EPHEMERAL REVOLUTIONS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA'S HYBRID DEMOCRACY: FROM OCCUPY NIGERIA TO THE OBIDIENT MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT: This study advances the concept of ephemeral revolutions to explain why major protest waves and social movements in Nigeria generate intense public mobilisation but fail to produce lasting political or institutional change. Drawing on social movement and hybrid regime theory, it argues that movements such as Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS, and the Obidient Movement exhibit similar trajectories: rapid mass mobilisation, short-lived disruption of state power, and eventual decline driven by elite co-optation, repressive adaptation, institutional weakness, and the volatility of digital organising. Through comparative qualitative analysis, the study shows how each movement illuminates a different facet of ephemerality. Occupy Nigeria demonstrated cross-class alliances, EndSARS – a digitally networked but leaderless structure, and the Obidient Movement, an attempt to channel protest energy into electoral politics – all of which confronted structural limits embedded in Nigeria's hybrid democracy. The findings refine debates on movement durability in hybrid regimes and suggest that without stronger political institutions, protections for civic space, and mechanisms for post-movement institutionalisation, digital-age mobilisation in Nigeria will continue to yield powerful moments rather than enduring democratic transformations.

Keywords: Social Movements, Ephemeral Revolutions, Hybrid Democracy, EndSARS, Obidient Movement, Occupy Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Can social movements truly transform democratic governance in political systems that are only partly democratic? This question underpins the paradox of activism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–present), a period marked by the coexistence of democratic institutions with persistent authoritarian practices (Walker, 1999). Since the return to civilian rule, Nigeria has witnessed recurring waves of civic mobilisation, separatist agitation, terrorism, and social unrest (Njoku & Obiukwu, 2025; Njoku & Sidhu, 2017; 2021). These upheavals have exposed governance failures and intensified demands for accountability; yet, movements such as the Oodua Peoples Congress, Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS, and the Obidient Movement have struggled to produce enduring political transformation (Ajala, 2022; Ojo & Afolaranmi, 2024). This raises fundamental questions: why does mass participation repeatedly fail to translate into institutional or policy change? Why do these movements rise dramatically yet fade quickly?

This study observes that Nigeria's democratic trajectory since 1999 operates within a hybrid democracy – a system that combines formal democratic features with entrenched authoritarian tendencies (Yaqub, 2023; Olukotun, 2002). Although elections occur and media pluralism ostensibly exists, systemic corruption, repression of dissent, and elite capture undermine democratic substance (Njoku, 2025). This hybrid condition shapes the contours of social mobilisation: citizens can organise and protest, but state coercion, legal restrictions and media censorship limit sustained activism. Within this contradictory environment, social movements have emerged as key vehicles of civic resistance.

Occupy Nigeria, which erupted in January 2012 in response to fuel subsidy removal, signalled a renewed era of mass protest, mobilising cross-class coalitions through both street demonstrations and digital platforms (Emmanuel & Ezeamalu, 2013). EndSARS represented a more decentralised and digitally sophisticated mobilisation, with young people leveraging social media to challenge police brutality and state impunity (Makinde, 2024). The Obidient Movement further demonstrated how protest energy can evolve into electoral participation, drawing millions of young Nigerians into political engagement during the 2023 elections (Adeoye, 2022). Yet despite their visibility and symbolic power, each movement eventually succumbed to fragmentation, co-optation and repression, leaving core grievances unresolved (Amnesty International, 2024; Salako, 2025).

This study adopts Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS and the Obidient Movement as case studies to capture distinct but interconnected phases of mobilisation in the Fourth Republic. Occupy Nigeria represented the first major post-military protest uniting labour, youth, and civil society around economic and governance concerns. EndSARS reflected the rise of leaderless, horizontal mobilisation enabled by digital technologies and transnational solidarity. The Obidient Movement illustrated the institutionalisation of protest through electoral participation, bridging activism and formal politics. Together, these movements trace the evolution of Nigerian protest culture from street-based agitation to digital and electoral forms, providing a comparative framework for analysing contemporary civic engagement.

The central issue this study interrogates is the ephemerality of social movements in Nigeria's hybrid democracy – the tendency of movements to generate intense participation and global attention yet fail to achieve lasting institutional reform (Ojo & Afolaranmi, 2024). Although they influence discourse and briefly disrupt entrenched power structures, they rarely alter underlying systems of corruption, exclusion and authoritarian resilience. This pattern reflects the limits of mobilisation under hybrid regimes, where civic energy meets structural inertia. It also highlights what this study conceptualises as "ephemeral revolutions"—uprisings that spark democratic aspiration but dissolve before producing structural change.

Despite extensive scholarship on Nigerian democracy and civil society, few studies examine the full life cycle of new social movements – their emergence, escalation, and decline, within the logic of hybrid political orders (Makinde, 2024). Much of the literature focuses either on protest causes or the challenges of activism but overlooks how institutional and political constraints shape movement trajectories over time (Akubo, 2021). Cross-movement comparisons also remain limited, with studies often treating Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS, and the Obidient Movement as isolated episodes rather than interconnected expressions of a broader democratic struggle. This study,

therefore, aims to analyse the institutional and political conditions that shape both the rise and decline of social movements in Nigeria's hybrid context.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews literature on revolution, social movements, and hybrid democracy. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework integrating Social Movement Theory and Hybrid Regime Theory. Section 4 explains the methodology. Section 5 presents empirical findings, drawing insights from the Tunisian Revolution and Nigeria's ongoing challenges. Section 6 concludes with reflections and policy implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Clarifications: Hybrid Democracy, Social Movements, and Ephemeral Revolutions

Understanding the rise, durability and decline of social movements in Nigeria's Fourth Republic requires situating mobilisation within the logics of hybrid democracy and examining how movements struggle to institutionalise gains in environments shaped by repression, elite capture and institutional fragility (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2025). The literature broadly converges on the idea that while hybrid regimes generate the grievances and opportunities necessary for mobilisation, they also impose structural barriers that undermine movement sustainability and post-protest consolidation.

Hybrid Democracy and the Structural Limits of Mobilisation

Hybrid democracy or competitive authoritarianism captures political systems that formally adopt democratic institutions while simultaneously undermining them through informal practices of repression, patronage and manipulation (Thornhill, 2021; Riaz, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Arato & Cohen, 2022). These regimes occupy a zone between democracy and authoritarianism (Natil, 2022) as they tolerate limited civic freedoms but constrain genuine competition through media control, electoral fraud, intimidation and selective enforcement of law (Caramani, 2017). Citizens retain the capacity to mobilise or vote, yet the institutionalisation of reform remains structurally obstructed (Riaz, 2019).

Hybrid regimes therefore offer paradoxical political environments—high mobilisation potential but low transformative capacity (Schedler, 2006). Movements emerge in response to grievances but face hostile institutional terrain that frustrates reform pathways (Natil, 2022; Nikolayenko, 2017). Nigeria exemplifies this pattern through recurrent electoral irregularities, judicial interference and the securitisation of dissent (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024). Protest is frequently framed as a threat to public order, legitimising coercive state responses that truncate movement trajectories (Tarrow, 2011).

Carothers (2010) describes this context as feckless pluralism, where political participation exists without institutional responsiveness, producing widespread alienation. Judicial institutions, though formally independent, often operate under executive pressure, reinforcing dominant-power arrangements (Diamond, Plattner & Costopoulos, 2010). The Nigerian state's institutional

weakness and inconsistency in law enforcement (Erdmann & Kneuer, 2013) further impede the consolidation of movement gains. Thus, movements in hybrid contexts are permitted to mobilise but prevented from institutionalising reforms—resulting in cycles of mobilisation, repression and decline.

Social Movements and the Politics of Mobilisation

Social movements constitute informal yet organised collective struggles that pursue political or social change through extra-institutional means (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024; Porta & Diani, 2006). Tarrow (2011) emphasises their character as sustained collective challenges rooted in shared grievances and enabled by networks, resources and political opportunities. Mobilisation requires collective identities, leadership structures and resource mobilisation frameworks that convert private discontent into public contention (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). However, in hybrid democracies, movements confront constraints that shape their durability: repression tends to be legalistic and discursive rather than overt, making it difficult for activists to frame state coercion as illegitimate (Schedler, 2013). Hybrid regimes blur the boundary between dissent and criminality, enabling forms of repression that fragment coalitions without attracting international condemnation. Movements thus oscillate between empowerment during peak mobilisation and containment once state adaptation begins.

Historically, mobilisation in Nigeria has been central to democratisation struggles. Under military rule, organisations such as the Campaign for Democracy and the Academic Staff Union of Universities challenged authoritarian excesses (Udogu, 2021; Ajayi, 2025). Yet in the Fourth Republic, protest cultures increasingly appear episodic and short-lived. These patterns reflect not simply failures of organisation but the structural and institutional constraints that prevent movements from evolving into durable agents of reform.

Scholars classify social movements along lines of goals, scope and motivations (Judge, 1992; Shah, 2004; Almeida, 2019; Peters, 2018). Heberle (1951) distinguishes movements by the extent of change (partial versus total) and member motivations – value-rational, emotional-affectual or purposive-rational. Cameron (1966) categorises movements as reactionary, conservative, revisionary or revolutionary based on their orientation toward systemic change. Reactionary movements resist change and seek a return to past structures; conservative movements aim to preserve the status quo; revisionary movements push for limited reform within the existing system; and revolutionary movements seek to overthrow and replace the entire socio-political order (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024). Shah (2004) provides a multidimensional typology that differentiates between revolt, rebellion, reform and revolution. A revolt challenges political authority in an attempt to overthrow it; a rebellion attacks authority without aiming to seize state power; reform movements do not challenge the political system itself but strive to make it more efficient and equitable; while a revolution seeks to completely replace the political and socio-economic structure with a new one. and identifies issue-based movements such as civil rights or electoral mobilisation (e.g., the Obidient Movement).

However, these frameworks offer limited guidance on movement durability and post-protest institutionalisation. They rarely account for movements whose objectives evolve in response to

political opportunities or repression (Manglik, 2023). This omission is significant for hybrid contexts, where shifting state strategies often force movements to alternate between reformist and radical stances. Consequently, typologies help explain movement goals but not the factors that determine their endurance or decline.

Digital Activism and the Reconfiguration of Protest

Digital technologies have transformed protest dynamics, enabling rapid mobilisation, horizontal organisation and transnational solidarity. Platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram allow activists to bypass state-controlled media, coordinate action and construct counter-narratives (Mutsvairo & Tendi, 2020). In Nigeria, digital activism was pivotal to the EndSARS movement, which mobilised domestic and international support through hashtags, crowdsourcing and real-time documentation (Eleanya, 2021; Premium Times, 2021). Digital networks enhance mobilisation but generate durability challenges. Scholars highlight the risk of slacktivism – high online engagement that does not translate into long-term organisational capacity (Vink, 2018; Eleanya, 2021). Leaderless and decentralised structures facilitate rapid diffusion but also rapid demobilisation when momentum wanes.

Digital spaces are increasingly securitised. Hybrid regimes deploy surveillance tools, cyber laws, internet shutdowns and platform bans such as Nigeria's temporary Twitter ban during EndSARS to suppress dissent (Achinivu, 2025). These strategies reflect a broader shift toward digital authoritarianism, where states use technological tools to monitor, infiltrate or disrupt movements. Studies warn that AI-driven surveillance, spyware and orchestrated disinformation deepen activists' vulnerabilities (Tufekci, 2017). Therefore, while digital activism lowers barriers to mobilisation, it does not guarantee movement endurance or institutionalisation. Instead, it often contributes to the transient nature of contemporary protest cycles.

Revolutions, Ephemeral Revolutions and the Question of Sustainability

Revolutions typically involve rapid structural transformation through mass mobilisation and institutional rupture (Yang, 2015; Lawson, 2019). Although outcomes vary widely, ranging from democratisation to authoritarian relapse (Moghaddam, 2022), revolutions require sustainability, organisational coherence, and capacity to institutionalise new governance arrangements. Hybrid regimes, however, rarely allow movements to mature into full revolutions. Instead, they produce ephemeral revolutions, intense but short-lived episodes of dissent that disrupt the political order without altering structural foundations. Ephemeral revolutions emerge from high mobilisation capacity but low institutionalisation, shaped by state repression, weak organisational infrastructures, digital vulnerabilities, and ideological fragmentation. Classical characteristics of revolutions, such as sudden onset triggered by tipping-point events (Davis, 2025; Mailhiot, 2020), confrontation and conflict (Kelly, 2022), elite replacement (Schmitt, 2008), transformative ambitions (Lawson, 2019), mass participation and ideological framing (Mhenni, 2014), rarely consolidate in hybrid contexts. Post-revolution uncertainty remains profound, as movements struggle to translate momentum into stable governance (Tesfaye & Kefale, 2025; Lageman, 2016).

Ephemeral Revolution as an Analytical Lens

This study conceptualises *ephemeral revolution* as uprisings or movements that briefly challenge entrenched power structures but fail to institutionalise lasting change. Ephemerality reflects structural limits rather than organisational failure. Nigerian movements such as Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS and the Obidient Movement, embody this pattern: they galvanise civic energy, attract global attention and articulate democratic aspirations yet dissolve without producing enduring reforms (Idowu, 2022). Three interrelated dynamics underlie this ephemerality. Elite co-optation occurs when state actors absorb movement leaders, symbols or grievances in ways that diffuse dissent and forestall institutional reform. Institutional fragility further weakens movement durability, as ineffective parties, legislatures and courts undermine the translation of protest demands into concrete policy outcomes (Njoku, 2025). Compounding these constraints is repressive resilience, whereby the state deploys adaptive legal, discursive and coercive strategies that neutralise movements without necessarily criminalising dissent. Together, these dynamics ensure that Nigerian movements remain cyclical rather than cumulative, generating repeated waves of mobilisation without sustained institutional transformation, and highlighting the structural conditions that drive movement decline in hybrid regimes.

Revolutions and social movements also emerge from the convergence of structural tensions and collective grievances, and four preconditions help explain their onset and intensity. The first is relative deprivation, where a collective perception that living conditions fall short of expectations produces psychological frustration and moral outrage (Gurr, 2015; Mhenni, 2014). The politicisation of grievances often follows this, as citizens increasingly attribute hardship to governance failures, thereby transforming diffuse dissatisfaction into targeted contentious action. A third precondition is leadership incompetence and incoherence, since elite vacillation, corruption, and governance failures erode legitimacy and embolden citizens to challenge authority (Lageman, 2016). Finally, ideological framing provides the moral and symbolic narratives that unify diverse grievances, linking material hardship to broader calls for justice, dignity, or systemic reform (Mhenni, 2014; Yerkes, 2023). These preconditions interact and reinforce one another, shaping the emergence and decline of movements under hybrid conditions.

Preconditions for Revolution and the Nigerian Paradox

Classical theories of revolution, whether structural, grievance-based, or mobilisation-oriented (Davies, 1962; Skocpol, 1979; Goldstone, 2016), identify a cluster of conditions that typically precede large-scale revolutionary rupture: widespread grievances, delegitimised authority, elite fragmentation, economic decline, and the emergence of collective identities capable of sustaining mass action. By these standards, contemporary Nigeria appears theoretically primed for revolution. Because chronic inequality, systemic corruption, governance failures, recurrent economic crises, and persistent public frustration constitute the very dynamics associated with revolutionary tipping points. Yet, despite repeated mass mobilisations and persistent calls for radical change, including those championed by figures such as Omoyele Sowore (Oluwafunmilayo, 2019), Nigeria has not produced a full-scale revolution. Instead, it has generated what this paper conceptualises as an "ephemeral revolution": short-lived, intense, but ultimately transient episodes of mobilisation that momentarily challenge the status quo without producing structural transformation.

Several interrelated factors explain this: First, ethnic and religious fragmentation – over 250 ethnic groups and a major Christian–Muslim cleavage- limits the formation of cross-cutting solidarities and confines mobilisations to localised or identity-bound constituencies. Second, elite co-optation mechanisms, including patronage networks, strategic appointments, and pacification programmes such as the Niger Delta Amnesty, absorb influential actors who might otherwise sustain radical mobilisation. Third, patronage-based state–society relations create material dependence on the state, dampening collective defiance by attaching livelihoods to political loyalty. In addition, Nigeria's repressive security apparatus, exemplified by the 2020 EndSARS crackdown, escalates the risks of sustained mobilisation and incentivises tactical withdrawal. Ideological incoherence further undermines durability: movements oscillate between reformist, ethno-nationalist, and populist agendas, preventing the emergence of a unifying revolutionary narrative.

Compounding this is economic precarity, which forces citizens to prioritise day-to-day survival over prolonged engagement in protest cycles. Public scepticism toward potential leaders, rooted in histories of opportunism and co-optation, weakens trust and attenuates coordination. Externally, international actors prioritise regime stability, given Nigeria's strategic significance, thereby limiting the possibility of a revolutionary breakthrough. Finally, collective memories of conflict – from the civil war to ongoing insurgencies, reinforce a societal aversion to large-scale upheaval, while a weak, fragmented civil society lacks the organisational capacity to maintain revolutionary momentum (Oyelakin, 2025). Taken together, these dynamics explain why Nigeria consistently meets theoretical preconditions for revolution but repeatedly fails to convert them into systemic rupture. Nigeria's trajectory thus challenges deterministic assumptions within classical revolutionary theory and highlights the need to account for contexts in which revolutionary potentials manifest only in transient, non-enduring forms.

Theoretical Framework

Social Movement Theory: Collective Action and the Logic of Mobilisation

Social Movement Theory (SMT) explains how collective actors mobilise, frame grievances and sustain resistance under restrictive political conditions. It views social movements as organised efforts operating outside formal institutions to challenge power (Tarrow, 2011; Porta & Diani, 2020). Three SMT models – Resource Mobilisation, Political Opportunity and Framing, illuminate the dynamics of movements such as Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS and the Obidient Movement.

Resource Mobilisation Theory holds that movements advance when actors secure and deploy resources such as funding, networks, leadership and communication tools (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In Nigeria, digital media became a key resource, enabling decentralised coordination and global visibility. Yet weak leadership structures and unstable funding fostered fragmentation, especially under repression. Political Opportunity Theory argues that mobilisation expands when political environments show openness or elite division (Tilly, 1978). Under President Jonathan, relative tolerance enabled Occupy Nigeria and related protests, whereas the Buhari administration relied on securitisation and digital censorship, culminating in the Lekki Toll Gate killings (Ibekwe, 2020). The Obidient Movement emerged during a more competitive moment but still faced institutional resistance. Framing Theory examines how activists craft narratives to build collective

identity. Nigerian movements framed demands around justice, accountability and anti-corruption, from EndSARS' "Soro Soke" to the Obidient Movement's anti-establishment messaging. Yet framing power was undermined by ethno-regional divisions and selective participation (Isenyo, 2025). While these SMT models explain mobilisation, resonance and repression-response dynamics, they do not fully clarify why movements in hybrid political systems seldom translate mass protests into enduring policy change. Hybrid Regime Theory (HRT) fills this gap by highlighting how competitive authoritarian structures co-opt, frustrate or neutralise civic pressure, illustrating the structural constraints within which Nigerian movements operate.

Hybrid Regime Theory: Structure, Constraint, and the Limits of Democratic Participation

Hybrid Regime Theory conceptualises political systems that combine democratic procedures with authoritarian practices (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Here, elections, legislatures, and courts exist, but they are manipulated through coercion, patronage, and information control. The state's dual nature – partly open and partly repressive- creates contradictory spaces for mobilisation. Nigeria's hybrid democracy embodies the paradoxes of formal democratic practice within an illiberal political environment. Elections occur regularly but often fail to meet standards of credibility, civil liberties are constitutionally guaranteed yet selectively applied and civil society organisations, though legally sanctioned, function under continuous state surveillance and coercive pressure. These contradictions shape both the opportunities and constraints of social movements. Hybrid regimes often employ "managed pluralism" where limited protest is allowed to diffuse discontent while elite dominance is preserved (Carothers, 2002). Hybrid Regime Theory thus contextualises the fragility of social movements in such settings: they emerge within moments of democratic opening but operate under the persistent threat of authoritarian closure.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design combining documentary analysis and digital ethnography to examine how social movements emerge, evolve and decline within Nigeria's hybrid democratic context. Source selection focused on materials produced between 2012 and 2024, including official documents, civil society reports, protest communiqués, newspaper archives and policy papers, as well as digital traces from X, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube. For digital data, key hashtags such as #OccupyNigeria, #EndSARS and #ObidientMovement were examined during their peak mobilisation periods. A purposive sampling strategy guided the selection of approximately 60 documents per case (Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS and the Obidient Movement), including statements, protest materials, reports and high-engagement digital posts. This ensured sufficient depth while maintaining comparability across cases. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic Analysis. All documents were first read for familiarisation, then openly coded manually, using a coding matrix that captured recurrent patterns in mobilisation, framing, repression, co-optation and institutional feedback. Codes were iteratively grouped into higher-order themes, allowing the transformation of raw textual and digital traces into analytic categories that explained movement durability and decline. Limitations include bias in available documents that privileged elite or urban voices and the absence of certain offline, marginal or community-level perspectives. Nonetheless, triangulation across multiple sources mitigated these constraints and strengthened interpretive validity.

Case Studies: Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS and the Obidient Movement

Occupy Nigeria

Triggered by the removal of fuel subsidies in 2012, *Occupy Nigeria* marked a turning point in post-1999 protest culture. It unified labour unions, students and civil society in nationwide demonstrations. While initially successful in forcing partial policy reversal, elite infiltration, state repression, and negotiation demobilised the movement (Emmanuel & Ezeamalu, 2013). Its legacy lies in reawakening civic consciousness and popularising protest as a democratic instrument. It unified labour unions, students, and civil society in nationwide demonstrations. Its strength lay in the broad, cross-sectional composition of its membership, cutting across class, gender, region, and occupation. The defining characteristics of Occupy Nigeria are outlined below:

a. Economic Catalyst and Political Transformation

The protests began as a reaction to the removal of fuel subsidy on 1 January 2012, which caused fuel prices and, consequently, transportation and food costs to double overnight. However, what started as an economic protest quickly transformed into a political mobilisation against government mismanagement and endemic corruption.

b. Broad-Based, Cross-Class Participation

Unlike earlier protests confined to specific groups, Occupy Nigeria united a wide spectrum of Nigerian society, from urban workers, students, professionals, and traders to civil servants, creating one of the most inclusive mobilisations in Nigeria's democratic history.

c. Decentralised and Spontaneous Organisation

The movement lacked a formal leadership hierarchy. Mobilisation was grassroots and organic, with multiple protest centres springing up across major cities, especially Lagos, Abuja, Kano and Port Harcourt. Although this decentralisation enhanced participation, it also limited sustained coordination.

d. Digital and Media Amplification

Social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, were used extensively to coordinate marches, share images, and mobilise public outrage. Hashtags like #OccupyNigeria became rallying points, making it one of Nigeria's earliest large-scale digital-era protests.

e. Civic–Labour Alliance

During the Occupy Nigeria protest, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) played central roles by declaring a nationwide strike. This alliance between civil society and organised labour gave the movement legitimacy and national reach and bridged the gap between digital activism and traditional protest.

f. Repression and Containment

The government responded with police and military force, leading to several casualties and widespread arrests (Emmanuel & Ezeamalu, 2013). The crackdown, coupled with negotiations with labour unions, eventually led to a gradual demobilisation of the protest movement by mid-January 2012.

EndSARS

In 2020, Nigerian youths took to the streets to demonstrate against the rogue police unit, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). This followed a viral video of a man allegedly killed by SARS (NAN, 2020). EndSARS began as an online campaign against police brutality but evolved into Nigeria's largest youth-led protest in decades. It exposed deep-seated grievances about governance, unemployment, and institutional violence. After years of complaints and seeming impunity, demonstrators went out into the streets to demand the disbandment of the SARS unit, police reforms, and better governance from the country's leaders. The EndSARS movement in Nigeria stemmed from specific, remote, and immediate events that triggered widespread outrage and mobilised citizens into nationwide protests. The EndSARS movement possessed several defining characteristics that set it apart as one of the most significant youth-led mobilisations in Nigeria's recent history: (1) Leaderless but Organised Structure (decentralised, no formal leaders). (2) Digital and Youth-Driven activism (the movement was powered by digital technology, especially Twitter, where the hashtag #EndSARS became a rallying symbol). (3) Peaceful and Non-Partisan Mobilisation (non-violent and non-partisan that attracted people across ethnic, religious, and class divides, with demonstrators emphasising peaceful protest). (4) Global Solidarity and Diaspora Support (international visibility, with global protests in cities like London, New York, and Toronto). While the movement was rooted in long-standing grievances over police brutality and governance failure, several immediate factors directly sparked the mass mobilisation of October 2020. These include;

Enduring Police Brutality and Impunity

SARS, created in 1992 to combat armed robbery, evolved into a unit notorious for human rights abuses, especially targeting young people. Repeated public complaints and government inaction despite pledges of reforms resulted in widespread resentment. The absence of institutional oversight and the culture of impunity within the Nigerian Police Force created fertile ground for mass dissent.

Weak Institutions and Governance Failure

At the heart of the EndSARS movement lay a crisis of governance and institutional mistrust. The Nigerian state had long failed to provide essential public goods such as security, justice, employment, and accountability. Rampant corruption, electoral malpractice, and patronage politics eroded public confidence in government institutions. Many citizens, especially the youth, perceived the state as predatory rather than protective, reflecting the broader dysfunction of Nigeria's hybrid democracy, where democratic procedures coexist with authoritarian tendencies.

Youth Unemployment and Economic Disempowerment

Socio-economic marginalisation further deepened anger. Despite being Nigeria's most educated and connected generation, millions of youths face joblessness, inequality and exclusion. SARS' profiling of young people with smartphones, laptops or modern cars symbolised a deeper conflict between a corrupt system and an emerging digital generation seeking dignity and opportunity. In addition to these underlying (remote) causes, the following are the immediate triggers.

Viral Incident of Police Brutality in Early October 2020

The immediate trigger came on 3 October 2020, when a video showed SARS officers allegedly shooting a man in Ughelli, Delta State, and fleeing with his car. Though police denied it, the footage went viral, igniting nationwide outrage (NAN, 2020). It became a symbol of decades of unchecked brutality and the catalyst for collective resistance.

Social Media Mobilisation

Social media amplified the outrage. Influencers and activists used #EndSARS to coordinate actions, raise funds, and share real-time updates. Platforms like Twitter Spaces and WhatsApp groups enabled transparent, leaderless coordination, turning a local protest into a nationwide and global movement within days.

Government Denial and Repression

Rather than engage protesters, authorities dismissed concerns and used force. Police fired tear gas and live bullets, and protesters were arrested in Lagos, Abuja, and Ibadan. The state's heavy-handed response transformed a call for reform into a broader struggle against repression and bad governance.

As the movement intensified, EndSARS put forward the following demands (Ayitogo, 2021).

Immediate dissolution of SARS – Protesters called for the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, citing extrajudicial killings, torture and harassment, especially of young Nigerians.

Justice for victims – The movement demanded accountability for past abuses, including prosecution of perpetrators and systemic reforms to prevent future misconduct.

Compensation for affected families – Protesters sought reparations, medical care, and psychological support for victims and their families, recognising both material and moral harm.

Police reform and good governance – Calls included restructuring policing, enforcing human rights, increasing transparency and ensuring law enforcement serves citizens rather than instils fear.

Improved welfare for officers – Recognising poor conditions and low morale as causes of abuse, the movement advocated for better training, fair pay, and psychological support to professionalise the force.

The Obidient Movement

The Obidient Movement is a political movement in Nigeria, which emerged in 2022 and became prominent in the lead-up to the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. It emerged around and largely driven by the Labour Party and its candidate, Peter Obi, a former governor of Anambra State. In other words, Obi did not create the movement (Opejobi, 2024). The *Obidient movement* channelled EndSARS-era disillusionment into electoral mobilisation. It relied heavily on digital networks and diaspora support to challenge entrenched elite politics (Mgbaemena, 2024). The movement gained significant support, particularly from young Nigerians frustrated with systemic corruption, insecurity, poor governance, and economic challenges. The inability of successive governments to promote inclusive governance through credible elections has remained a major cause of youth restiveness across much of the country.

This persistent failure explains why many citizens, particularly young people, have sought to challenge and transform Nigeria's existing political order (Mokuye, Onwunyi, & Okonkwo, 2023). In line with this, Obi reawakened the political consciousness of a generation of young Nigerians, resulting in massive mobilisation of support from Nigerians at home and abroad (Aboh & Okoi, 2023). Some defining characteristics of the Obidient movement included its youth-driven activism, as it was largely fuelled by young Nigerians who sought systemic change and demanded better governance. The movement emphasised transparency and good governance, advocating for leadership grounded in competence, accountability and openness. Social media played a central role, serving as a powerful tool for mobilisation, raising awareness and amplifying the movement's message across the country and beyond. Additionally, the protests were marked by their peaceful and non-violent nature, as participants organised orderly rallies and demonstrations to express their grievances without resorting to violence, distinguishing the movement from many previous forms of civic unrest in Nigeria.

A key constituency within the Obidient Movement consisted of professionals and intellectuals – middle-class Nigerians, including academics, technocrats, entrepreneurs and civil servants, frustrated by corruption and policy inconsistency (Mokuye, Onwunyi & Okonkwo, 2023). Many had long withdrawn from partisan politics, but the movement revived their civic optimism by offering a platform centred on merit-based leadership and institutional reform. They viewed Peter Obi as a symbol of efficiency, competence, character, discipline and technocratic governance. Another major pillar was celebrities and digital influencers whose large followings on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok turned political participation into a pop-cultural phenomenon. Their endorsements and activism mobilised millions of young Nigerians and reframed political engagement as both fashionable and patriotic (Mokuye, Onwunyi & Okonkwo, 2023). The movement also attracted ethno-regional nationalists, particularly among the Igbo, for whom Obi's candidacy represented a long-awaited opportunity for an "Igbo presidency" and a correction of perceived historical marginalisation (Njoku, 2025). Equally important were activists and EndSARS

veterans who redirected post-2020 frustrations into electoral mobilisation after the trauma of the Lekki Toll Gate shootings and the absence of justice.

Diaspora Nigerians also contributed funding, advocacy, and digital mobilisation, having been motivated by exposure to stronger institutions abroad. Urban youths and first-time voters – digitally savvy and previously disengaged- became central to voter registration, rallies and online debates. Finally, religious and moral advocates, especially within Christian communities, framed Obi's candidacy in ethical terms and cast him as a figure of integrity against entrenched corruption. Together, these constituencies illustrate a shift from protest to politicisation without institutionalisation – a pattern this study conceptualises as "ephemeral revolutions."

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ephemeral Revolutions and Social Movement Decline in Hybrid Democratic Systems

Although numerous factors account for the decline of social movements, or what this study terms *ephemeral revolutions*, these causes can be broadly grouped into four categories: repression, co-optation, success and organisational or strategic weakness.

State Repression

Repression refers to deliberate state efforts to suppress, neutralise or dismantle movements through surveillance, censorship, intimidation, arrests or violence (Davenport, Johnston & Mueller, 2005). Though often justified as preserving order or national security, such tactics primarily aim to silence dissent (Njoku, 2025; Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024). Davenport, Johnston & Mueller (2005) distinguish between hard repression (overt violence and direct state action) and soft repression (which includes subtler constraints exercised not only by the state but also by civil society). While less centralised and visible, soft repression, manifesting through ridicule, stigmatisation and silencing, can effectively obstruct movements. Sustained repression generates fear and fatigue, reducing participation, as seen in the 2020 EndSARS movement, which lost momentum after the Lekki Toll Gate killings and arrests of organisers (Ibekwe, 2020; Falana, 2021). Similar patterns appear in crackdowns on pro-democracy activists in Egypt and Belarus. Yet repression does not always defeat movements; it may radicalise them or push them underground, only for them to re-emerge in new forms. Even where protests triggered regime change, such as in Tunisia and Egypt, gains were limited by unclear goals and the absence of a coherent political agenda, leaving decentralised movements vulnerable to fragmentation (Tesfaye & Kefale, 2025).

Co-optation

Co-optation occurs when a movement or its leaders become absorbed into the political structures they initially opposed. Co-optation is always possible once activists achieve some success and interact more closely with established actors (Piven & Cloward, 2012; Coy, 2008). Co-optation can take many forms, but it typically involves offering concessions to the movement or incorporating it into the existing political system. This often happens through official appointments, advisory roles, or elite partnerships that dilute the movement's autonomy and radical edge. This can be seen

as a combination of carrots and sticks approach (Trejo, 2012). Often, co-optation is perceived as a temporary success or partial achievement of a movement's goals; however, what may seem like progress can, in fact, undermine the movement's credibility (Holdo, 2019). While repression remains a key tool for governments in managing protests, the use of co-optation enhances its effectiveness and further weakens protest movements (Tesfaye & Kefale, 2025). Co-optation thus transforms insurgent energy into moderate accommodation and blunts the movement's transformative potential.

Success

Some movements decline not due to repression or failure but because they achieve their goals. Once legislative, policy, or regime changes occur, momentum fades as members see their mission as complete. Yet success brings challenges, including institutionalising gains and preventing reversal. The Occupy Nigeria protests, for example, pressured the government to reverse fuel subsidy removal partially but lacked the structure to sustain coordination afterwards (Emmanuel & Ezeamalu, 2013). Tunisia shows similar limits: more than a decade after the revolution, many citizens express disappointment at the lack of meaningful change. Dissenters still face harassment and intimidation, while economic frustrations persist. Unemployment continues to rise, and job prospects decline, partly due to insecurity (Mhenni, 2014). Many feel the revolution's promises were betrayed. Thus, success may bring closure without ensuring long-term consolidation of ideals.

Organisational or Strategic Weakness

Leaders and activists from hierarchical, centralised organisations with weak community networks are more vulnerable to co-optation through selective government incentives, and they are more likely to withdraw from sustained mobilisation when faced with repression (Trejo, 2012). This is because, in the absence of strong local networks, leaders operate without effective checks and balances, and communities lack the capacity to hold them accountable. Internal fragility, manifesting as factionalism, poor leadership or strategic missteps, remains a major cause of decline for social movements (Akingbohungbe, 2025). Factionalism arises when ideological or leadership disputes fracture movements into rival camps, each claiming authenticity, as seen when internal controversies led figures like Aisha Yesufu to withdraw from the Obidient Movement (Adeleke, 2025). Encapsulation, on the other hand, occurs when movements become inward-looking, obsessed with internal rituals, and lose connection with the broader public. Such isolation erodes adaptability, coordination, and credibility, leading to eventual dissipation.

Comparative Lessons from the Global South: The Tunisian Revolution

The 2011 Tunisian (*Jasmine*) Revolution was a decisive North African uprising that ignited the Arab Spring (Lageman, 2016). Under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia was marked by entrenched authoritarianism, characterised by repression, censorship, and the suppression of political dissent. Persistent economic challenges such as high youth unemployment, pervasive corruption, weak job creation, and limited opportunities generated widespread frustration, while stark social inequalities deepened resentment as a few elites prospered and public services

deteriorated. The political system, dominated by the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) through repression and electoral fraud, offered little room for opposition or peaceful reform.

Thus, despite its perceived potential as a "Tiger of the Mediterranean," Tunisia struggled with poor export performance and governance failures (World Bank, 2014). These structural grievances were encapsulated in the revolutionary slogan "Employment, freedom and dignity" (Mhenni, 2014), which also mirrors conditions in Nigeria that include youth unemployment, inequality, systemic corruption, and marginalisation (Pontiggia, 2021; Yerkes, 2023). In Ben Ali's Tunisia, development policies favoured coastal regions and neglected interior areas such as Sidi Bouzid, where decades of exclusion made the region a focal point of resistance (Ryan, 2011).

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, provided the moral shock that triggered 28 days of nationwide mobilisation that ultimately forced Ben Ali's ouster (Fitouri, 2021). Digital networks amplified mobilisation, uniting marginalised workers, youth, and the middle classes (Lageman, 2016). The revolution succeeded because structural grievances, systemic corruption and expanding digital connectivity converged to forge a sense of national unity (Abbott, 2019). For many Tunisians, the pursuit of *karama* (dignity) and *hurriyya* (freedom) energised a movement that reshaped regional politics and set much of the Middle East on a new emancipatory trajectory (Sadiki, 2025). Nigeria shares similar conditions but lacks a unifying catalyst. Because of ethno-religious fragmentation, elite co-optation and repression diffuse anger (Njoku, 2025). Movements like EndSARS mirrored Tunisia's digital activism but remained urban, episodic and easily repressed. This shows that structural grievances alone do not produce revolution; they require catalysts, cross-class and ethnic alliances, and sustained organisation.

Continuing Challenges of Social Movements in Nigeria's Hybrid Democracy

Nigeria's hybrid democracy imposes enduring constraints on civic mobilisation. The state's repressive elasticity that shifts between tolerance and coercion undermines trust, while a politicised legal system and a security apparatus geared toward regime preservation discourage transformative activism. Elite co-optation further weakens movements. Both ruling and opposition elites absorb movement narratives to neutralise dissent, appropriating the language of reform without enacting real change. This was evident after Occupy Nigeria and the 2023 elections, highlighting the need for movements to maintain organisational independence and ideological coherence. Similarly, the digital divide compounds challenges. While urban youth dominate online activism, rural populations remain marginalised, reproducing class and spatial inequalities. It is also necessary to note that issues such as migration and socio-economic precarity erode civic energy. Many EndSARS activists have emigrated, and persistent unemployment, insecurity, and corruption deepen public disillusionment and contribute to the "democratic fatigue" characteristic of hybrid regimes. Nigeria's social movements continue to witness episodic bursts of activism without lasting impact. In sum, the decline of social movements rarely stems from a single factor. Repression and co-optation reflect external constraints, while success and organisational weakness expose internal limitations. Even victorious movements struggle to sustain relevance and institutionalise change (Lageman, 2016). This dynamic underscores a central paradox: though social movements are powerful agents of transformation, they remain inherently fragile in maintaining momentum within a complex and repressive political environment such as Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study examined the evolution and limits of social movements in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, showing how Occupy Nigeria, EndSARS and the Obidient Movement exemplify ephemeral revolutions – intense but short-lived mobilisations that fail to achieve structural transformation. Empirically, their ephemerality is demonstrated by their rapid rise and decline: digital networks that enabled mass turnout but quickly dissipated under repression; weak leadership and funding structures; and swift demobilisation following coercive actions such as the Lekki Toll Gate shootings, the Twitter ban, and targeted arrests. These patterns reveal how Nigeria's hybrid democracy produces revolutionary moments that flare but do not endure. Because organisational fragility, elite co-optation, and limited institutional access drive this ephemerality, movements in Nigeria need formal leadership pipelines, sustainable funding, and broad coalitions linking digital activists with civil society and reform-oriented institutions to withstand repression and fragmentation. By comparing how organisational design shapes movement longevity in hybrid regimes or investigating how digital repression technologies influence the life cycle of Nigerian social movements, future research can clarify how ephemeral revolutions might evolve into more durable drivers of democratic change in Nigeria.

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