

Protest is to democracy what voting is to elections

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Protest is not a new socio-political phenomenon; it has been around since the advent of human clusters. The many recent protests around the world have sparked fierce debates about how and why citizens vent their anger and disapproval of their leaders and/or their actions, laws and policies. The recent #BlackLivesMatter in the US, #EndSARS protests in Nigeria and demonstrations against the third term bid of Alpha Condé in Guinea, have reignited a desire to articulate the need for citizens' action or participation in a democracy.

A protest can take the form of a statement or an action, expressing disapproval to the general state of affairs in one's community, city or country; or an objection to an action, policy, steps or laws or their implementation by government. Protest can be both peaceful or violent. Peaceful protests are usually done through petitions, marches or sit-down strikes, donning certain dresses or colours or just gathering in one place with placards and billowing chants. Violent protests are usually setting tires, cars on fire, barricading offices and disrupting traffic; hurling stones and other objects on the police or the authority or institution being protested. However, violent protests such as the use of machetes and firearms are deemed armed insurrection and acts of treason. And this article doesn't advocate such violent protests and should not be construed as such.

Our right to participate in a democracy doesn't stop at being issued a ballot paper to elect our representatives of government. It goes all the way into how we hold the very individuals we elect to account. Protest is a form of expression in a democracy. It has inspired positive political and social changes, improved protection of human rights, and has helped to define and protect civic spaces. Protests enable citizens to express dissent and grievances, to share views and options, to expose flaws in governance; it encourages the development of an engaged participation in governance.

Protest is a non-absolute fundamental right of expression and association and is therefore covered by Articles 19 & 21—right to freedom of expression and right to peaceful assembly respectively under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; Articles 9 & 10—right to free expression and right to freedom of association under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Sierra Leone's 1991 Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and

association (sections 25 & 26 respectively). In 2017, the Renaissance Movement petitioned the Supreme Court to construe the hybrid effect of the said rights as guaranteeing a right to protests, as has been done in international human right law and in most leading democracies.

In Sierra Leone, several protests have been undertaken since the adoption of the 1991 Constitution. Notable ones post-1991 are the student protest on August 18, 1997 in which many lost their lives and the demonstration against Foday Sankoh and his RUF cohorts on May 8, 2000. In recent times, call for protests and demonstrations have been aborted by the Inspector General of Police refusing approval/clearance, except for pro-government rallies. Unfortunately, the few times citizens have attempted protests without police clearance, their placards and chants have been met with bullets. It is about time that the Supreme Court gave a ruling on whether the Inspector General does have the power to refuse exercise of fundamental right by not granting clearance for protest/demonstration without valid national security basis.

The right to peaceful protest in every democracy is the same as the right to be given a ballot paper. Governments must recognise that protest is a fundamental right of citizens and that they have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil such right. State security must ensure that peaceful protests are not triggered into violence, by reason of their unreasonable and sometimes, irrational response. For citizens, protest is usually the last resort. It is a mark of neglect; an indication that voices were not heard, and that leadership was unresponsive, inaccessible and failing. Instead of oppressing citizens further with security heavy-handedness, governments must ensure to dialogue and be apologetic and react slowly and with a right-based restraint. Leadership's response to and handling of protest can either win back the hearts of its people or lose it irredeemably.

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