: 9-11). In other words, fragile state means to assess and understand when a state's weaknesses prolong and unabated. Fragile theory reveals that when a state fails to manage perceived social or political conflicts as well as institutionalise law and order for the peaceful co-existence of its citizens, it becomes vulnerable to internal or external escalators. The fragile state theory is useful for this study as it was used to understand how African/Nigerian citizens became vulnerable to external shocks of Covid-19 that shattered the already weakened socioeconomic structures of the country.



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative methodology applied in social sciences and humanities to carry out its investigations. The qualitative methodology is discussed within the context of the events of Covid-19 crisis in relation to socio-political context through the civil societies, agencies, governmental and non-governmental records, and available literature on the subject matter. The data used for the study were gathered from secondary sources comprised of existing literature and media materials. Hence, the data used for the study were gathered from libraries and internet materials. The data were carefully collected from logical chains of evidence available in journal articles, books, online newsletters, and media/documentary materials to mention a few. The study used content analytical techniques to analyse data collected.

SOCIAL CONFLICT AND COVID-19 IN AFRICA: A REVIEW

It is pertinent to note that Africa is a vast and diverse continent, and the causes as well as nature of social conflicts vary from one region to the other. Efforts to address these conflicts often involve peacekeeping missions, diplomatic negotiations, civil society influence, community and religious interventions and development initiatives to promote stability and reconciliation (Azar, Moon 1986: 33-35). Social conflict can be referred to disagreements or tensions that arise between individuals or groups in a given community or society (Itumo, Udeuhele, Aro 2017: 346-351). Social conflict is often rooted in a variety of factors ranging from differences in values, interests, beliefs, or access to resources (Alda, Sala 2021: 3-7). Alda and Sala contend that socio-political unrest is already more common in African cities than rural areas (2021: 1-5). They further stressed that the same goes for the activities of extremist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia, especially those that rely on suicide bombings.

According to de Coning (2021: 341-369), the Covid-19 pandemic has drastically disrupted African Union (AU) and United Nations (UN) peace operations in Africa. Moreover,



Covid-19 has worsened socioeconomic operations in Africa. It also contributed to the heightened pressure of social security in Africa, hence, created social tension or unrest amongst the people against the authorities (de Coning 2021: 341-369).

On the other hand, the UN policy brief on the impact of Covid-19 in Africa posited that the Covid-19 pandemic is undeniably a game-changer for public health and the global economy (United Nations 2020: 1-3). The outbreak devastated fragile states, sparked widespread unrest, and put international crisis management systems to the test (Akinola, Tella 2022: 607-608). Its implications are serious for those caught up in conflict as the disease disrupted humanitarian aid flows, limited peace operations, and delayed or distracted conflict parties in Africa from both new and ongoing diplomatic efforts (United Nations 2020: 21-24). The UN added that unscrupulous leaders used the pandemic to further their goals in ways that exacerbate domestic or international crises, such as cracking down on dissent at home or escalating conflicts with rival states, assuming they will get away with it (United Nations 2020: 17-18).

Covid-19 exacerbated tensions in African countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Ghana, Sudan, and Kenya, among others. For instance, in South Africa, just as in many other parts of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on social conflict (Ssemugabo, Choonara 2021: 1-5). Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing economic disparities in South Africa as the imposed lockdowns and other associated restrictions disproportionately affected vulnerable populations (Oyebamiji 2023: 123-125). In South Africa, Covid-19 also led to job losses, reduction of incomes and increase in poverty contributed to social tensions and protest actions against the lockdown measures (Oyebamiji 2023: 123-125; Akinola, Tella 2022: 589-603). The authors added that Covid-19-related social tensions in South Africa were associated with the challenges of its healthcare system (Akinola, Tella 2022: 599-601). This includes issues of access to medical care and healthcare infrastructure. Thus, these disparities are linked to a major source of social tensions as some communities felt neglected and under-resourced (Akinola, Tella 2022: 601-603).

In addition, Covid-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on social conflict in many aspects of Kenya's economy, such as economic hardships in the areas of job losses as economic activities were disrupted, just as in other African countries (Ssemugabo, Choonara 2021: 1-2). Also, Uganda and Kenyan governments' enforcement of Covid-19 measures, such as curfews and restrictions from public gatherings, contributed to issues of social conflict as it led to confrontations between Kenyans, Ugandans and their law enforcement officers (Ssemugabo, Choonara 2021: 1-5).

In a similar vein, aside from the issue of economic hardships and lack of access to medical and healthcare infrastructure due to the implementation of Covid-19 measures, misinformation and conspiracy theories contributed to social tension in Africa (United Nations 2020: 18-20). In Egypt, the case was not different, as it led to stigmatization and discrimination against some groups or individuals (Ssemugabo, Choonara 2021: 1-2). However, in spite of the challenges, some communities in Egypt displayed a high-level of resilience and solidarity. This allowed local initiatives and community-led efforts to play a significant role as they provide support and relief to those in need to douse tensions as a result of Covid-19 measures (Ssemugabo, Choonara 2021: 1-2). The authors are unclear as to when and where Covid-19 would have the greatest impact, as well as how economic, social, and political factors may have interacted to have caused or exacerbated social conflicts. They also stated that it is not guaranteed that the pandemic's effects will be entirely detrimental to peace and security in Africa (United Nations 2020: 18-19; Lehrs 2021: 1-4).

Apart from having a negative impact on peace, the spread of Covid-19 has a positive impact on African societies. For example, it exposes the flaws in a specific peace strategy, triggering the need or desire to improve it before or after the crisis is resolved (United Nations 2020: 18). In some conflict zones,



infectious disease like Covid-19 creates opportunities for conflict parties to collaborate (Ossai 2021: 2-5; Lehrs 2021: 1-4). This disease-related cooperation is a subset of what is sometimes referred to as “disaster diplomacy” or “disaster-related cooperation,” which also includes cooperation resulting from the emergence of other types of crises, such as natural disasters (Lehrs 2021: 1-2; United Nations 2020: 18-19). Furthermore, spreading infectious diseases is thought to create conditions that discourage social conflict (United Nations 2021: 1-3).

Social conflict continued to rise, with an increase in death rates in 2020 and 2021 despite lockdown measures that reduced Covid-19 and reduced mobility. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (van der Lijn 2020: 1-2), violent social conflicts in Africa are mainly caused by weak state capacities, corruption, inefficient provision of basic services, competition for natural resources, inequality, and alienation. Conflicts over the power and legitimacy of states are another driving force in African conflict (United Nations 2021: 22-26). This indicates that conflict is a symptom of multiple institutional failures and weaknesses.

It can be deduced from the foregoing analyses that most African states encountered similar experiences of Covid-19 pandemic that sparked social tensions in various cities or communities. Yet, the survey suggests that in addressing social conflict as impacted by Covid-19 pandemic in Africa, the relevant governments focused on building economic support and equitable access to jobs and healthcare. They also need to address the issue of Covid-19 misinformation and vaccine allocation shortages, as well as foster dialogue that will enhance peace and security of the citizens.

SOCIO-POLITICAL CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA PRIOR TO COVID-19

With a population of over 180 million, most of whom self-identify as Christians or Muslims, Nigeria is “the most populous country, the largest economy and largest democracy in Africa” (Ploch Blanchard 2023: 1-2). It is made up of 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja. It is also made up of more



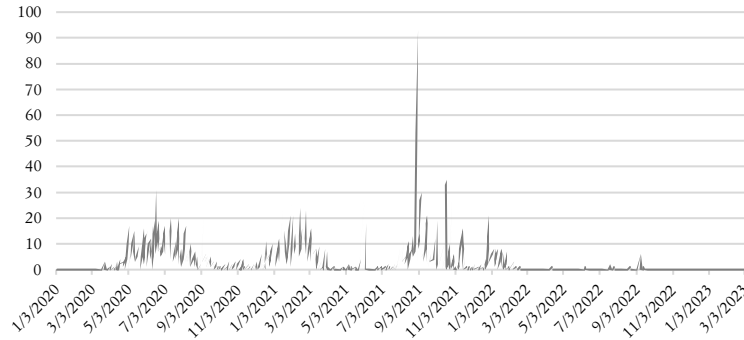


Fig. 1. Covid-19 death frequencies between 2020 and 2023.

Source: World Health Organization, Covid-19 Global Table Data.

than 250 ethnic groups and is culturally diverse (Ploch Blanchard 2023: 1-3). Since gaining independence from Britain in October 1960, Nigeria has been through all sorts of violent conflicts. Between 1967 and 1970, there was a civil war (Ploch Blanchard 2023: 1-12). The war resulted from the former eastern Nigeria's decision to secede and the federal military government's resistance to secession (Ploch Blanchard 2023: 2-13). Although it ended decades ago, this experience still affects the relationship between the country's ethnic and religious groups, particularly between the Igbo, Hausa, and Fulani peoples (Ploch Blanchard 2023: 1-12). The war led to military coups that slowed the country's democratic development. Between 2009 and 2020, Boko Haram insurgents in northeast Nigeria killed an estimated 350,000 people, 314,000 of which are believed to be indirectly caused. Hundreds of people were displaced between 2001 and 2018 (Ossai, 2021: 1-4). Over 3,500 people were killed in conflicts between shepherds and farmers between January 2016 and October 2018 alone (Ossai 2021: 1-4). In the conflicts between 2017 and May 2020, about 2,500 people died.

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIAL CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

The aforesaid condition of the country before the pandemic provides a background to the socio-political conflict in Nigeria and how the aftermath of the conflicts continues to affect the country till today. In the worst scenario, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has not just created detrimental conditions in the world but also worsened the socio-political fabric of the Nigerian state (Ossai 2021: 3-4; Lehrs 2021: 1-2). For example, it has contributed to the suspension of democratic freedoms and the removal of restrictions on exercising political power, leading to “increased violence, exploitation, and instability” (Lehrs 2021: 2-3). In Nigeria, the impact of Covid-19 created both physical and psychological unrest, coupled with the cases of insurgencies that were ongoing before the outbreak of the pandemic in different regions of the federation (Lehrs 2021: 8-9).

In addition, the period of Covid between 2020 and 2022 was a watershed in the Nigerian socio-political sphere as a series of conflicts emanated through the effects of Covid-19 (Ossai 2021: 1). This implies that the pandemic further exposed the weakness of the Nigerian state by the weak health infrastructure that made the response to the crisis slow and ineffective. The ineffectiveness and the worsened case of responses to the pandemic were influenced by the incessant social conflicts that bedevilled the Nigerian states (Adewale Idowu 2020: 1-8). These forms of conflict were different from the previously discussed political/armed conflict, which made it difficult for the security agencies and apparatus to nip down (Adewale Idowu 2020: 10-15). The modality operands and strategies employed in these disputes were distinct and varied. These include the clashes between Fulani herders and farmers in the southwestern part of the country; cattle rustling in the north-west; kidnapping and banditry in the south-west, and north central as well as south-south states of the federation (Sun News 2020: 1-3). There were issues of socio-political conflicts in the south-west and south-eastern parts of Nigeria where the agitation for secession characterised the regions and generated hits amidst Covid-19 pandemic (Adewale Idowu 2020: 1-11; Ossai 2021: 1-2). Thus,



these socio-political crises were often time exploited by the political class who manipulated the situations for economic gains and political scores by using the effect of Covid as reasons for the delayed containment of issues of conflicts in the country.

Armed non-state actors have exploited the Covid-19 crisis militarily and politically to gain territorial control in Nigeria (Hazzard 2020: 1-5; Daily Mail GH 2020: 1-2). Thus, governments in many conflict-affected countries have struggled to manage the Covid-19-related health crisis and have been forced to divert resources from counterinsurgency efforts to healthcare (Uwazuruike 2020: 1-3).

This was evident in the case of Nigeria, as political authority used that willed power to exploit the general masses by hiding the palliatives that were supposed to serve as relief for the citizen to boost their political power (Aluko 2020: 3-4). They intend to use it to strengthen their political ambition, which was later discovered and exposed during the EndSARS² brutal youth protest in Lagos state (Akoni 2021: 1-5). This further spread to other states where more of the palliative was discovered and hidden in Plateau, Ilorin, Abuja and Ibadan, among others (Aluko 2020: 4). Hence, the Covid crisis exposed the woes of the government's lack of good government and mismanagement of funds and resources (Adebulu 2020: 1-2). The sudden discovery of warehouses where food like grains and noodles were stocked and arguably kept for political campaigns of the 2023 elections instead of the ostensible reasons meant for Covid-19 relief packages for the masses (Uwazuruike 2020: 3-4). However, the lack of good governance characterized by the saddened events of police brutality in Lagos in 2020 necessitated the mass protest actions that called for the reformation of the Nigerian police service (Akoni 2021: 1-5).

The ENDSARS crisis resulted in contentious killings and destructions of public and private properties in Lagos state and other parts of the country (Uwazuruike 2020: 2-4). The youth who dominated the protest were said to have been motivated to participate in the social unrest on diverse grounds (Ohia, Salawu 2020: 1-12). For example, there is an increase in unemployment, corruption in the public and private sectors, and persistent strikes by higher institution lecturers like universities



and polytechnics due to unpaid salaries and arrears. The last straw that broke the camel's back was the police harassment, illegal detention and killings of Nigerians without proper judicial actions (Aluko 2020: 4-5). As a result, coupled with the crisis of Covid-19 and these social conflicts, many Nigerian youths became frustrated and felt dejected and marginalised (Uwazuruike 2020: 1-4). Thus, without fear of police arrest, detention, and killings the youths went on rampage because majority were of the opinion that the Covid-19 crisis was worse than poverty and unemployment. Yet, the government did little to contain the situation (Aluko 2020: 3-4). For example, Human Rights Watch revealed that:

The Troubling reality of the Covid-19 crisis for many families in Lagos has been hunger and deprivation, with people still battling every day for survival, the pandemic has highlighted the critical need for a functioning social security system that will allow all Nigerians to achieve an adequate standard of living. "Similarly, a woman was reported to have lost her job as a cleaner in March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 measure". She said: "We have our fill in the morning, and sometimes at night, we just soak two handfuls of garri [a staple made from cassava] and sleep" (Human Rights Watch 2021: 1-5).

The above shows that the Covid-19 crisis devastated the already fragile social security system of the Nigerian people, as the lockdown and other restrictions, as well as the rise in food prices, made access to livelihood more difficult and increased the sufferings of the vulnerable poor. Thus, the frustration was capable enough as a contribution to social tension amidst the crisis.

Like most Africans, some Nigerian citizens often came to subject their opinions to the conspiracy theory that Covid-19 was humanly fabricated and a hoax (Aluko 2020: 4). This was because the Covid-19 crisis heightened the sufferings of Nigerians, especially the youths, women and children that form the larger chunk of the population (Ohia, Salawu 2020: 8-9). Poverty and not Covid-19 was the problem of the people and if the government can provide an enabling environment where small-medium enterprises can thrive, the commoner will live above the poverty line, and there would be fewer health hazards and socioeconomic

tensions (Ohia, Salawu 2020: 2-6). Due to the circulation of public opinion on the Covid-19 misinformation and discrimination of vaccine distributions, the risk of social tension heightened amongst the Nigerian people (Ohia, Salawu 2020: 4-8).

In a bid to find solution to the social problem, when the youths went on rampage and ransacked government's institutions and warehouses and looted items, they were arrested and detained under the charges of theft and burglary (Okunna 2021: 2-3). The level of poverty and lack of adequate social welfare pushed dozens of Africans to the forced labour, looting of food and household items, with children and women accounting for the larger chunk of the demographic groups (Abdulkareem, Ehiane, Nzamezie 2021: 1-6). This, in turn, made youths, children of school age as well as women to be tempted into systemic labour where the looted goods are sold in the free market and streets in South Africa (Abdulkareem, Ehiane, Nzamezie 2021: 1-6). However, when the billions of funds have been embezzled, many leaders would either use political wills to manipulate in their favour with less or minimal judicial penalties. This, according to Okunna is called political marginalisation and legal inequality (2021: 2-3). Again, it is important to stress that Okunna argued that the Nigerian situation pre or post-Covid-19 would rather not be resolved should the problem of social insecurity not be holistically addressed. For example, the issue of poverty reduction and access to quality and adequate education have to be addressed in order to put an end to the recurring social conflicts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study examines the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on Africa, with a focus on Nigeria. It suggests that the weak socio-economic condition and inadequate response to the pandemic contributed to conflicts within the country, particularly during the period from 2020 to 2021. Using the framework of fragile state theory, the paper argues that Covid-19 had a significant impact on Nigeria's struggling healthcare and economic systems, which were unable to effectively contain the virus. Consequently, the Covid-19 issue allowed those in political power



to exploit the citizens, resulting in looting, protests, and unrest in certain states of the country.

Additionally, it is crucial to investigate other aspects of the Covid-19 outbreak's impact on Nigerian society. It is well-known that during times of crisis, democratic freedoms are often suspended, leading to violence, exploitation, and heightened insecurity. This is true not only in Nigeria but also in other countries affected by Covid-19, as mentioned in the study. However, despite the evident negative effects, further research is needed to determine if there have been major positive outcomes in certain regions of the country and the wider African continent. Nevertheless, the overall argument of this paper, using Nigeria as an example of social conflict in Africa, is that the lack of good governance, functioning social security, and mismanagement of resources contributed to the socioeconomic crisis during the Covid-19 era.

Research indicates that political corruption and distrust hindered public compliance with government protocols, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the government's response to Covid-19 and facilitating the spread of the virus in Africa. The paper recommends that African governments, in order to address future external shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic and mitigate social conflict, should improve public sector management and provide robust social security for citizens. These measures will enhance public confidence, promote compliance with safety protocols, and reduce the risk of social tensions in Nigeria and beyond.

NOTES

¹ According to the World Health Organisation, Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid 19) is defined as illness caused by a novel coronavirus called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus2 (SARS-CV-2; formerly called-nCoV). The virus was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China.

² EndSARS is an acronym for social movement slogan in Nigeria that came into effect in 2020. It can be divided into two separate words END and SARS. The slogan means to disband a section of Nigerian Police Force known as Special Anti-Robbery Squad which has been tagged for its notorious activities of abuse of power on Nigerian citizens.



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