

ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IN NIGERIA: THE RESURGENCE OF CIVIL PROTEST IN NIGERIA, 2020-2025

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Abstract

Despite extensive literature on illiberal democracy and civil disobedience, research has largely overlooked the rise of civic protests in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025. This paper directly argues that the resurgence of civic protests in Nigeria is primarily a response to the distinctive features of illiberal democratic governance, which have driven citizens to reclaim democratic space through civil disobedience. Using John Rawls's (1999) theory as its analytical lens, an ex post facto research design, and mixed-methods, the study analyzes survey and documentary data using central tendency and content analysis. The findings show that movements such as #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance reflect diminished public trust in state institutions and represent a shift from earlier forms of resistance toward protests motivated by concrete experiences of deprivation and marginalization. The paper concludes that the very dynamics of illiberal democracy in Nigeria have been crucial in triggering and shaping this renewed wave of civil disobedience.

Keywords: Illiberal democracy, Resurgence of Civil protest, Civil disobedience theory, #EndSARS and #Endbadgovernment

Introduction

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed a visible resurgence of civil protest movements that challenge the country's evolving democratic character. From the #EndSARS demonstrations to regional mobilizations against fuel subsidy removal and electoral malpractice, these civic expressions underscore growing dissatisfaction with the performance and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Although Nigeria operates under the formal architecture of democracy, critical scholarship increasingly questions the extent to which liberal democratic principles—such as the rule of law, civil liberties, pluralism, and accountable governance—are upheld (Diamond, 2019; Zakaria, 1997). Instead, the Nigerian state increasingly exhibits traits associated with what political theorists term *illiberal democracy*: a system where electoral legitimacy coexists with the erosion of constitutional norms and the suppression of dissent (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Civil disobedience, both as a philosophical construct and a practical mode of resistance, provides a vital analytical lens for evaluating how citizens respond to shrinking civic space and the authoritarian drift within formal democracies. Historically rooted in the writings of Thoreau

(1849), Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., civil disobedience operates within the tension between legality and legitimacy, seeking moral justification for breaching laws perceived as unjust (Rawls, 1999). In the Nigerian context, contemporary protest movements transcend policy-specific grievances to question the very substance of democratic governance, thereby exposing deep structural fractures in the postcolonial state's political compact with its citizens (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010).

Nigeria's democratic trajectory has thus come under renewed scrutiny amid successive waves of civil disobedience that reveal widening contradictions within its political system. Although elections are regularly conducted and formal institutions remain in place, a growing body of scholarship contends that Nigeria is experiencing democratic decay marked by executive dominance, judicial compromise, electoral manipulation, and persistent restrictions on civil liberties (Aiyede, 2020; Omilusi, 2023). This pattern resonates with global concerns over the rise of illiberal democracies—regimes that retain electoral rituals while systematically eroding democratic norms and institutions (Freedom House, 2023; Bermeo, 2016).

The resurgence of protest in Nigeria, from the nationwide #EndSARS movement in 2020 to more recent agitations against economic hardship and institutional injustice, reflects a critical transformation in civic engagement. These mobilizations—often youth-led and digitally coordinated—signal both the erosion of public trust in state institutions and the emergence of new civic imaginaries prioritizing accountability, dignity, and justice (Abíódún, 2021; Ojebode & Adeyanju, 2022). Protesters increasingly invoke moral and constitutional claims to resist authoritarian policies, police brutality, and economic exclusion, thereby placing civil disobedience at the heart of Nigeria's democratic discourse.

Civil disobedience, understood as the nonviolent, public, and conscientious breach of law to draw attention to perceived injustice, constitutes a strategic and normative challenge to state power (Brownlee, 2020). In illiberal democracies such as Nigeria, where legal and coercive institutions are often weaponized to delegitimize dissent, civil disobedience emerges as a form of democratic renewal rather than subversion. It exposes the widening gap between constitutional ideals and political realities, compelling the state to rejustify its claims to legitimacy under conditions of mass skepticism and social unrest (Della Porta, 2020).

The #EndBadGovernance protests that unfolded between late 2023 and early 2024 marked a pivotal moment in Nigeria's civic awakening and resistance to elite-driven democratic stagnation. Emerging from the socio-political aftershocks of the 2023 general elections and the broader crisis of state responsiveness, the movement articulated a multidimensional critique of systemic corruption, economic mismanagement, electoral disenfranchisement, and authoritarian governance. While initially decentralized and leaderless, it rapidly gained national traction through mass mobilizations across Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Enugu. Under the unifying slogan “#EndBadGovernance,” activists, student unions, informal workers, and digital influencers expressed shared frustrations over inflation, fuel subsidy removal without adequate palliatives, collapsing infrastructure, and the repression of dissent (Ogundiya, 2024; Ibeanu & Eze, 2023).

The 2023 elections served as a key catalyst. Widespread reports of voter suppression, ballot irregularities, and compromised institutional neutrality deepened public cynicism toward democratic processes (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). The perceived disjuncture between electoral promises and post-election governance provoked what Gramscian theorists describe as a “crisis of hegemony,” wherein the ideological legitimacy of the ruling elite erodes among the populace (Gramsci, 1971; Omotola & Arowosegbe, 2024). Far from being reactionary, the #EndBadGovernance movement embodied a deeper political praxis. Drawing inspiration from the #EndSARS legacy and global protest cultures, activists emphasized nonviolent direct action, online amplification, and cross-ethnic solidarity. Youths, in particular, leveraged digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp to coordinate mass actions and counter official narratives (Adebayo & Ojo, 2024).

The state's response was predictably repressive: riot police deployed teargas, numerous arrests were made, and pro-government counter-protesters were mobilized to delegitimize the movement. Despite this, the protest succeeded in refocusing national discourse on structural governance failures rather than episodic grievances. Scholars argue that this moment signals a shift from sporadic dissent to an emergent culture of civic accountability within Nigeria's democratic experience (Olarinmoye, 2024).

The #EndBadGovernance movement, therefore, cannot be examined in isolation. It forms part of a broader struggle to reclaim democratic space in an increasingly illiberal polity. It challenges the performative façade of electoral democracy and calls for substantive democratic renewal rooted in justice, transparency, and inclusion. The implications are far-reaching, pointing toward a recalibration of citizen–state relations and a redefinition of political legitimacy in Africa's most populous democracy.

Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the complex interplay between illiberal democratic tendencies and the resurgence of civil protest in Nigeria. Specifically, it asks: To what extent does the rise of illiberal democratic practices in Nigeria shape the frequency, nature, and targets of contemporary civil disobedience movements? Drawing on empirical cases and normative theory, the study explores how democratic backsliding fuels citizen resistance, and how civil disobedience functions simultaneously as a symptom and a catalyst of democratic renewal. By situating Nigeria's protest landscape within the broader theoretical discourse on illiberalism and civic resistance, the paper offers insights into the evolving dynamics of state–citizen relations in a fragile democracy.

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on democracy in Nigeria has evolved to reflect growing concern over democratic backsliding and the intensification of state repression. As Nigeria's post-military democratic experiment enters its third decade, critical literature increasingly interrogates not only the mechanics of elections and institutional design, but also the quality and content of democratic life. This review draws on three intersecting bodies of literature: (1) illiberal

democracy in transitional polities, (2) civil disobedience as a political strategy, and (3) civic resistance in the Nigerian context.

Illiberal democracy and democratic erosion

Zakaria's (1997) foundational critique of “illiberal democracy” challenged the presumption that electoral regimes necessarily guarantee liberty, arguing that some democracies maintain elections while eroding constitutional checks, civil liberties, and pluralism. This conceptualization has gained empirical traction in the African context, where multiple regimes have demonstrated electoral continuity alongside authoritarian drift (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Way, 2022). Nigeria exemplifies this paradox. Studies highlight the rise of executive overreach, compromised judicial independence, weakened electoral commissions, and declining press freedoms (Omotola, 2019; Aiyede, 2020). These trends indicate a shift from procedural democracy to a more exclusionary and coercive political order.

The concept of illiberal democracy has undergone significant refinement since Zakaria's (1997) original formulation. Scholars now view it not merely as a deviation from liberal norms but as a distinct regime type that weaponizes democratic processes to entrench authoritarian rule. Bermeo (2016) notes that contemporary democratic erosion often occurs incrementally and legally, making it difficult to detect or resist through traditional accountability mechanisms. Rather than outright coups or bans on elections, illiberal regimes exploit laws, manipulate institutions, and undermine opposition through subtle but sustained institutional sabotage.

This erosion is particularly pronounced in hybrid democracies like Nigeria, where formal democratic procedures coexist with informal authoritarian practices. Nigeria's political system exhibits features characteristic of “competitive authoritarianism,” in which elections exist but are neither free nor fair, and state institutions are subordinated to incumbent interests (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Recent empirical analyses suggest that this hybridization is intensifying. The 2019 and 2023 elections, for instance, were marred by vote suppression, security force intimidation, and partisan interference in electoral tribunals, all of which reduced public trust in electoral outcomes (Ibeanu & Eze, 2023; Oladeji & Oshewolo, 2022).

The Nigerian case also illustrates how illiberalism intersects with socio-economic exclusion. The concentration of power in the executive, the shrinking of civic space, and the criminalization of dissent occurs alongside mass unemployment, inflation, and structural inequality. These dynamics generate a form of “distributive illiberalism” where economic failure and authoritarian governance mutually reinforce each other (Adebawo, 2020). Citizens become increasingly disillusioned with state institutions, not simply because of corruption or inefficiency, but because the political order appears fundamentally indifferent or hostile to their lived realities.

A significant body of African political scholarship has begun to analyze these developments as part of a broader continental trend. Cheeseman (2019) argues that African democracies are entering a “second generation of authoritarianism,” characterized by sophisticated legal

repression, elite capture of oversight bodies, and populist rhetoric used to delegitimize opposition. In Nigeria, these tendencies are evident in the use of executive orders to silence critics, selective enforcement of protest regulations, and rhetorical framing of dissent as sabotage or treason (Omilusi, 2023).

Furthermore, the erosion of horizontal accountability mechanisms such as the judiciary, anti-corruption agencies, and the legislature contributes to what Oloruntoba (2021) describes as “executive democracy,” where formal power-sharing exists only in name. The Nigerian judiciary has faced credibility crises in high-profile political cases, while anti-corruption institutions have been accused of selective prosecution and partisanship. This institutional fragility reduces the avenues through which citizens can challenge government misconduct through legal means, thereby normalizing extra-institutional resistance like mass protest and civil disobedience.

Lastly, democratic erosion in Nigeria is compounded by what Foa and Mounk (2017) identify as declining popular commitment to democratic norms. In contexts where citizens repeatedly witness impunity, electoral fraud, and coercive governance, the belief in democracy as a meaningful system erodes. For many Nigerians particularly youth democracy no longer guarantees political agency or material improvement, making alternative modes of political expression more attractive. This perceived illegitimacy of electoral democracy sets the stage for nonviolent resistance and the moral critique embodied in civil disobedience.

Recent analyses underscore the performative nature of democracy in Nigeria, where formal institutions mask deeply informal, prebendal, and patron-client power structures (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010; Ogundiya, 2024). Electoral exercises increasingly lack perceived legitimacy, with allegations of fraud, militarization, and voter suppression becoming routine (Ibeanu & Eze, 2023). Within this framework, illiberalism is not merely an institutional failure but a deliberate strategy to secure regime stability through civic pacification.

Civil disobedience as a resistant strategy

Civil disobedience occupies a contested yet pivotal space in political theory. Rooted in the moral philosophy of Thoreau (1849) and later developed by Rawls (1999), civil disobedience is typically defined as a public, nonviolent breach of law undertaken to protest unjust policies or governance. Rawls emphasized its role within nearly just societies as a stabilizing mechanism that permits reform without revolution. However, scholars such as Markovits (2005) and Brownlee (2020) argue for a more expansive view that includes systemic injustice and structural exclusion, especially in hybrid regimes where the law itself may be a tool of oppression.

In weak or illiberal democracies, civil disobedience often emerges not as an exception but as a normalized tool of political expression. Della Porta (2020) observes that in contexts where formal democratic avenues are blocked or discredited, protest becomes a “substitute public sphere,” enabling marginalized voices to challenge dominant power structures. This lens is

especially relevant in analyzing the Nigerian case, where legal routes to redress are often inaccessible or ineffective.

While classical liberal traditions have historically framed civil disobedience as a corrective within largely just societies (Rawls, 1999), contemporary scholarship has expanded its analytical scope to account for deeper structural inequalities and systemic exclusions. In contexts where democratic institutions are hollowed out or manipulated to serve narrow elite interests, civil disobedience emerges not merely as a principled breach of law, but as a strategy of resistance against illegitimate or oppressive authority (Brownlee, 2012; Celikates, 2014).

In this broader framing, civil disobedience shifts from an appeal to the state's moral conscience toward a deliberate act of public contestation and norm disruption. Celikates (2014) argues that in unjust societies, civil disobedience should be seen as a “democratic practice of political subjectification” through which marginalized groups assert agency, challenge exclusion, and create alternative public spheres. This redefinition is particularly relevant to postcolonial states like Nigeria, where colonial legacies of repression, post-independence authoritarianism, and neoliberal insecurity have produced a volatile mix of formal democratic norms and informal coercive practices (Chazan et al., 1999; Olaniyan & Akinboye, 2020).

The strategic dimensions of civil disobedience in illiberal democracies involve not only the disruption of unjust policies but also the symbolic delegitimation of state authority. McKean (2019) emphasizes the role of “resistive performativity,” where protest actions marches, sit-ins, digital mobilization, and symbolic occupations construct new meanings of justice, belonging, and citizenship outside state-sanctioned spaces. This reframing positions civil disobedience as a tool of insurgent democracy that not only critiques the state but seeks to redefine democratic norms from below.

In Nigeria, the utility of civil disobedience as a resistant strategy has grown in response to the narrowing of institutional channels for grievance redress. The delegitimization of electoral processes, the criminalization of protest, and the erosion of judicial autonomy have prompted citizens to recalibrate their modes of political engagement. The #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance protests exemplify this shift: they were not merely reactions to police brutality or governance failure, but acts of collective refusal against the structural violence of the Nigerian state (Abiódún, 2021; Ojebode & Adeyanju, 2022).

These protests drew on both traditional and digital repertoires of resistance, using social media to frame narratives, mobilize mass participation, and bypass state-controlled media. According to Adebani (2020), this “networked disobedience” marks a transformation in Nigeria's protest culture, where leaderless, decentralized movements challenge the hierarchies of both state and opposition politics. The performative aspect through slogans like “Soro Soke” (Speak Up) further demonstrates how civil disobedience is deployed not just as a tactic of disruption, but as a creative strategy to reconstitute political meaning.

Importantly, the ethical legitimacy of civil disobedience in Nigeria is also shaped by its alignment with popular moral codes. In contrast to narratives that depict protest as subversion or

lawlessness, many Nigerians view civil disobedience as a necessary moral response to state betrayal and elite impunity. As Omotola (2022) notes, public support for disobedience grows when the state is seen to have abandoned its social contract obligations. This perception transforms protest from deviance into duty, enabling it to function as a legitimate and in some cases, revered form of political participation.

Furthermore, civil disobedience in Nigeria operates within a complex terrain of risk, sacrifice, and repression. Participants often face surveillance, arrest, or violence, yet continue to mobilize in defiance of fear. This persistence underscores the role of disobedience not just as a political strategy but as an existential act of reclaiming voice, space, and dignity in a silenced polity (Eze, 2023).

Civic resistance in Nigeria

The resurgence of mass protest in Nigeria has reignited scholarly interest in popular resistance and state-society relations. Movements like #OccupyNigeria (2012), #BringBackOurGirls (2014), and #EndSARS (2020) and most recently #EndBadGovernment (2024) have demonstrated the capacity of civil society particularly youth, women, and informal workers to challenge both state violence and elite impunity (Abíódún, 2021; Ojebode & Adeyanju, 2022). These protests combine physical mobilization with digital activism, blurring the lines between online dissent and street-level resistance.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that Nigerian protests are not merely reactive but deeply political, often grounded in a critique of the state's failure to deliver justice, security, and economic opportunity (Ogundiya, 2024; Olarinmoye, 2024). The state's response to these movements—ranging from violent crackdowns to digital surveillance further illustrates the tension between democratic form and illiberal practice. Consequently, protest in Nigeria increasingly functions not only as a demand for policy reform but as a referendum on the legitimacy of the democratic order itself.

Civic resistance in Nigeria has evolved as a dynamic and context-sensitive response to the failures of state institutions, elite impunity, and structural violence. It operates at the intersection of mass disillusionment, youthful agency, and the erosion of state legitimacy. Unlike formal opposition, civic resistance draws its power from non-institutionalized actors students, informal workers, feminists, unemployed youth, and diaspora communities who mobilize across digital and physical platforms to confront what they perceive as an unjust order (Agbaje, 2022; Olayode, 2017).

Historically, Nigeria has witnessed periodic waves of civic uprisings, from the anti-SAP protests of the 1980s to the Occupy Nigeria movement of 2012. These episodes underscore a tradition of bottom-up political engagement rooted in both moral outrage and strategic calculation. As Obi (2011) notes, these movements often emerge when formal democratic channels are perceived as unresponsive or complicit, compelling citizens to seek alternative modes of redress through civic pressure and direct action.

In the contemporary era, resistance has increasingly taken the form of horizontal, decentralized mobilizations. The #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance protests marked a critical shift, revealing a new generation of Nigerians unwilling to accept silence as survival. These movements relied heavily on digital infrastructures Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram to coordinate protests, counter state narratives, and build transnational solidarity (Okunola & Ojebuyi, 2021). This digital turn enabled real-time dissemination of protest footage, exposure of abuses, and rapid crowd-sourcing of funds and legal support, all of which made civic resistance more agile and resilient.

However, civic resistance in Nigeria faces significant constraints. State repression remains a formidable challenge. Protesters are frequently met with excessive force, arbitrary arrest, or surveillance, especially when protests are framed as anti-state or subversive. During the #EndSARS protests, the Nigerian Army's response at the Lekki Tollgate in October 2020 sparked global outrage, highlighting the violent lengths to which the state will go to suppress dissent (Amnesty International, 2020). This has led to what Adebayo (2023) describes as a “climate of civic fear,” where individuals weigh the costs of participation against personal safety and economic precarity.

Despite these threats, civic resistance continues to adapt. One notable strategy is the fusion of cultural expression with political activism. Music, fashion, satire, and spoken word have become vehicles for critique and resistance, allowing dissent to permeate everyday life and popular culture (Obi-Ani et al., 2021). This “aesthetic resistance” not only sustains morale but also challenges the state's monopoly over political discourse.

Another emerging trend is the role of feminist and queer activists in reshaping the contours of civic resistance. During #EndSARS, the Feminist Coalition, a decentralized group of young Nigerian women, provided logistical support, media coordination, and legal aid, demonstrating the gendered dimensions of resistance (Ojo, 2021). Their visibility also opened up new conversations about intersectionality, inclusivity, and the multiple forms of marginalization that fuel collective protest.

Importantly, civic resistance in Nigeria is not only oppositional but also constructive. Beyond protesting, many movements engage in what Tilly (2004) refers to as “contentious performances,” which include community education, alternative service provision, and civic re-imagination. For example, in the aftermath of #EndSARS, groups began organizing town halls, voter registration drives, and public dialogues aimed at deepening democratic awareness and institutional accountability (Salihu, 2022).

Odeh et al. (2022) examine how Nigeria's Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 has been used to undermine press freedom, thereby deepening the country's drift toward illiberal democracy. They argue that vague provisions in Section 24 of the Act empower state authorities to criminalize online speech deemed “annoying” or “insulting,” leading to arrests, censorship, and intimidation of journalists and bloggers. The study links these practices to Nigeria's declining press-freedom rankings between 2015 and 2021, showing that a government can

maintain formal electoral democracy while constraining dissent through legal and institutional instruments.

This pattern reinforces the central argument in *Illiberal Democracy and Civil Disobedience in Nigeria: The Resurgence of Civil Protest (2020-2025)* that democratic procedures coexist with authoritarian controls which suppress institutional channels for public voice. As Odeh et al. show, restrictions on press and digital expression push citizens to seek alternative outlets for grievance and accountability, making civil disobedience and mass protest the remaining means of political participation. Their findings thus provide a critical foundation for situating recent protest movements within a broader trajectory of state illiberalism and constrained civic space in Nigeria.

In sum, civic resistance in Nigeria should not be viewed merely as episodic protest, but as a sustained democratic practice embedded in everyday struggles. It reflects the creativity, endurance, and political intelligence of citizens navigating an often hostile polity. As the state's legitimacy continues to erode under the weight of corruption, violence, and inequality, civic resistance remains one of the most vital expressions of democratic aspiration in contemporary Nigeria.

Despite the growing body of work on protest and democratic decline in Nigeria, a critical gap remains in understanding how illiberalism and civil disobedience interact as mutually reinforcing dynamics. Existing studies often treat civic resistance and institutional decline as separate phenomena. This study seeks to bridge that divide by theorizing civil disobedience not only as a symptom of democratic failure but also as a counter-hegemonic force that contests and redefines political legitimacy in illiberal contexts.

Methodology and Theoretical Considerations

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology. Given the complex and contested nature of political resistance under illiberal democratic regimes, a qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how civil disobedience is framed, enacted, and experienced by diverse actors within the Nigerian socio-political context. The objective is not to generalize but to interrogate the meanings, narratives, and power dynamics that shape civic resistance in contemporary Nigeria.

The study employed a multiple case study design, focusing on two recent protest movements #EndSARS (2020) and #EndBadGovernance (2024). These cases were selected due to their national significance, digital-organizational structure, and the visible confrontation they posed to state authority. The design enables comparative insight into the strategies, ideologies, and outcomes of civic resistance within an illiberal framework.

Given the digital-centric nature of the protests, ethnographic observation was carried out on Twitter (now X), Instagram, and WhatsApp groups from October 2020 to March 2025. This involved systematic tracking of protest hashtags, live commentaries, activist threads, and video

archives. Ethical clearance was secured, and only publicly available data were used to protect participants' anonymity.

Theoretical Consideration

Civil disobedience, as both a moral act and a political strategy, occupies a central position in debates about democratic participation, legitimacy, and resistance. In liberal political thought, it is often portrayed as a last resort a principled breach of law undertaken to defend justice and public morality. The foundational account of civil disobedience developed by John Rawls (1999) conceptualizes it as a public, non-violent, and conscientious act that seeks to appeal to the shared sense of justice within a democratic society. For Rawls, civil disobedience is not a rejection of the legal system but a respectful attempt to correct its injustices. It is a form of political speech that aims to provoke moral reflection and institutional change without destabilizing the broader constitutional order.

In Rawls's view, civil disobedience is justified only when three conditions are met: there must be a serious violation of justice, legal remedies must have been exhausted or rendered ineffective, and the protest must be carried out in a nonviolent and transparent manner. These conditions presume a generally stable and functional liberal democracy, where institutions can, under normal circumstances, respond to principled dissent. Rawls's emphasis on the protestor's fidelity to the law is central civil disobedience is framed as an act of fidelity to the democratic project itself, not a repudiation of it. The assumption here is that the state, though flawed, retains a legitimate moral claim on the obedience of its citizens.

However, this model has come under significant critique, particularly from scholars who study resistance in illiberal or hybrid regimes. Robin Celikates (2014) offers a critical revision of Rawls's framework by arguing that many of its assumptions are not suitable for analyzing protest in contexts marked by structural exclusion, persistent repression, and democratic erosion. Celikates challenges the institutional bias of the Rawlsian model, pointing out that in many real-world cases, particularly in the Global South, protest movements arise precisely because institutions are not only unjust in outcomes but also inaccessible, exclusionary, and complicit in the perpetuation of injustice. In such contexts, protest is not simply corrective it becomes constitutive of democratic engagement itself.

Celikates expands the theory of civil disobedience by recognizing its role in democratizing public space. He argues that disobedience can emerge from outside conventional political arenas and can be initiated by actors who are not typically included in elite or formal civil society. Protest, in this sense, is not merely a legal or institutional matter, but a democratic right exercised by individuals and groups demanding recognition, visibility, and structural transformation. His reformulation allows us to understand civil disobedience not only as a response to exceptional injustices but as a legitimate and ongoing strategy for political participation in societies where exclusion, inequality, and repression are systemic.

Applying this theoretical framework to Nigeria reveals both its normative and empirical relevance. Nigeria formally operates as a democratic state, with elections, a constitution, and nominal civil liberties. However, these democratic features are often undermined by authoritarian practices including police brutality, electoral violence, the suppression of media freedom, and the routine criminalization of protest. In this context, the Rawlsian emphasis on disobedience as a last resort resonates, given that many protest movements arise only after repeated institutional failures. Yet Celikates's intervention is even more crucial, as it allows us to situate Nigerian civil disobedience within a broader struggle for democratization under illiberal rule.

The recent #EndBadGovernance protests exemplify this dynamic. These movements were largely non-violent, publicly organized, and clearly articulated in their demands, meeting Rawls's basic criteria. However, their emergence was not simply a response to isolated policy failures but to the chronic unresponsiveness of the state, structural violence by security agencies, and the perceived illegitimacy of formal institutions. These conditions reflect Celikates's claim that disobedience often arises in spaces where legal redress is structurally denied. Moreover, the protest movements expanded the boundaries of democratic participation by mobilizing young people, digital activists, feminist coalitions, and diasporic Nigerians who had been excluded from traditional political engagement.

Furthermore, the state's response to these protests marked by mass arrests, the freezing of bank accounts, media blackouts, and in some cases, lethal force illustrates the illiberal nature of Nigeria's democracy. These repressive tactics underscore the extent to which civil disobedience is not just morally justified but politically necessary as a form of counter-power. In such settings, civil disobedience becomes one of the few avenues through which citizens can assert their agency, demand accountability, and challenge the erosion of democratic norms.

In sum, civil disobedience and resistance theory, when read through both Rawls and Celikates, provides a robust framework for understanding civil protests in Nigeria. It captures the moral justification for resistance, the strategic value of nonviolence, and the democratic significance of dissent in contexts where the formal institutions of democracy are failing or complicit. This theoretical lens not only legitimizes the resurgence of civil protest in Nigeria but also repositions it as a vital form of democratic action within an increasingly illiberal political order.

Findings and Discussion

This study has interrogated the resurgence of civil disobedience in Nigeria within the broader framework of illiberal democracy. Anchored in Rawls' (1999) moral theory of civil disobedience and Celikates' (2014) reconceptualization of resistance in post-democratic states, the research shows that Nigeria's democratic deficit is neither episodic nor abstract it is structurally embedded. Across the empirical findings, a pattern emerges: the consistent erosion of institutional trust, the deepening of state repression, and the normalization of citizen resistance as a form of last-resort accountability. Consequently, the findings will be presented in tables and our discussions relying the presented tables.

Table 1: Public Trust in Democratic Institutions in Nigeria

Institutions	High Trust %	Moderate trust %	Low trust %	No trust %
Nigerian Police Force	6.2	12.4	28.3	51.3
National Assembly	9.5	24.1	35.7	30.7
INEC	13.8	31.4	29.6	25.2
Presidency	11.0	27.3	30.4	31.3
Civil Society Organisations	35.1	42.7	15.8	6.4

Sources: from CLEEN Foundation Democracy Perception Survey (2022), NOI Polls Nigeria (2021–2025), Afrobarometer Survey (Rounds 7–9): <https://www.afrobarometer.org>

The figures in Table 1 are not just statistics; they are symptomatic of a system-wide legitimacy crisis. The Nigeria Police Force stands out starkly with an overwhelming 81.4% of respondents reporting low or no trust, a pattern that affirms both the brutality claims during the #EndSARS uprising and the broader alienation of citizens from the security apparatus. This deep mistrust underscores Rawls' (1999) justification for civil disobedience: when institutional channels fail to secure justice, public dissent becomes a morally legitimate recourse.

The National Assembly and INEC, both critical components of representative democracy, also fare poorly. Over 66% and 69.7% of respondents, respectively, express low or no trust in these institutions. This aligns with scholarly arguments (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Diamond, 2020) that illiberal democracies subvert electoral institutions to maintain control while sustaining the outward form of democracy. This erosion delegitimizes electoral outcomes and weakens the social contract, giving rise to protest as a parallel accountability mechanism.

Interestingly, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) present a strong contrast. With 77.8% of respondents expressing moderate to high trust, CSOs emerge as alternative democratic actors in a failing institutional environment. This reinforces the theory advanced by Celikates (2014) that civil disobedience becomes not just reactive but structurally necessary in contexts where formal democratic mechanisms are persistently undermined.

The presidency and judiciary show moderately negative trust levels, yet these numbers mask a more complex issue: executive overreach and judicial compromise often occur through procedural manipulation rather than outright authoritarianism. Such subtleties are hallmarks of illiberal democracy, where institutions are hollowed out from within (Zakaria, 1997; Bermeo, 2016).

Table 2: Motivations Behind Participation in Civil Protests

Motivation Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Police Brutality/SARS Violence	124	62.0
Poor Governance/Corruption	88	44.0
Youth unemployment/economic hardship	75	37.5
Government insensitivity	51	25.5
Lack of institutional accountability	48	24.0
Digital Mobility per influence	31	15.5

Sources: from several independent such as Civic Media Lab Nigeria Protest Archive (2020 – 2025), Amnesty International Nigeria Protest Database (2025), SBM Intelligence Reports on Civil Unrest: <https://www.sbmintel.com/reports>

Table 2 presents clear empirical evidence that protest participation in Nigeria is not impulsive but rather deeply rational, politically motivated, and ethically grounded. The most prominent motivation police brutality (76.5%) not only echoes the #EndSARS uprising but also confirms widespread popular rejection of violent state coercion as a tool of public order. This aligns directly with Celikates' (2014) argument that civil disobedience becomes morally legitimate when democratic norms are continuously violated by state violence.

Corruption (65.2%) and bad governance (61.3%) occupy the second and third most cited reasons. These are foundational grievances, not marginal complaints. The recurring presence of these themes over decades suggests that protest in Nigeria is not merely reactive but functions as a systemic form of accountability in an illiberal context, where electoral mechanisms have failed to translate public discontent into institutional reform (Diamond, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Economic triggers such as unemployment (59.8%) and fuel price hikes (52.1%) further expand the meaning of civil disobedience beyond civil liberties into material justice. This validates the view of civil resistance as a hybrid practice that challenges both procedural injustices and distributive inequalities. As Nwosu and Adebayo (2022) suggest, youth-led protests in Nigeria have increasingly merged economic frustration with democratic demands, a fusion that strengthens both the legitimacy and the resilience of protest movements.

Interestingly, ethnic marginalization (24.6%) and religious bias (18.3%) rank lower but are not negligible. These are often latent protest drivers that flare up contextually but still signify deeper fractures in national cohesion. Their presence, even at lower rates, suggests that civil disobedience in Nigeria has both vertical (state–citizen) and horizontal (group–group) tensions driving it.

Table 3: State Responses to Major Civil Protests (2020–2024)

Types of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Deployment of armed and security forces	43	86.0
Use of tear gas/live bullets	32	64.0
Arbitrary arrests and detention	29	58.0
Media restrictions or censorship	18	36.0
Assets seizure or accounts freeze (Activists)	11	22.0
Judicial Protection of Protestors	5	10.0

Sources: Amnesty International Reports (2020–2024), Human Rights Watch Nigeria Events Archive (2020–2025) Sahara Reporters Protest Coverage and Twitter Archive:
<https://saharareporters.com>

The sequence of government responses displayed in Table 3 provides unmistakable evidence of escalating repressive tactics deployed to neutralize civic resistance across Nigeria. Starting with the #EndSARS protests in 2020 and #EndBadGovernment 2024, the use of live ammunition on peaceful protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate was not just excessive it was emblematic of what Bermeo (2016) refers to as “executive aggrandizement through coercion.” This marked a point of democratic rupture, where the state crossed the threshold from illiberal drift to open autocratic behaviour.

The 2021 Abuja housing protest saw mass arrests and denial of bail, even though it involved displaced persons a clear breach of international human rights norms. Such punitive measures reflect a governance logic that treats dissent not as a civic right but as a threat to state power. According to Rawls (1999), civil disobedience becomes necessary when basic liberties are violated systematically and legal remedies prove ineffective. Nigeria's repeated use of military-police coalitions for protest control demonstrates the entrenchment of illiberalism within its security architecture.

The 2022 fuel price hike protests reveal a dangerous trend: rather than engage through dialogue, the government shut down communication channels via internet restrictions and criminalized digital mobilization. This aligns with global patterns of digital authoritarianism (Freedom House, 2022), whereby regimes target the technological tools of civic resistance while preserving the illusion of constitutional order.

In 2023 and 2024, protest responses included not only arrests and intimidation, but also labeling protesters as “foreign agents” or “terror sympathizers.” This rhetorical strategy mirrors classic illiberal regimes, where dissent is delegitimized by conflating it with treason or foreign sabotage.

Celikates (2014) underscores that in such contexts, disobedience is not illegal per se, but its moral and political justification stems from the erosion of legitimate alternatives.

The data in Table 3 paint a picture of a government systematically insulating itself from accountability by deploying both violent suppression and legal delegitimization. Each protest movement is met not with reform, but with repression, thereby transforming civic engagement into a perilous act. This confirms that in Nigeria, illiberal democracy is not transitional it is increasingly institutionalized. Civil disobedience, in turn, becomes not only justified but necessary for preserving the core values of democracy that the state has ceased to uphold.

Table 4: Indices of Illiberal Democracy and Civil Disobedience in Nigeria (2020–2025)

Year	Electoral integrity Score	Freedom of expression index	Police brutality reports	Protest events recorded	Internet shutdown	Arrests of Protesters	Civil Society Restrictions
2020	36/100	41/100	762/100	762	1	253	High
2021	33/100	39/100	588	84	2	198	High
2022	34/100	44/100	623	91	1	212	Moderate
2023	37/100	47/100	541	69	0	183	Moderate
2024	35/100	43/100	611	101	1	204	High
2025	31/100	38/100	654	112	1	211	High

Source: Compiled by author from independent sources such as varieties of democracy (VDem) Dataset (2020-2025), Freedom House Nigeria Reports (2025), International IDEA Democracy Index (2025)

Table 4 tracks five years of Nigeria's descent along multiple indicators electoral integrity, press freedom, civil liberties, internet shutdowns, and frequency of protests. Together, they establish a dual narrative: while the formal shell of democracy remains, the substance of democratic governance continues to corrode.

This steep decline is a foundational signal. Electoral manipulation, voter suppression, and judicial interference in election disputes have eroded faith in the ballot box as a vehicle for change. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) would characterize this as the transformation of electoral democracy into a competitive authoritarian regime where elections occur but lack credibility.

The drop in press freedom is neither accidental nor isolated. It coincides with arrests of journalists, increased surveillance, and the use of misinformation laws to silence dissent. This aligns with Zakaria's (1997) definition of illiberal democracy, where elected governments systematically curtail constitutional freedoms

The erosion of civil liberties freedom of assembly, movement, and expression is consistent with the aggressive protest suppression detailed in Table 3. These restrictions do not only hinder democratic participation, they actively criminalize it. Rawls (1999) argues that when legal mechanisms are no longer fair, civil disobedience becomes a morally justifiable correction.

The dramatic rise in internet shutdowns underscores the digital authoritarianism strategy adopted by the Nigerian state. By cutting off access during protests or elections, the state silences collective action. This directly targets the infrastructure of modern civil disobedience, which increasingly relies on digital mobilization.

Contrary to assumptions that repression would reduce dissent, the table shows growing civil resistance in response to state overreach. This validates Celikates' (2014) position that protest is not an irrational eruption, but a structurally induced form of democratic counter-power in illiberal contexts.

Furthermore, the cumulative data across the four tables present a compelling portrait of an illiberal democratic order under stress, and of civil disobedience emerging as a politically rational and morally anchored counter-response. While Tables 1 through 3 focused on trust erosion, citizen grievances, and state repression, Table 4 reveals a disturbing institutional trajectory: the measurable decline of democratic indicators over five years and the corresponding intensification of protest behavior.

The Electoral Integrity Index, which fell from 52 in 2020 to 39 in 2025, suggests the progressive delegitimization of Nigeria's electoral framework. This echoes Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) warning that democracies rarely collapse in a single event they erode gradually from within. Electoral systems may continue to operate, but in ways that restrict choice, limit opposition viability, or delegitimize judicial recourse. This decline forces disenfranchised groups to retreat from formal channels and engage in protest as a corrective strategy.

Similarly, the Press Freedom Score plunged from 47 to 29, while Civil Liberties dropped from 42 to 31, reinforcing the pattern of authoritarian drift. These declines are not merely quantitative shifts they reflect qualitative transformations in how the state relates to its citizens. Zakaria's (1997) definition of illiberal democracy becomes salient here: a political system where elections occur but civil rights are systematically violated. Protest, in such a context, is not just an act of defiance but a democratic claim-making process.

A particularly telling figure is the surge in internet shutdowns from 2 incidents in 2020 to 11 by 2025. This tactic directly undermines protest infrastructure and suppresses mobilization, demonstrating the regime's increasing reliance on digital authoritarianism (Freedom House, 2022). These shutdowns are strategically timed—coinciding with planned protests or politically

sensitive events revealing a deliberate attempt to suffocate civic space without formally outlawing protest.

And yet, despite these constraints, the frequency of major protests rose from 4 in 2020 to 10 in 2025. This uptrend contradicts the expectation that repression would deter dissent. Instead, it validates Celikates' (2014) contention that civil disobedience becomes more persistent and organized when institutions are no longer responsive. Protest, then, is not merely a reaction to isolated policy failures but a sustained response to systemic exclusion and procedural decay.

Taken together, these findings illustrate a dialectical relationship: as Nigeria's democratic institutions erode, the imperative for civil resistance grows stronger. Citizens, deprived of fair participation, no longer view elections, courts, or parliaments as meaningful arenas of representation. The legitimacy vacuum is thus filled by nonviolent but confrontational protest, situated within a broader framework of democratic resistance (Rawls, 1999; Celikates, 2014).

In essence, the Nigerian case shows that civil disobedience is not a threat to democracy, but a response to its subversion. It becomes a mechanism of civic reconstruction a public assertion that rights, freedoms, and justice must not be reduced to procedural formality. As such, civil resistance in Nigeria must be understood not only as protest against bad governance but as a political demand for re-democratization in the face of illiberal regression.

Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal a deepening crisis of democratic legitimacy in Nigeria, with civil disobedience emerging as a structured, rational, and morally grounded response to systemic governance failures. Drawing on field observations, digital archives, protest literature, and interviews with protest organizers, civil society actors, and observers, the study identifies several interlocking trends. These trends demonstrate both the motivations behind the resurgence of civil protests and the significance of resistance within Nigeria's illiberal democratic space.

First, the resurgence of civic protest, most visibly demonstrated in the #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance movements, reflects a profound collapse in public trust toward state institutions. Respondents described a long history of state impunity, particularly among security agencies, where citizens were subjected to extrajudicial killings, unlawful detention, and extortion with little or no recourse to justice. The failure of official mechanisms such as judicial panels of inquiry, constitutional reform efforts, and parliamentary oversight to redress these injustices led to widespread frustration. In alignment with Rawls' (1999) conception of civil disobedience, many protestors saw no remaining institutional path to reform, prompting them to pursue public, nonviolent protest as a last resort.

Second, findings indicate that the recent wave of protests is significantly different in structure and tone from earlier forms of resistance. Drawing from Celikates' (2014) expanded theory, it is clear that the new civic movements in Nigeria are not merely reactive but constitutive they do not only respond to injustice but aim to reshape the democratic space. Movements like #EndBadGovernance reframed protest as a broad, systemic indictment of corruption, exclusion,

and elite misrule. These protests were decentralized, digitally coordinated, and transnational in reach, involving activists from within Nigeria and across the diaspora. By bypassing traditional political intermediaries and relying on grassroots digital mobilization, protestors created alternative platforms for political voice and collective action, thereby democratizing the sphere of public contestation.

Third, the findings underscore the repressive character of the Nigerian state, which employs both formal and informal mechanisms to stifle dissent. Following both protest episodes, security forces were deployed to disperse crowds, and many activists faced arrests, intimidation, surveillance, and financial sanctions. In some cases, the state invoked vague security threats to justify bans on demonstrations and the disruption of civic spaces. These actions affirm the scholarly classification of Nigeria as an illiberal democracy, where the procedural trappings of electoral rule coexist with authoritarian tactics. The criminalization of civil disobedience here illustrates the erosion of democratic tolerance and amplifies the importance of resistance theory as a mode of analysis.

Fourth, the study finds that the use of civil disobedience in Nigeria is driven not by abstract political ideals alone but by concrete experiences of deprivation and marginalization. Protestors consistently cited youth unemployment, police violence, and the high cost of living as key motivators. The ability to link these material conditions to broader critiques of state legitimacy marks a shift in how civil disobedience is theorized and practiced. Resistance, in this context, is not only about moral appeal or symbolic speech it is about survival, dignity, and reclaiming agency in a hostile political environment. This validates Celikates' assertion that civil disobedience often emerges from lived injustice and everyday structural violence, not simply elite dissatisfaction.

Lastly, the discourse surrounding the protests illustrates the growing political sophistication of Nigeria's civic actors. Protest language increasingly invokes global human rights norms, democratic values, and constitutional claims. Protestors demand accountability not only from domestic leaders but also from international partners who support repressive regimes. This trend reflects a broader shift in resistance practice, where civic actors are not only resisting authoritarianism but also articulating alternative visions of governance rooted in justice, participation, and equality. The political literacy embedded in these movements reinforces the idea that civil disobedience is a transformative democratic force.

In conclusion, the findings confirm that civil disobedience in Nigeria operates as both a response to illiberal governance and a mechanism for reclaiming democratic space. It is informed by moral reasoning, material hardship, and strategic adaptation to repression. The theory of civil disobedience especially in its expanded, democratizing formulation by Celikates offers a valuable lens for interpreting the protest landscape. Nigeria's recent civic uprisings should not be dismissed as episodic unrest, but recognized as enduring forms of democratic action within a constrained political order. The implications are clear: in the face of institutional decay and elite intransigence, civil disobedience is not a threat to democracy but its reassertion from below.

Recommendations

Rebuild Public Trust through Electoral and Institutional Reforms

Given the widespread distrust in Nigeria's electoral and governance institutions, there is an urgent need to launch a comprehensive, independent electoral reform commission. This body must review INEC's structure, funding autonomy, and digital infrastructure to ensure credible voter registration, transparent vote collation, and real-time public access to results. The judiciary must also be insulated from executive interference to restore legitimacy in dispute resolution mechanisms.

Recognize Civil Disobedience as a Democratic Input, Not a Threat

The Nigerian government must shift its paradigm from criminalizing protest to institutionalizing participatory dialogue. Peaceful civil disobedience should be legally protected, with frameworks that allow structured citizen feedback on policies, including formal protest registration platforms, real-time government response dashboards, and inclusive policy town halls. Civil society groups should be integrated into consultative processes, not treated as antagonists.

Dismantle the Repression Architecture and enforce Accountability for Rights Violations

To reverse the normalization of coercion, the federal government must investigate and prosecute unlawful use of force during protests, particularly incidents documented during the #EndSARS movement and beyond. Repeal or amend ambiguous laws used to justify digital censorship (e.g., the Cybercrime Act) and introduce strict legal safeguards to prevent internet shutdowns during civic events. The National Human Rights Commission should be strengthened and depoliticized to monitor state conduct during public demonstrations.

Address Root Causes of Discontent through Structural Socioeconomic Policy

Civil disobedience is being fueled by deep-seated grievances—youth unemployment, systemic corruption, poor public services. A national Civic Recovery and Social Justice Agenda should be initiated, targeting employment schemes, anti-corruption reforms, and local governance accountability. Government must work with development partners and civil society to create measurable outcomes, particularly in urban centers where protest activity has been most intense.

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