Youth, Civil Society, and Democratic Renewal

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — #EndSARS and the new African citizen

#EndSARS and the New African Citizen

In October 2020, young Nigerians organised one of the most remarkable civil society mobilisations in African history. The #EndSARS movement — calling for abolition of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), notorious for extortion, torture, and extrajudicial killings — brought hundreds of thousands of young Nigerians onto the streets of Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and dozens of other cities. The movement was organised entirely through social media, led by a generation that had grown up with digital technology and had no patience for the patronising condescension of an older political establishment that had delivered corruption and repression rather than development.

The government's response — the Lekki toll gate massacre of 20 October 2020, in which soldiers opened fire on peaceful protesters — was both a moral catastrophe and a political miscalculation. It deepened the conviction of millions of young Nigerians that fundamental political reform was needed, not incremental adjustment, and generated international outcry that put Nigeria's governance failures before a global audience.

#EndSARS was not unique to Nigeria. It expressed a phenomenon visible across Africa: a young, digitally connected, increasingly educated generation with higher expectations of governance, the organisational tools to mobilise without traditional political parties or patronage networks, and an unwillingness to accept the governance failures their parents endured. The youth protests in Sudan that overthrew Bashir in 2019, the Zimbabwean youth movement demanding Mugabe's departure in 2017, and the Senegalese civil society that defended democracy in the 2024 election all express the same generational energy that is Africa's greatest governance asset.

The Role of the African Citizen

Good governance is not delivered by good leaders alone. It is built by engaged citizens — people who vote, who pay taxes, who report corruption, who participate in community governance, who hold their representatives accountable between elections as well as on

election day, and who build the civil society organisations that form the connective tissue of democratic culture.

The most important governance reform Africa needs is cultural as much as institutional: the development of a political culture in which citizens expect accountability from their leaders as a matter of right, not as a gift; in which public office is understood as a service, not a privilege; in which corruption is socially condemned rather than socially admired; and in which citizens are willing to organise, advocate, and resist when their rights are violated. This cultural change is already happening, driven by the generational shift that produced #EndSARS and the other youth movements of the past decade. The generation coming of age now carries both the responsibility and the power to complete what the independence generation began.

Key Takeaways

#EndSARS demonstrated both the power and the limits of digitally organised civil society: hundreds of thousands mobilised without traditional political parties, but the movement was met with state violence and did not achieve its immediate demands. This generation's energy — visible from Lagos to Khartoum to Dakar — is Africa's single greatest governance asset, and converting it into lasting institutional reform, not just protest, is the work still ahead. The final lesson in this sequence brings together everything this unit has examined about governance, democracy, and the rule of law.