



HAS ANYTHING CHANGED? IMPACT OF THE NIGERIA POLICE FORCE ACT 2020 ON POLICE PRACTICES AND REFORMS

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Abstract

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has long been the subject of public scrutiny for its inefficiencies, corruption, and human rights abuses. In response to widespread calls for reform, the Nigeria Police Force Act 2020 was enacted to replace the colonial-era Police Act of 1943. This paper evaluates the impact of the 2020 Act on police practices and reforms, analyzing whether it has achieved its goals of modernizing the police force, enhancing accountability, and improving public trust. Using qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including policy analysis, interviews, and case studies, this study finds that while the Act introduced progressive provisions, its implementation has faced significant challenges. These include institutional resistance, inadequate funding, and entrenched systemic issues. The paper concludes with recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of the Act and fostering meaningful reform within the NPF.

Keywords: Police reform, Public Trust, Corruption, Human Rights, Nigeria Police Force, Policy Implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Police brutality, the excessive and often unlawful use of force by law enforcement officers, is a pervasive issue that transcends borders, affecting societies across the globe. From the Americas to Africa, Europe to Asia, and the Middle East, instances of police misconduct have sparked outrage, protests, and widespread demands for accountability and reform. While its manifestations vary depending on cultural, political, and socio-economic contexts, police brutality remains a critical challenge to the principles of justice, human rights, and democratic governance. Globally, the roots of police brutality can often be traced to systemic issues such as entrenched authoritarianism, weak oversight mechanisms, institutionalized racism, and socio-economic inequalities. In many cases, law enforcement agencies have been accused of targeting marginalized communities, perpetuating cycles of mistrust and social division. Historical legacies, such as the use of police forces to suppress dissent during colonial and post-colonial eras, have further entrenched adversarial relationships between law enforcement and the public in several regions.

In recent years, high-profile incidents, amplified by social media and global advocacy networks, have brought police violence to the forefront of public discourse. Movements like Black Lives Matter in the United States, EndSARS in Nigeria, and anti-police brutality protests in countries like Brazil, France, and India highlight the universal nature of this problem.

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has long been a focal point of criticism in the country's governance and public discourse. With a history marred by allegations of corruption, brutality, inefficiency, and human rights abuses, the NPF's reputation has consistently been a subject of public discontent. The colonial-era Police Act of 1943, which governed the NPF for decades, was widely regarded as outdated and ill-suited to address the dynamic security challenges of a modern, democratic society.

The enactment of the Nigeria Police Force Act 2020 was heralded as a significant milestone in the journey towards

reforming policing in Nigeria. Introduced during a period of heightened public outcry—exemplified by the #EndSARS protests against police brutality—the Act promised a restructured and professionalized police force. Key provisions of the Act emphasized community policing, accountability, respect for human rights, and improved welfare for officers, aiming to align the NPF with international best practices.

This study seeks to explore the impact of the Nigeria Police Force Act 2020 on police practices and reforms, examining whether it has catalyzed meaningful change or remains a legislative effort with limited practical outcomes. By analyzing the implementation of the Act, public perception, and the systemic challenges within the NPF, this research aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of its effectiveness. It also identifies persistent issues and offers actionable recommendations for fostering sustainable reforms. The paper adopts the qualitative research methods. This involves the use of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were majorly through observations and expert opinions while the secondary sources included books, journals, and newspaper articles.

Literature Review

Police brutality is a widespread issue worldwide. In Africa, governments have also initiated police reforms, but these efforts have only been partially successful due to persistent challenges. Alemika, Ruteere, and Howell (2018) note that African police forces face distinct issues, including the legacy of colonialism and the rise of organized criminal networks, which are reshaping their roles and operations. Marenin (2013) emphasizes that designing effective reforms for African policing systems requires careful consideration of various factors, including the political and economic environment, local security conditions, and the presence of political will. This observation is particularly relevant to developing countries like Nigeria.

Alemika and Chukwuma (2000) which examines police–community violence in Nigeria, argues that the political and socio-economic dynamics shaping police-citizen violence are evident in the deeply rooted antagonism between the police and specific segments of the population. These include labor unions, student bodies, peasant farmer organizations, pro-democracy and human rights advocates, professional associations, and community-based advocacy groups, often labeled as "enemies" of the government. These groups frequently bear the brunt of government-initiated police violence, both as perpetrators and victims. Public ignorance and widespread misconceptions about the role and authority of the police exacerbate tensions. These misconceptions stem from a historical legacy where both colonial and post-colonial governments used the police to suppress citizens. Consequently, the public harbors resentment toward the police, even when they lawfully perform their duties. They furthered that this hostility sometimes sparks violence against the police, prompting retaliatory actions. Additionally, institutional challenges such as insufficient personnel, inadequate resources, and limited funding within the Nigeria Police Force, compounded by poor social infrastructure—particularly in transportation and telecommunications—undermine police effectiveness and public perception of the force. Anaekwe and Oli (2024) found that police brutality is

prevalent and evident in Nigeria and was traced from the days of the colonial era to the current democratic dispensation with evidences of this brutality been witnessed during the ENDSARS protest, the unlawful arrest of youths and also the incessant extortion by the members of the police on the highways. Uwazurike (2020) traced the history of the EndSARS protests to 2018 where it was first used to raise awareness of allegations of violence and exploitation by SARS officials. Onwunynimadu (2022) argues that police brutality in Nigeria has led to loss of lives, torture of detainees and extortion of suspects. He recommended that the Nigerian police commission should strictly investigate and sanction erring officers, there should be a proper police reform and that men of the Nigerian police should be subjected to a thorough mental examination before engaging them to service. Nsirim, E. N & Nwakanma (2022) in their study which Addresses Police brutality as a form of Human Right Abuse in Nigeria with focus on government efforts finds that there is a significant relationship between the daily routines of police officers and instances of human rights abuse. It also highlights the profound effects of police brutality on its victims, demonstrating the detrimental impact on their physical, psychological, and socio-economic well-being. Furthermore, the research underscores the lack of government accountability in implementing proposed measures to address police brutality, rendering these efforts largely ineffective in curbing the menace in Nigeria. They advance that in response, the study recommends several actionable measures. First, the government should prioritize revamping the economy to improve the standard of living for its citizens, thereby addressing some of the underlying socio-economic factors contributing to police brutality. Second, policies must be designed with a genuine focus on solving systemic problems rather than merely appeasing public sentiment. Lastly, the study emphasizes the importance of regular training and retraining of police officers, particularly on international standards such as the United Nations Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms. These steps are essential for fostering accountability, protecting human rights, and ensuring the effectiveness of law enforcement in Nigeria. Imegi (2023) noted that police brutality, which infringes on human rights and contributes to insecurity, manifests in various forms, including torture to extract confessions or information, unlawful detention, bribery and corruption, intimidation, harassment, rape, extrajudicial killings, and disregard for court orders. To address these issues, the paper recommends making human rights education mandatory across all levels of education, particularly in Police Colleges and academies. Additionally, he recommended that police authorities should prioritize human rights education during the training of constable recruits, who are frequently responsible for rights violations.

Antecedent to the Nigeria Police Force Act 2020 and Key Provisions

The call for police reform has been an aged demand and renewed debate about social inequality by the Nigerian society following unending rights abuses and sometimes extra judicial killings of the civilian populace by officers and men of the police. There have been earlier attempts by the citizenry against the Nigeria police force and its special anti-robbery squad (SARS). After the 2015 general elections. The then governor of Rivers State mentioned that some political elite used a few SARS

operatives to thwart the will of the citizenry. He noted that the officers of the SARS were paid to carry out ballot box snatch and intimidation of voters as well as snatching of ballot boxes. In 2017, many people also demanded that the SARS be disbanded (Thompson et al., 2024).

Governor Nyesom Wike had stated that the Commander of the SARS in Rivers State, Akin Fakorede was being used by the opposition to thwart the peoples' mandate. While the IG panel had exonerated Mr. Fakorede, the case ended up in litigation after both accused each other of libel and corruption and attempt to bribe. The protests whether in public or digital space continued even beyond 2018 and it got to the authority in spite the promises of reforms for years (Thompson et al 2024)

With these calls from many parts of the country over the reform of the Police, the Senate and House of Representatives in 2020 worked out a modality for the reform of the Nigeria Police Force. The Nigeria Police Force Act 2020 made provisions for the transformation of the Police from just a common agency of enforcement to 'force' to reckon with among security agencies in the country. President Muhammad Buhari signed the bill into law, in September 2020. The Act repeals the Police Act CAP P19 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004 and it generally provides guiding principles to ensure accountability, transparency, and the overall protection of fundamental human rights. The new Act also provides for a substantive funding mechanism for the Police Force in line with what is obtainable in other government parastatals. The bill among other things aimed to create a police force that is fair, just, and equitable, prioritizing the protection of fundamental rights and fostering public trust (FGN, 2020). Key goals include improving public perception, empowering the police to ensure safety and security, fostering community collaboration to combat crime, enhancing professionalism through training, and ensuring respect for crime victims and their needs.

Assessing the impacts of the Nigeria Police Act 2020

The Act since its passage have centred on community policing, human rights protections, accountability, training and welfare improvements of the police force and guide against the excessive use of force.

Community Policing: Emphasizing Partnership between the Police and Local Communities

Community policing focuses on fostering a collaborative relationship between law enforcement and the communities they serve. This approach emphasizes mutual trust, respect, and cooperation to identify and address local safety concerns. It involves establishing community advisory boards, conducting regular dialogue sessions, and incorporating feedback from residents into policing strategies. By engaging community members as partners in crime prevention, this model aims to improve public safety, reduce fear of crime, and build a sense of shared responsibility for maintaining law and order (FGN, 2020).

Human Rights Protections: Mandating Adherence to Constitutional Rights and International Human Rights Standards

Police operations must align with both constitutional guarantees and internationally recognized human rights frameworks. This entails strict adherence to principles such as due process, freedom from arbitrary detention, and protection from torture or inhumane treatment. Training programs should emphasize these standards, while oversight mechanisms ensure their application in day-to-day policing. By prioritizing the dignity and rights of individuals, law enforcement agencies can enhance their legitimacy and foster public trust. It has enhanced human rights among officers of the police force. Section 76 of the Act says that if a police officer is not available & a warrant needs to be executed immediately; a court can direct any person to execute the warrant. The practicality of this is however not clear because the Act did not say what will happen if a member of the public refuses (FGN, 2020).

Accountability Mechanisms: Establishing the Police Complaints Response Unit (PCRU) to Handle Complaints Against Officers

Accountability is essential to curbing misconduct within the police force. The establishment of a Police Complaints Response Unit (PCRU) provides a dedicated platform for the public to report instances of abuse, corruption, or other violations. This unit should operate independently, ensure confidentiality, and conduct prompt and impartial investigations. Regular reporting on its activities, coupled with appropriate disciplinary actions, reinforces transparency and signals zero tolerance for police malpractice. Section 68(3) of the Act makes it mandatory that every police division must have at least one police officer who is qualified to practice law and who will also be responsible for the promotion of human rights compliance amongst officers. Since 2020, the police force has tried so many officers for infringements and abuses including extortions. Apart from that, erring officers have been discharged from the force and made to face the wrath of the law.

Training and Welfare Improvements: Addressing the Professional Development and Welfare of Officers

The effectiveness of any police force is closely tied to the quality of its training and the welfare of its personnel. Comprehensive training programs should cover not only technical and tactical skills but also conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity, and human rights awareness. Adequate welfare provisions, including fair salaries, healthcare, and support systems, are equally critical to ensuring that officers remain motivated, ethical, and focused on their duties. Investing in these areas fosters a professional and disciplined force capable of meeting contemporary security challenges. Section 93 makes it unlawful for a serving police officer to be in any financial debt. Creditors can now apply for attachment of earnings that will make the debt to be deducted directly from the monthly salary of such officer (up to 30% of total salary) until the debt is paid in full. More so, Serving officers

are not allowed to engage in any form of business other than farming according to Section 95 of the Act (FGN, 2020)

Use of Force Guidelines: Introducing Clear Guidelines to Prevent Excessive Use of Force

The introduction of clear, codified use-of-force guidelines is vital to preventing abuses and ensuring accountability. These guidelines specified when and how force can be used, emphasizing de-escalation tactics and prioritizing non-lethal measures. Officers in order to keep abreast on the use of force were mandated to have undergone training and retraining extensively on these protocols, with regular evaluations to ensure compliance. The establishment of oversight mechanisms to review incidents involving force ensures transparency, promotes accountability, and safeguards public trust in law enforcement. Section 54 makes it unlawful for police officers to create reasonable suspicion to search or detain individuals on the basis of manner of dress, hairstyle, tattoos etc (FGN, 2020)

Has Anything Changed? Challenges in Implementing the Nigeria Police Force Act 2020

Institutional Resistance: Cultural and Operational Barriers to Reform

Efforts to reform the police have encountered significant institutional resistance, rooted in entrenched cultural norms and long-standing operational practices. Many officers view these reforms as a threat to their established routines, authority, and discretionary powers. This resistance is further fueled by a lack of clear communication about the benefits of reform and inadequate involvement of rank-and-file officers in the design and implementation process. As a result, progressive changes such as community policing, human rights training, and stricter accountability measures are either undermined or implemented superficially. Overcoming this resistance requires strong leadership, targeted awareness campaigns, and incentives that align individuals and institutional goals with the objectives of reform.

Inadequate Funding: A Barrier to Sustainable Reform

Reforms aimed at improving the police force are often hampered by insufficient budgetary allocations. Critical areas such as officer training, welfare programs, infrastructure development, and procurement of modern equipment remain underfunded, leaving the police ill-prepared to meet contemporary security challenges. This financial shortfall not only weakens the implementation of reforms but also exacerbates morale issues among officers, leading to further resistance and inefficiency. To address this, governments must prioritize police funding as part of broader public safety initiatives, ensuring that resources are allocated effectively and transparently to driver meaningful change.

Weak Oversight: The Limitations of the Police Complaints Response Unit (PCRU)

The Police Complaints Response Unit (PCRU), established to promote accountability, faces significant operational challenges due to insufficient resources, limited autonomy, and political interference. These limitations hinder its ability to conduct thorough investigations, enforce disciplinary actions, and gain public confidence. Without adequate funding, staffing, and legal independence, the PCRU struggles to address complaints effectively, leaving many incidents of police misconduct unresolved. Strengthening the PCRU requires not only increased resources but also legislative reforms to enhance its authority and protect it from external pressures.

Public Mistrust: Overcoming Decades of Abuse and Disillusionment

Decades of police misconduct, including brutality, corruptions, and impunity, have eroded public trust in law enforcement. Many citizens view the police as oppressors rather than protectors, resulting in reluctance to cooperate with law enforcement efforts. This mistrust creates a vicious cycle, where community disengagement further isolates the police, impeding effective crime prevention and response. Rebuilding trust requires a sustained commitment to transparency, accountability, and community engagement. Public relations campaigns, regular reporting on reform progress and visible actions against misconduct can help restore confidence in the police force, but these efforts must be consistent and backed by tangible results.

Has anything changed? Assessing the Nigeria Police Force Act 2020

Immediately one month after the passing of the bill to law, there was the ENDSARS protests which led to not just abuses but also wanton killings and destruction of public facilities including police stations. The Police had also been embroiled in the brouhaha just like the Nigeria Armed Forces. This led to several deaths, abuses and displacements. The violent suppression of protesters and the subsequent targeting of activists revealed deep-seated challenges in Nigeria's governance and human rights record. For example, it was reported that a police officer attached to the Otuocha Area Command in Anambra East Local Government Area, Anambra State, shot and killed an unidentified male commercial bus driver over the payment of a N100 bribe to the security operatives at a checkpoint in the area in November 2024 (Obianeri, 2024). Any wonder then that Amnesty International (2024) reports that it continues to receive – almost daily – reports of human rights violations by the police across Nigeria, including unlawful detention, extortion, torture, sexual violence and in some cases extrajudicial execution.

Nevertheless, the 2020 Act represents a significant legislative step forward. For instance in 2022, The Nigeria Police Force has arrested DCP Abba Kyari and four other police officers for their involvement in an alleged case of criminal conspiracy, discreditable, unethical, and unprofessional

conduct, official corruption and tampering with exhibits in a case of illicit drug trafficking involving a perpetual transnational drug cartel. This was despite the fact that MrKyari was one of its finest officers (NPF, 2022). This shows that there was no scare crow in the Police Force. Also, The Nigerian Police Force dismissed no fewer than 18 cops for various offences ranging from abuse of power to gross indiscipline and extortion in October and December, 2022, and April, 2023 (Adejoro, 2023).

While one can say that the Nigeria Police Act 2020 is not perfect like every other laws in the land and much has not changed; it will be safe to say that there have been some sort of improvements and accountability unlike before the law was passed. Augustus-Daddie, J., Asiegbu, and Okoro(2023) could not agree more when they concluded that the Act 2020 is a veritable tool which can be used to entrench transparency and efficiency in the Nigerian Police Force.. To further enhance the law, the government must among other things strengthen oversight mechanisms, increase funding, expand community policing, engage civil society and with time to time monitor and evaluate reforms

Conclusion

The Nigeria Police Force Act 2020 represents a significant step toward reforming policing practices in the country. By addressing issues such as accountability, human rights, and professionalism, the Act has laid a legal foundation for a more responsive and citizen-focused police force. However, the implementation of these reforms has revealed persistent challenges, including institutional resistance, inadequate funding, and a lack of robust oversight mechanisms. While the Act has introduced measures to improve public-police relations and operational efficiency, the widespread mistrust of the police, coupled with limited political will, continues to hinder transformative progress.

Ultimately, the Act's impact on police practices and reforms remains a work in progress. For it to achieve its intended goals, the government must ensure effective implementation through sustained political commitment, adequate resourcing, and ongoing public engagement. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, enhancing police welfare, and fostering collaboration between law enforcement and local communities are critical to building trust and ensuring the Act's provisions translate into meaningful change. Only through consistent and deliberate efforts can the Nigeria Police Force evolve into an institution that upholds justice, protects human rights, and effectively serves the Nigerian people.

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