

Institutionalization of Police Road Blocks and Extortion on Nigeria's Highways

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Abstract

Security is of critical importance in ensuring the wellbeing and development of any society. No society can achieve and sustain stable development without efficient security network and apparatuses. Preservation of lives and property is guaranteed when security agencies discharge their duties efficiently and with integrity. The opposite is mostly the case in Nigeria where the security personnel, especially those of the Nigerian Police Force, mount road blocks on the highways and routinely extort money from road users and engage in other unethical and unprofessional acts. The paper adopted descriptive research design and utilized mixed methods approach. Primary data were sourced through semi-structured interview involving one hundred and fifty (150) respondents purposively selected and interviewed; they were mostly bus, lorry, and truck drivers and other road stakeholders from the South West, South East and South South geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Secondary data, sourced through journals, newspapers and internet-based materials, were analyzed in terms of their thematic relevance to the topic; capture theory served as the paper's theoretical framework. The paper concluded that the extortionist acts of Nigerian police officers on Nigerian roads contravenes the Nigerian Police Force Code of Conduct Act and recommends an upward review of salaries of Nigerian police officers even as punitive mechanisms are put in place to discourage and hinder the police and other security agents from molesting and exploiting lawful road users.

Keywords: Nigerian police, road blocks, security, extortion, commuters

Introduction

Peace and security are the primary goals of any civilized order or system; they are prerequisites for the development and progress of any society. Security must first be in place before social structures – families, towns and nations, and the entire infrastructure needed to run them – can be

established, stabilized and sustained. Security and the well being of citizens is the major reason security agencies, such as the police force, the army, navy, and immigration, are set up all over the world. Their core duty is to ensure that lives and property and the territorial integrity of communities, states or nation-states are preserved. The police force is usually the primary agency charged with the responsibility of watching over the society and maintaining law and order. A situation where this primary watchdog turns around to bark at, bite, and oppress the very people it was supposed to protect is dangerous and should be treated as a matter of grave concern. Such is the current situation in Nigeria where the Nigerian Police Force has institutionalized the practice of setting up unnecessary road blocks across the country's highways and using them daily to waylay and extort money from road users. This paper enquires into the various aspects of this dangerous habit indulged in by the police and other security agencies in constant breach of the security and wellbeing of millions of Nigerians who daily pass through the country's roads to go about their lawful businesses.

Policing in Pre-colonial Societies of Nigeria

In ancient or pre-colonial societies that now make up what is known as Nigeria, the primacy of security was never downplayed. The social order of that era was built upon an arrangement that ensured that lives and property were adequately protected. At that time, "Policing was part of the general culture and traditions of the people and not an external body outside the people" (Alemika, 1993, in Arisukwu, 2012). There were age groups, masquerade groups (Aniche, 2016), and gallant hunters, members of whom were all able-bodied males upon whom the responsibility of protecting the traditional society fell. These male groups served as the vanguard of the traditional society, in peace time, and as the warriors, in times of war. The male groups were stratified according to age, family background, war or hunting experience and this determined the socio-economic or political functions they performed to enhance the cohesion and security of their different societies. In times of perceived or real threats, they served as vigilantes or roving communal policemen.

These groups performed in line with prescribed norms and customs, respected and were accountable to the traditional leadership hierarchy. There was a great deal of spiritual sensitivity as no one wanted to attract the wrath of the gods or the judgement of the priests overseeing their shrines. Indeed, ethical misconduct or egregious violations by any individual or armed group could attract instant ostracism, banishment (Olusegun, 2021), mysterious disease or death and a great odium upon the offenders' families. Because of these consequences and the associated

stigma, communal male groups tried to live above board while functioning as security gatekeepers or traditional policemen of their societies.

An important incentive for these male groups was the respect and honour the society accorded them for their sacrificial acts, for serving as its foot soldiers, whenever the need arose, and for regularly maintaining its peace, order and development. Any member of these male groups wounded or killed in war was hailed and mourned as a hero. Moreover, the traditional society valued the services of these male groups because, apart from maintaining law and order, they also played a corrective role by helping to reconcile repentant offenders with the community (Tamuno, 1970, in Arisukwu, 2012).

With the emergence of colonial administration, some of these vanguard groups were retained and served as the law enforcement officers of the administration at the local levels. During the colonial era, they operated under different appellations in different societies and some of them were recruited and trained to serve at official government functions. This use of traditional security arrangements by colonial officers was common in many British West African colonies; in Nigeria, they contributed to the concept of Native Authority police instituted by the colonial masters (Killingray, 1993).

This was why, after independence, the Nigerian state retained the British police force system bequeathed to it, and why, over the years, a number of efforts have been made to make the police more efficient in the performance of their duties.

Definition of Key Terms

Extortion

The word extortion means to obtain gratification or derive benefit through the use of one's position or office to make unfair decisions, carry out unfair acts, do injustice, or aid an illegal conduct or action. Extortion is a common law offence committed by a public officer who uses his position to take money or any other benefit that is not due to him. Different scholars see extortion as obtaining something beneficial to one's self from another through the wrongful use of actual or threatened force, violence or fear. It is essentially obtaining money from a person by force or intimidation; it is undue or unlawful use of authority or power. In Nigerian parlance, and in the context of this paper, extortion is what someone is induced to offer at police check-points in response to the security agent's question, "Anything for the boys?"

Whatever method is used to exact it, extortion is grossly illegal; it is not only restricted to a given clime or system but is, unfortunately pervasive and found everywhere. In the Nigerian context, area boys or community youth may extort money from road users within their localities because “The boys are hungry.” This social misbehavior is common in developing countries, and is gradually becoming a norm in Nigeria. During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in Nigeria, when inter-state movement was temporarily banned, police extortion on Nigerian roads assumed a new height (Aborishade, 2022; Shodunke, 2022) as motorists were charged three thousand naira on the inter-state borders; many of them dutifully paid, as complaints to the appropriate authorities yielded no result.

Road Block

Road blocks are obstructions placed on roads as barricades to hinder easy flow of traffic in order to enable the appropriate law enforcement agencies conduct searches, prevent illegal transportation of arms and other dangerous items, facilitate the recovery of stolen vehicles and other items, rescue abducted persons, enforce traffic safety standards and exigencies or prevent the advance of an enemy.

According to Collins dictionary, road block is a police or army strategy to track a fugitive or criminal or a barrier set up across a road by the police or the military in order to stop a fugitive or inspect traffic. The essential reason for barricades on public roads is to track down a questionable person or thing, a function the Nigerian police seldom perform as their emphasis is usually on the illegal collection of money from road users. In doing this, the Nigerian police are violating the right of Nigerians to freely move from place to place as enshrined in section 41(1) of the 1999 Constitution, as amended. That section says, inter alia, that “Every citizen of Nigeria is entitled to move freely throughout Nigeria and to reside in any part thereof”. A person’s movement can only be legally hindered if he has committed a crime and is found guilty by a competent law court.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted capture theory as its theoretical framework. The capture theory was propounded by Michael Mark Wolfson in 1964 as a scientific theory that put forward the idea that the Solar System developed from the Sun’s interface with a low-density protostar. Over time, the import and relevance of the theory was extended to other fields of study, especially disciplines in the social sciences. The concept, as it applies to the field of political science, reckons that how public service is run or should be run is captured in relevant government regulations which should not be deviated

from. This paper explores how the Nigerian police and other law enforcement agencies, such as the Army, Customs, and Immigration deviate from established rules and use their operations at the several road blocks they set up across Nigerian highways to exploit, brutalize, and extort money from Nigerian road users (NRUs).

Police and Road Block Extortion in Nigeria

The routine stop-and-search operations of the Nigerian police, effected through setting up road blocks on Nigerian highways, was instituted in early 1980s to check the menace of armed robbery and kidnapping on the highways. Before then, there were security check points where the driver's identity and vehicle particulars were verified. Since the mid 1980s, Nigerian police road blocks have been used as extortive outposts where money is daily exacted from intimidated commuters.

To perpetuate this heinous act the police officers posted to a particular highway would set up four or more road blocks and assign two or three armed police to man each blockade, where all they do is stop mostly commercial vehicles and extort from the drivers about ₦200-₦500, and then allow them to pass without the passengers and goods being searched. All drivers who readily offer two hundred naira or five hundred naira to the officers on duty are allowed to go unchecked, even when they might be threats to the society or might be conveying arms to robbers, kidnappers or terrorist gangs. Although police officers are the most frequent and most visible culprits, members of other security agencies, such as federal road safety corps, immigration, custom, navy and the army are also culpable, and often even more ruthless.

The various roles of the police, including the power to conduct searches and make arrests, are enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution. Regrettably, instead of performing their policing duties with diligence and integrity, gun-wielding members of the Nigerian police force have capitalized on their constitutional role to molest and exploit road users by using what should have been security-enhancing road blocks as self-serving opportunities for illegal collection of money from intimidated motorists. Across the country, the Nigerian police have, on many busy roads, turned their road blocks to illegal "toll gates" where drivers, mostly commercial drivers, are compelled to drop, at each road blockade, two hundred to one thousand naira. Those who rebuff them are usually made to pack their vehicles for detailed "investigation" which could last for more than one hour and which often ends with trumped-up issues raised about some aspect of the drivers' particulars – matters mostly ended when the frustrated drivers grease the palms of the police in order to be freed to

continue on their journey.

The fact that the police wield powerful weapons, such as AK47 and AK49, on the highways easily enables them to intimidate road users. Nobody challenges the Nigerian police on the highways and go scot free; some people have been shot for doing that while others have been arrested and taken to court, charged with criminal offences they did not commit; usually, victims paid the authorities a lot of money before such trumped-up charges are dropped.

Some police officers on road-block duties do not wear police uniform, making it very difficult to distinguish them from robbers on the highways (Yuguda, 2017). There were cases where police vehicles parked beside road blocks manned by police in mufti have been attacked because road users mistook them for robbers. Such incidents prompted Nigerian Police Force headquarters to issue a directive that all Nigerian police officers on the highway must be fully kitted to enable road users distinguish police officers from men of the underworld; this directive has often been flouted by some irresponsible police officers. Matters are sometimes complicated when some robbers operate wearing police uniforms.

The irony of police road blocks on Nigerian highways is that these road blocks are mounted during the day, not at night when robbers mostly operate. The proliferation of small and light weapons has enabled some robbers to acquire dangerous weapons that now embolden them to overpower the police and carry out daytime robberies.

Police acts of extortion on Nigerian highways take place in violation of the 2020 Police Act. The Act enjoins the police to work towards making members of the public to build a lasting trust in the police, and to protect and uphold the rights of persons, to be impartial and respectful in the performance of police duties. In their various operations, the Nigerian police are known to have violated several sections of the Act, especially Sec. 32(2) which prohibits the Police from arresting anyone based on a civil wrong or breach of contract, and have frequently failed in their duties, particularly those of “prevention and detection of crime”, as listed in Section 4 of the Nigerian Police Act.

The Police Code of Conduct, concerning integrity, emphasizes that police officers shall not engage in acts of corruption or bribery, nor shall any officer condone such acts by other officers and that officers shall refuse to accept any gifts, presents, subscriptions, favours, gratuities or promises that could be interpreted as seeking to cause the officer to refrain from performing official responsibilities honestly and lawfully. In spite of these

set values, the police act as if they are not bound by any rules.

Police road-block extortion is usually a shameless open operation where the police would collect a currency note and provide change to the driver in full glare of passengers and onlookers; such is how this illegal and despicable act has been made to look like an acceptable norm (Iyang & Ubong, 2013). The police perpetuate these shameful acts even when motorcades of government officials are passing by, and the government officials do not usually stop to reprimand the unfaithful police officers.

Table 1

Number of road blocks and the amount collected by the police from each car, bus, lorry or truck driver in Nigeria’s South East, South South and South West zones

	Highways or Road Transport Routes investigated by the Researchers	Number of Police Road Blocks*	Minimum Amount collected from each Driver
1	Edo (Benin) - Lagos	26 road blocks	₦200 per road block
2	Ijebu Ode-Imota-Ikorodo	8 road blocks	₦200 per road block
3	Benin-Warri	17 road blocks	₦200 per road block
4	Benin-Asaba	9 road blocks	₦200 per road block
5	Asaba-Onitsha	6 road blocks	₦200 per road block
6	Warri-Patani	10 road blocks	₦200 per road block
7	Mbima -PH	21 road blocks	₦200 per road block
8	Onitsha-Owerri	11 road blocks	₦200 per road block
9	PH-Owerri	12 road blocks	₦200 per road block
10	PH-Aba	10 road blocks	₦200 per road block
11	Aba-Umuahia	10 road blocks	₦200 per road block
12	Umuahia-Enugu	14 road blocks	₦200 per road block
13	Anambra-Enugu	18 road blocks	₦200 per road block
14	Enugu-Nsukka	16 road blocks	₦200 per road block
15	Benin-Ondo	12 road blocks	₦200 per road block
16	Oyo-Osun	10 road blocks	₦200 per road block
17	Ebonyi-Akwa Ibom	13 road blocks	₦200 per road block

* These figures, which were the number of road blocks counted by the researchers when they passed through the routes, are likely to differ from day to day.

Source: Researchers’ Field Work

Police road blocks have led to terrible disasters in which lives were lost. There were occasions when trucks and lorries ran over stopped vehicles at police road blocks; such incidents were recorded on Okene-Abuja, Abuja-Kaduna, Lokoja-Auchi, Benin-Asaba, Onitsha-Owerri, Delta-Patani and Patani-Bayelsa highways, just to mention a few. Whenever such accidents occurred, police officers responded by quickly dismantling the road block before relocating to another spot. The spots they choose to mount their road blocks are often the bad spots, usually after dangerous bends or where there are many potholes – anywhere where drivers would be forced to slow

down to enable the police to stop them easily and extort money from them.

The extortion by the Nigerian police force has ripple effects: commercial drivers often hike their fare in order to generate extra money for “settling” the police; the passengers, mostly traders, increase the retail price of their wares, thereby transferring the burden of the extortion to the masses. This chain of extortion remains the same even when the road-block oppressors are immigration, customs, navy or army officers. Extortion by the Nigerian police is, however, more noticeable because it is a daily routine on Nigerian roads.

Police road-block extortion has become so entrenched that even when some erring officers are reported, no serious disciplinary action is taken against them; rather, the worst offenders are usually simply reposted to another town to continue their extortion, a practice which supports the widely-held view that some superior police officers receive regular returns from the uniformed extortionists they post to the highways (Etzioni, 2009). Such tolerance of corruption at the highest levels of the force was reflected in the way the EndSARs protests, in spite of proven cases of murder by operatives of Awkuzu SARS, have been swept aside without any government white paper issued on the matter. This is perhaps why, in spite of several strategies mapped out to curb this menace, police road-block extortion remains prevalent in many parts of the country (Stafford & Warr, 1993; Armstrong et al, 2018; Bates & Anderson, 2021; Enoch, 2022).

Methodology

The paper adopted descriptive research design and utilized mixed methods approach. Primary data were sourced through semi-structured interview involving one hundred and fifty (150) respondents purposively selected and interviewed; they were mostly car, bus, lorry, and truck drivers and other road stakeholders. They were interviewed along the major highways in the South West, South East and South South geopolitical zones of Nigeria. These three zones were strategic as they featured many police road blocks, unlike the highways in the North East, North West and North Central zones. Fifty respondents were interviewed in each of the three zones of the South East, South South and South West on the issue of police road blocks and extortion on Nigeria’s highways and the associated pains experienced by commuters. Secondary data, sourced from journals, newspapers and internet-based materials, were analyzed in terms of their thematic relevance to the topic.

Discussion and Findings

As stated earlier, fifty (50) respondents were interviewed in each of the

three zones of the South East, South South and South West, making it a total of 150 respondents, on the issue of police road blocks and extortion on Nigeria's highways. They were mostly car, bus, lorry and truck drivers. One hundred and twenty-eight (128) respondents, representing 76.5% of all the respondents from the three zones, frowned at police road-block operatives and the suffering they unleash on commuters and the drivers who are forced to part with their hard-earned money at each road block. Some respondents even said that police road blocks could be government's way of indirectly reintroducing toll gates dismantled by Obasanjo's administration; they lamented that while the previous tollgate collections were used for road maintenance, police road blocks constitute illegal avenues utilized by the police to enrich themselves.

The study revealed that some police officers were ready to relinquish their monthly salary to the divisional police officers (DPOs) in order to motivate the DPOs to post them to highway road-block duties. The study noted that some police officers were ready to resign from the force if road blocks are discontinued. 23.5% of the respondents blamed the government for the rut in the Nigerian police force, observing that the force is the least paid security agency in Nigeria. One police officer interviewed confidentially said:

If we do not collect this money, what do we use to feed our families? Some of our colleagues who died in active service or retired from the force...their families are yet to be compensated, so our concern here on the road blocks is to make enough money that would be enough to take care of our families since the government does not care about us.

Some respondents observed that the Nigerian police force is a reflection of Nigerian society where those in the corridors of power loot the treasury and, when caught and arraigned in court, use legal loopholes to endlessly adjourn their matter until the judges are compromised to declare them discharged and acquitted.

Few of the respondents held some drivers responsible for the institutionalization of highway extortion by the police. They were referring to impatient drivers who would not allow the police to check their particulars but would rather stick out their hands to offer the police money even before such is demanded. Of course one would not expect the police officer whose salary is nothing to write home about to turn down the offer. Many Nigerian road users are in a hurry and would part with anything to have easy passage.

Contribution to Knowledge

There have been different scholarly articles on the issue of police road blocks and extortion in Nigeria. Prominent among them are the following: “Investigating the Proliferation of Police Roadblocks and Extortion of Motorist in the Southeast of Nigeria” (Nnaeto, J, 2020); “Why Nigeria Want to Remove Police Roadblocks” (Commentary by Amina Yuguda, BBC 2017); and Sahara Reporters’ (July, 27. 2010) report, “How Police Personnel raked in 9.35 Billion Naira from Roadblocks in the Southeast Nigeria in 18 months”. Useful as these studies are, they were focused on the Southeast zone whereas police roadblocks and extortion are not zone specific as they are found in every zone of Nigeria. Their single-zone approach marked the limitation of these studies.

There were other academic papers that enquired into issues of corruption by the Nigerian police (Human Rights Watch, 2010; Inyang, J. D. & Ubong, E. A., 2013; Akpunonu-Ogu, 2014), but no detailed research of the type carried out by this paper across the whole of southern region of Nigeria (where most of the country’s road blocks are located) was previously carried out, to the best of our knowledge. The paper, in conducting an in-depth research into the specific issue of extortion arising from police misuse of their road-block operations in the three zones of southern Nigeria, fills a gap in and enriches existing literature on the subject matter of malpractices by the Nigerian police.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that Nigerian Police force road blocks and extortion on Nigerian highways are impediments to the socio-economic development of the country. They constitute human rights abuses that smear the image of the Nigerian police force, and they lead to increase in cost of transportation and the prices of goods and services bought and sold in Nigerian markets. Instead of allowing the officers of the Nigerian police force to keep on extorting money from the citizens for their personal enrichment, there may be need to restore the tollgates dismantled during Olusegun Obasanjo’s regime, especially now that our roads are in terrible state of disrepair. This paper strongly urges that the Nigerian police force and other security agencies should be paid good wages as that would help to minimize the ugly trend of road blocks and extortion on Nigerian highways.

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Writers' Brief Data



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