

PRESS CONFERENCE ON THE URGENT NEED TO SHELVE ANOTHER ROUND OF #ENDSARS PROTESTS FOR NOW - A TIMELY WARNING AND AN APPEAL TO THE HEART OF NIGERIAN YOUTHS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, GOVERNOR YAHAYA BELLO OF KOGI STATE

I am unsettled by credible intel indicating that another round of the #EndSARS protests is brewing in select cities across the country, likely to commence this week, and possibly as early as Monday the 7th of December. In other words, tomorrow morning.

Every Nigerian should be worried by the spectre of another nationwide protest for any reason at all at this time. Not only is it true that the whole nation is still scarified and much traumatised by the violent aftermath of the last round of protests, but Ground Zero has changed drastically, and the rules of engagement this time around will no longer be the same.

The last round of protests benefited from a police force subdued by embarrassment at the misdeeds of few of their colleagues and simultaneously held in check by official directives, even from self defence. Any future protest is likely to run into a police force still enraged by the vicious attacks visited upon her last time.

Nigerians are aware of the gruesome slaughter, and even cannibalism, of at least 22 police officers during the violence that erupted alongside the #EndSARS protests. This is aside from the scores who were injured or maimed, in addition to the deliberate targeting and destruction of dozens of police stations and other police facilities as well as the looting of high calibre guns and ammunition from armouries. These 22 police officers were our brothers, sons and husbands. Ultimately, they are Nigerians.

While it is true that law enforcement should do her job professionally irrespective of circumstances, it is even truer that official uniform armed men and women who were universally hunted and killed across the country by hoodlums can be unpredictable, even paranoid. In the face of all this and as the first sitting Governor who publicly upheld the rights of our youths to protest against Police Brutality, I cannot in all good conscience agree that the time is ripe for another round of #EndSARS protests.

Moreover, it seems to me that this is the time to consolidate on the gains of the last protests by participating fully in the various Panels and bodies set up by the Federal and state Governments to look into police brutality, identify perpetrators and compensate victims.

From what I can see so far, progress is being made at the various Panels. Not only are we seeing emboldened citizens coming forward with their stories of officer-involved in human rights abuses, but such erring officers are being identified. No doubt, established offenders will be punished, just like the scores of the defunct SARS officers who have since been dismissed from the force, and who may be further sanctioned.

Youths have seats on these Panels and have acquitted themselves with commendable humility and maturity. I therefore call on them to persevere in this process despite any perceived shortcomings. It is only an unwise hunter who does not make time to roast or otherwise prepare what he took in hunting for consumption or commerce.

I deem another round of #EndSARS protests to be premature and counter-productive at this time. Apart from the higher likelihood of conflict with the police earlier canvassed, we must also admit that the security situation in the country is very precarious at the moment. All patriots must therefore make

conscious efforts not to degrade a parlous security situation further. Nationwide protests at this time will only overburden the load-bearing capabilities of our security architecture increasing the likelihood of total collapse. No matter the narrative, I doubt that out-of-control anarchy is an objective of the #EndSARS protests.

It is also true that we live in an economy that is bleeding badly right now. Traditional responses to Covid-19 has hurt, not just Nigeria, but all other countries of the world. Many have fallen into recession. To worsen matters, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) predicted 3 days ago that the pandemic could push the number of people living in extreme poverty to over 1 billion by 2030. Thank God they are owning up to my earlier prediction, warning and caution.

Nigeria's earnings and foreign exchange situation is too fragile as we speak to resist sustained shocks. Another nationwide protest will worsen the multidimensional poverty indices all over our country and work greater hardship on the ordinary Nigerians we claim to be advocating for.

There are also sociocultural implications. Nigerians tend to travel a lot during the Christmas holidays. Statistics show that travel during this period is not only for pleasure as widely supposed. For many of our people, this is the only time in the year when they can attend to pressing life responsibilities like marriages, hospital appointments, funerals of loved ones and even community improvement events.

As a Governor, I am aware hundreds of such events will happen in towns big and small in my state and beyond. Many have been fixed for months or even years in advance with much expense already gone into planning. All of this will be disrupted by nationwide protests at this time and I appeal to the great Nigerian youths not to be the harbingers of so much pain and loss to their compatriots - individuals, families and communities alike.

Then of course we have sociopolitical reasons to thread carefully. We have the example of countries which have gone the path of chaotic social change only to collapse as proof that Action and Caution are siamese twins in the journey of all successful revolutions.

Social justice is always going to be within a social context. In other words, we need to have a country to even protest for a better one at all. Social Change, like fire, must never be allowed to get out of control or it will consume the very building it was ignited to warm in the first place, along with the occupants.

In public protests, no variable is 100% guaranteed. Every protest can be hijacked. Like the #EndSARS protests, recent Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests against systemic racism and police brutality in the United State were largely peaceful, yet they were infiltrated by violent elements. This forced the leaders to frequently recalibrate their strategy in order to keep travelling towards their objectives. For instance, they have ceased fire since November 4th, no doubt to give the electoral process a chance.

I must also stress that when all is said and done, the fastest route to desired social change in a democracy is via the political process. The guarantee of periodic elections and change of guard in government is one reason never to burn it all down at once. Perhaps the most impressive thing about the US protesters is how much they have utilised the ballot box in 2020.

In 2016, about 135 million Americans voted in the Presidential Elections. In 2020, they are on course to overtake the 180 million mark. Majority of the new voters are youthful protesters, and mobilisation is the key. Currently, Black Lives Matter (BLM) is actively participating and setting agenda in the Joe Biden

transition programme because their roles in his support cannot be denied. #EndSARS can do likewise or even better.

Pressure groups take political power when their pressure has built up to the point where they can no longer be refused or ignored. My administration has recently capitulated to the growing power and participation of women in our state politics by ceding all the 21 Deputy Chairmanship positions in all of our local government councils to them along with the 21 Council Speakership positions. Nothing stops #EndSARS from achieving similar accommodation with our political parties.

The good thing about a democracy is that if leaders push citizens to the brink through a consistent pattern of substandard governance, citizens can always wait for them at the next elections. I can testify from my personal experience that a political system can only be comprehensively overhauled from within and you can only do that when you take control of it as a legitimate and legal participant. It does not matter how much protesters ground the nation, they can never produce even a Councillor outside the ballot box who will be acceptable to the people.

Thus, anger at social imbalances or poor governance manifested only through protests, whether peaceful or violent, will only achieve piecemeal objectives. Our #EndSARS protesters must therefore start looking and organising towards the 2023 General Elections now, either by adopting an existing party platform or setting up one of their own.

Contrary to perceptions, 2023 General Elections are not far at all. If God keeps our lives, we are only about 800 days away from February, 2023 when all of this youthful energy can be harnessed and channeled properly for a true revolution via the ballot box. Till then, there is more than enough work before the #EndSARS group.

I therefore appeal to the Nigerian Youth, especially the #EndSARS protesters, to rethink all plans for protests at this time, and indeed before the Panels have rounded off their assignments. Such would be premature, dangerous and above all, counter-productive to our stated aims and objectives.

Men are still mourning the man bitten to death by the lizard (with his small teeth). The leopard should not take money to go and sharpen his fangs please.

I wish all Nigerians the very best of this season, a Merry Christmas and a peaceful, prosperous and healthy 2021.

Thank you and God bless.

YAHAYA BELLO

Governor of Kogi State

December 6, 2020.

To God be the Glory!