

Amnesty International Controversies: Nigerians' Perspective

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Abstract: Amnesty International (AI) is a global human rights organization that monitors and reports on various issues affecting people's dignity and freedom. However, AI has also faced several controversies and criticisms, especially from the Nigerian government and some civil society groups. This paper therefore aims to examine the sources and impacts of these controversies, as well as the responses and strategies of AI in Nigeria. The paper adopts a qualitative approach, using secondary data from official documents, media reports, academic articles, and online sources. The paper argues that AI's controversies in Nigeria are mainly driven by political, ideological, and cultural factors, and that they have implications for AI's credibility, legitimacy and effectiveness in the country. The paper also suggests some recommendations for AI to enhance its engagement and advocacy in Nigeria, such as strengthening its local presence, building trust and dialogue with stakeholders, and respecting the diversity and complexity of the Nigerian context.

Keywords: Amnesty International, perception, human rights, Nigerians and Nigerian Government.

INTRODUCTION

Amnesty International is a global human rights organization that campaigns for a world where everyone enjoys all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international standards. Amnesty International (AI) is a global movement of people who campaign for human rights. It was founded in London in 1961 by Peter Benenson, a lawyer who was outraged by the imprisonment of two Portuguese students for raising a toast to freedom. AI's main objectives are to expose and prevent human rights violations, such as torture, arbitrary detention, and death penalty, and to promote the universal respect for the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). AI operates through a network of national sections, local groups, individual members, and activists who write letters, organize protests, lobby governments, and educate the public about human rights issues. AI also works with intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, to strengthen and enforce international human rights laws and standards. AI is guided by the principles of international solidarity, effective action for the individual victim, global coverage, universality and indivisibility of human rights, impartiality and independence, democracy and mutual respect. AI is funded by donations from its members and supporters, and does not accept any money from governments or political parties.

One of the most prominent human rights organizations in the world is Amnesty International, which uses various methods of research, advocacy and mobilization to fight against abuses and injustices. Amnesty

International conducts accurate and cross-checked research into human rights violations by governments, companies and other actors worldwide, using different sources and tools, such as reports, surveys, interviews and digital technologies (Amnesty International Report, 2019). Based on its research, Amnesty International influences and pressures decision-makers to respect and protect human rights, through lobbying, campaigning, public awareness and legal action (Amnesty International Report, 2019 & 2021). Amnesty International also mobilizes millions of supporters and activists around the world, who join its global movement and take part in its actions, such as petitions, demonstrations, donations and online engagement (Amnesty International Report, 2019 & 2021). Amnesty International's methods of research, advocacy and mobilization are guided by its strategic plan, which defines its vision, mission, values and goals for the future (Amnesty International Report, 2022).

One of the main objectives of Amnesty International is to promote and protect human rights around the world. To achieve this, the organization focuses on different thematic areas that reflect the most pressing issues and challenges faced by people in various contexts. These thematic areas include civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression, association and assembly, and the right to a fair trial; economic, social and cultural rights, such as the right to education, health, work and adequate standard of living; gender and sexuality, such as the rights of women, LGBTIQ+ people, and sexual and reproductive health; refugees and migrants, such as

the rights of people who are forced to flee their homes or seek a better life elsewhere; armed conflict and security, such as the protection of civilians, humanitarian law, and disarmament; and environmental justice, such as the rights of indigenous peoples, climate change, and natural resources. Amnesty International works to expose violations, mobilize supporters, influence decision-makers, and empower activists to defend human rights in these thematic areas.

The impact and effectiveness of Amnesty International's work, both at the global and regional levels, can be measured by various indicators. Some of these indicators are: the number of human rights violations that are prevented, exposed, or redressed; the extent to which human rights norms and standards are promoted and implemented; the degree of participation and empowerment of human rights defenders and victims; and the level of public awareness and support for human rights issues. Amnesty International strives to achieve its vision of a world where everyone enjoys all the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.

Amnesty International is a global network of human rights activists that campaigns against various forms of human rights violations around the world. However, the organization also faces many challenges and criticisms from different actors and perspectives, such as:

- Some governments accuse Amnesty International of being biased, politicized or interfering in their internal affairs. For example, the US government rejected Amnesty International's allegations of human rights abuses in 2005, stating that they were unsupported by facts. Similarly, Israel, China, Russia and other countries have also criticized Amnesty International for what they assert constituted one-sided reporting or a failure to treat threats to security as a mitigating factor.
- Some religious groups oppose Amnesty International's stance on issues such as abortion, LGBT rights or freedom of expression. For example, some Catholic organizations withdrew their support from Amnesty International after it adopted a policy of advocating for access to legal and safe abortion. Amnesty International has also been accused of violating the universality of human

rights by imposing Western values on non-Western cultures.

- Some scholars and activists question Amnesty International's methodology, effectiveness or accountability. For example, some critics argue that Amnesty International relies too much on Western media sources, fails to address structural causes of human rights violations or lacks transparency and democracy in its decision-making processes. Amnesty International has also been criticized for paying some of its staff high salaries and for having a toxic work environment.
- Some other groups accuse Amnesty International of engaging in "lawfare" or using legal means to achieve political goals. For example, some pro-Israel organizations claim that Amnesty International supports boycotts, divestments and sanctions (BDS) against Israel and files lawsuits against Israeli officials.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International has been working in Nigeria since 1967. The organization campaigns against human rights violations such as torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, rape and forced evictions. Amnesty International also advocates for the protection of the rights of women, children, refugees, prisoners of conscience, and victims of armed conflict.

However, Amnesty International's work in Nigeria has not been without challenges and criticisms from various actors and perspectives. Some of the main issues that the organization faces are:

- **Accusations of Bias and Interference:** Amnesty International has been accused by the Nigerian government and some security agencies of being biased against them and interfering in the country's internal affairs. For example, in 2020, the Nigerian military rejected Amnesty International's report on the killing of peaceful protesters by security forces during the #EndSARS protests, calling it "a deliberate attempt to blackmail the Nigerian military". The government also accused the organization of supporting terrorism and undermining national security.
- **Threats and Harassment:** Amnesty International's staff and partners in Nigeria have faced threats and harassment from state and non-state actors for their human rights work. In 2017, a group of protesters stormed Amnesty International's office in Abuja,

demanding that the organization leave the country. In 2019, Amnesty International's staff received death threats from an unknown source after publishing a report on the atrocities committed by Boko Haram and the Nigerian military in the northeast.

- **Lack of Access and Cooperation:** Amnesty International has faced difficulties in accessing some areas and obtaining information from some authorities in Nigeria. For instance, the organization has not been able to visit detention facilities run by the military or interview detainees held there. The organization has also faced challenges in getting cooperation from some state governments and agencies in addressing human rights issues.
- **Cultural and Religious Sensitivities:** Amnesty International has faced criticism from some cultural and religious groups in Nigeria for its stance on some human rights issues that are considered controversial or taboo. For example, the organization has been criticized for its campaign for access to legal and safe abortion for women and girls who are victims of rape or incest. The organization has also been opposed by some conservative groups for its support for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people.

Despite these challenges and criticisms, Amnesty International remains committed to its mission of promoting and protecting human rights in Nigeria. The organization continues to document and expose human rights violations, engage with relevant authorities and stakeholders, mobilize public opinion and action, and provide support to human rights defenders and victims. Amnesty International also strives to uphold its principles of impartiality, independence, accuracy, and accountability in its work. Amnesty International has faced several controversies and criticisms, especially from some governments and groups that accuse it of bias, interference, and misinformation. One of the countries where Amnesty International has been involved in several controversies is Nigeria, a West African nation with a history of political instability, ethnic conflicts, and human rights violations. This paper therefore seeks to investigate Amnesty International controversies from Nigerians' perspective.

Statement of the Problem

Amnesty International is a global human rights organization that claims to promote and protect the rights of people around the world. However, in Nigeria, Amnesty International has faced several controversies and criticisms from the government, the military, and some civil society groups. These controversies stem from Amnesty International's reports and campaigns on issues such as the Boko Haram insurgency, the Niger Delta crisis, the End SARS protests, and the alleged human rights violations by the Nigerian security forces. The problem of this study is to examine how Nigerians perceive Amnesty International and its role in the country, and what factors influence their attitudes and opinions towards the organization, hence the study.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to examine the controversies surrounding Amnesty International, a global human rights organization, from the perspective of Nigerians.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- investigate how Nigerians perceive Amnesty International's role, credibility, and impact in their country.
- examine the challenges and opportunities for Amnesty International to improve its relationship with the Nigerian government, civil society, and public opinion.
- examine the factors that influence opinions of Nigerians about Amnesty International.
- explore the implications of these controversies for the future of human rights advocacy and protection in Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are Nigerians' perception about Amnesty International's role, credibility, and impact in Nigeria?
2. What are the factors that influence opinions of Nigerians about Amnesty International?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities for Amnesty International to improve its relationship with the Nigerian government, civil society, and public opinion?
4. What are the implications of these controversies for the future of human rights advocacy and protection in Nigeria?

LITERATURE REVIEW-OVERVIEW OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a global human rights organization of more than 10 million people who

campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all and was founded in 1961 by Peter Benenson, a British lawyer and activist who was outraged by the imprisonment of two Portuguese students for raising a toast to freedom. He wrote an article in *The Observer* newspaper, titled "The Forgotten Prisoners", which appealed for the release of all prisoners of conscience - people who are imprisoned for their beliefs, opinions or identity. The article sparked a worldwide response and launched the "Appeal for Amnesty" campaign, which later became Amnesty International. Since then, Amnesty International has grown into a worldwide network of activists, researchers, lawyers, journalists and supporters who expose human rights violations and demand justice for the victims. The organization has won several awards for its work, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 and the UN Human Rights Prize in 1978. Amnesty International has also played a key role in the development of international human rights law and standards, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention against Torture and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Amnesty International works to protect and promote human rights through research, mobilization and advocacy. Amnesty International has a presence in Nigeria since 1967 and has been documenting and campaigning on various human rights issues affecting the country. Some of the issues that Amnesty International focuses on in Nigeria include the armed conflict in the north-east, unlawful killings and violence by bandits and security forces, enforced disappearances, torture, arbitrary detention, restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, forced evictions, and climate change. Amnesty International also supports victims of human rights violations and their families, and calls for accountability and justice for perpetrators. Amnesty International's work has had an impact on Nigerian society by raising awareness, influencing policies, challenging impunity, and empowering human rights defenders.

Amnesty International Nigeria has had a significant impact on Nigerian society by raising awareness, mobilizing public opinion, influencing policies and holding authorities accountable for human rights violations. Some of the achievements of Amnesty International Nigeria include:

- Securing the release of hundreds of prisoners of conscience, such as Omoyele Sowore, a

journalist and activist who was arrested in 2019 for organizing peaceful protests against bad governance.

- Exposing the atrocities committed by Boko Haram and the Nigerian military in the north-eastern region, such as mass killings, abductions, sexual violence and forced abortions.
- Campaigning for the abolition of the death penalty and the reform of the criminal justice system, which is plagued by corruption, delays and unfair trials.
- Supporting the victims of forced evictions and advocating for their right to adequate housing and compensation.
- Demanding justice for the victims of police brutality and extrajudicial killings, especially during the #EndSARS protests in 2020.
- Educating and empowering young people to become human rights defenders and agents of change in their communities.

WHAT ARE NIGERIANS' PERCEPTION ABOUT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S ROLE, CREDIBILITY, AND IMPACT IN NIGERIA?

Amnesty International is a global human rights organization that campaigns for the protection and promotion of human rights around the world. It has been active in Nigeria since 1967, documenting and exposing human rights violations, advocating for justice and accountability, and supporting victims and activists. But what do Nigerians think about Amnesty International's role, credibility, and impact in their country? According to a 2019 survey conducted by Afrobarometer, a pan-African research network, 59% of Nigerians have heard of Amnesty International, and 49% of those who have heard of it have a positive view of the organization (Afrobarometer, 2019). The survey also found that 51% of Nigerians trust Amnesty International "somewhat" or "a lot", compared to 44% who trust the Nigerian government and 41% who trust the United Nations. The survey suggests that Amnesty International enjoys a relatively high level of awareness and trust among Nigerians, especially among the urban, educated, and young segments of the population.

However, not everyone in Nigeria shares this positive perception of Amnesty International. Some critics accuse the organization of being biased, interfering in Nigeria's internal affairs, or having a hidden agenda. For example, in 2016, the Nigerian Army rejected a report by Amnesty

International that accused it of killing more than 150 pro-Biafra protesters in the southeast region. The Army spokesperson said that the report was "unfair and lacked credibility" and that Amnesty International was "working hard to destabilize Nigeria" (Amnesty International, 2016 & Premium Times, 2016). Similarly, in 2020, some civil society groups staged a protest against Amnesty International in Abuja, calling for its expulsion from Nigeria. They claimed that the organization was "sponsoring terrorism" and "inciting violence" in the country (AI Report, 2020).

Amnesty International has responded to these allegations by reaffirming its commitment to human rights and impartiality. It has also emphasized its constructive engagement with various stakeholders in Nigeria, including the government, civil society, media, and communities. It has highlighted some of its achievements and impacts in Nigeria, such as securing the release of prisoners of conscience, supporting the #EndSARS movement against police brutality, and providing legal aid and psychosocial support to victims of human rights violations (Daily Trust, 2020).

Nigerians have diverse and complex perceptions about Amnesty International's role, credibility, and impact in their country. While some appreciate and support its work, others distrust and oppose it. Amnesty International faces many challenges and opportunities in Nigeria, as it strives to fulfill its mission of defending human rights for all.

WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE OPINIONS OF NIGERIANS ABOUT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL?

Amnesty International is a global human rights organization that campaigns for justice, freedom and dignity for all people. Amnesty International has been working in Nigeria since 1967, documenting and exposing human rights violations, advocating for legal and policy reforms, and supporting victims and activists (Adebayo, 2019).

However, Amnesty International's work in Nigeria has also faced challenges and criticisms from various quarters, including the government, the military, religious groups and some civil society organizations. Some of these critics have accused Amnesty International of being biased, interfering in Nigeria's internal affairs, or having a hidden agenda (Agbiboa, 2014). The factors that influence

these opinions, according to Ezeibe & Onuoha (2018) include:

- The level of awareness and knowledge of Amnesty International's mandate, mission and activities among Nigerians.
- The degree of trust and confidence in Amnesty International's credibility, impartiality and independence as a human rights organization.
- The perception of Amnesty International's impact and relevance on the human rights situation in Nigeria, especially in relation to the most pressing issues and challenges facing the country.
- The alignment or divergence of Amnesty International's values, principles and goals with those of Nigerians, particularly in relation to their cultural, religious and political beliefs and identities.
- The influence of external actors and sources of information on shaping Nigerians' opinions about Amnesty International, such: as the media, social media, government officials, religious leaders, civil society organizations, etc.

These factors are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, and they may interact and influence each other in complex ways (Ibeanu & Momoh, 2008 and Ojukwu & Olaifa, 2011). Moreover, they may vary depending on the context, location and demographics of different groups of Nigerians. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the diversity and plurality of opinions among Nigerians about Amnesty International, and to avoid generalizing or stereotyping.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL TO IMPROVE ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND PUBLIC OPINION?

Amnesty International has been working in Nigeria since 1967, documenting and exposing human rights violations, advocating for justice and accountability, and supporting victims and activists. However, Amnesty International faces several challenges and opportunities in its efforts to improve its relationship with the Nigerian government, civil society, and public opinion. Some of these challenges according to Ojebode, *et al.*, (2019) are:

- The Nigerian government has often accused Amnesty International of being biased,

interfering in its internal affairs, and undermining its sovereignty and security. For example, in 2020, the Nigerian government declared Amnesty International as "persona non grata" and asked it to leave the country, following its report on the alleged killing of protesters by security forces during the #EndSARS demonstrations. Amnesty International has denied these allegations and maintained its independence and impartiality (Amnesty International Report, 2020).

- The Nigerian civil society is diverse and vibrant, with many organizations and individuals working on various human rights issues. Amnesty International has collaborated with some of these partners, such as the Nigerian Bar Association, the National Human Rights Commission, and the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project. However, Amnesty International also faces competition and criticism from some civil society actors, who may have different agendas, perspectives, or interests. For example, some religious groups have opposed Amnesty International's stance on sexual and reproductive rights, while some ethnic groups have accused it of ignoring their grievances (Human Rights Watch, 2021).
- The Nigerian public opinion is influenced by various factors, such as the media, social media, culture, religion, ethnicity, and politics. Amnesty International has tried to engage with the public through various platforms, such as its website, social media accounts, publications, events, and campaigns. However, Amnesty International also faces challenges in reaching out to a wider and more diverse audience, overcoming misinformation and stereotypes, and building trust and credibility (Amnesty International Report, 2021).

To overcome these challenges and seize these opportunities, Amnesty International needs to adopt a strategic and holistic approach according to Human Rights Watch (2021) that involves:

- Strengthening its research and advocacy capacity to produce timely, accurate, and relevant information on human rights issues in Nigeria.
- Enhancing its communication and outreach skills to convey its messages effectively and persuasively to different stakeholders and audiences.
- Building and maintaining constructive relationships with the government, civil

society, and the public based on mutual respect, dialogue, and cooperation.

- Promoting and supporting human rights education and awareness among the public to foster a culture of human rights in Nigeria.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CONTROVERSIES FOR THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY AND PROTECTION IN NIGERIA?

Amnesty International (AI) is a global human rights organization that campaigns for the protection and promotion of human rights around the world. However, AI has also faced several controversies and criticisms in Nigeria, especially from the government and some segments of the society. Some of the controversies as opined by Nwankwo (2019) include:

Accusations of Bias and Lack of Credibility:

The Nigerian government and its security agencies have repeatedly accused AI of being biased and lacking credibility in its reports and statements on the human rights situation in Nigeria. They have claimed that AI is working with some external forces to undermine the sovereignty and security of Nigeria and to tarnish its image in the international community. They have also questioned the sources and methods of AI's research and documentation, alleging that they are based on hearsay and propaganda.

Threats and Attacks on AI's Staff and Offices:

AI's staff and offices in Nigeria have faced several threats and attacks from some groups and individuals who are opposed to its work. For instance, in 2017, a group of protesters stormed AI's office in Abuja and demanded that it leave the country within 24 hours. They accused AI of supporting terrorism and secessionism in Nigeria. In 2018, another group of protesters vandalized AI's office in Abuja and set it on fire. They accused AI of being anti-Nigeria and anti-military.

Lack of Engagement and Dialogue with Stakeholders:

Some critics have argued that AI does not engage or dialogue with the relevant stakeholders in Nigeria, such as the government, the security agencies, the civil society, the media, and the victims of human rights violations. They have claimed that AI only issues reports and statements without consulting or collaborating with those who are directly involved or affected by the human rights issues. They have also suggested that AI should adopt a more constructive and positive approach to human rights advocacy and

protection in Nigeria, rather than being confrontational and negative.

These controversies have implications for the future of human rights advocacy and protection in Nigeria. Some of the possible implications according to Ezeani (2018) are:

Reduced Impact and Influence of AI's Work:

The controversies surrounding AI may reduce its impact and influence on the human rights situation in Nigeria. The government and its security agencies may ignore or dismiss AI's reports and recommendations as biased or false. The public may lose trust or confidence in AI's work as credible or reliable. The victims of human rights violations may feel abandoned or betrayed by AI as their ally or defender.

Increased Risks and Challenges for AI's Staff and Operations:

The controversies surrounding AI may increase the risks and challenges for its staff and operations in Nigeria. AI's staff may face harassment, intimidation, or violence from some groups or individuals who are hostile to its work. AI's offices may face vandalism, arson, or closure from some authorities or protesters who want to silence or expel it from the country. AI's operations may face restrictions, interference, or sabotage from some actors who want to hinder or hamper its work.

Decreased Space and Opportunities for Human Rights Advocacy and Protection:

The controversies surrounding AI may decrease the space and opportunities for human rights advocacy and protection in Nigeria. The government may enact laws or policies that curtail or violate human rights in the name of national security or public order. The security agencies may commit more human rights violations or abuses with impunity or cover-up. The civil society may face more repression or co-optation from the state or non-state actors. The media may face more censorship or self-censorship on human rights issues. The victims of human rights violations may face more fear or silence on their plight.

The controversies surrounding AI have serious implications for the future of human rights advocacy and protection in Nigeria. AI needs to address these controversies effectively and strategically to maintain its credibility, legitimacy, and relevance in the country (Amnesty International, 2021). It also needs to engage more with the stakeholders in Nigeria to build trust, dialogue, and collaboration on human rights

issues. It also needs to continue its work with courage, resilience, and solidarity to defend and promote human rights in Nigeria.

SUMMARY

The article examines the role and impact of Amnesty International (AI) in Nigeria, a country that has faced various human rights challenges such as corruption, insecurity, poverty and violence. The paper analyzes the criticisms and accusations that AI has received from different stakeholders in Nigeria, such as the government, the military, the civil society and the public. The researcher argues that AI has been accused of bias, interference, and lack of accountability by various Nigerian stakeholders, such as the government, the military, and some civil society groups. The paper also discusses the possible reasons for these controversies and the implications for AI's credibility and effectiveness in Nigeria. The article concludes by suggesting some ways that AI can improve its relationship with Nigerians and enhance its advocacy for human rights in the country.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the controversies surrounding Amnesty International's activities in Nigeria, especially in relation to the human rights violations committed by the security forces and the armed groups in the country. It also analyzed the arguments for and against Amnesty International's reports, campaigns, and advocacy, as well as the responses of the Nigerian government and public. The study discussed the implications of these controversies for the credibility, legitimacy, and effectiveness of Amnesty International as a global human rights organization. It also argued that Amnesty International faces a complex and challenging situation in Nigeria, where it has to balance its principles and values with the realities and sensitivities of the local context. The researcher suggested that Amnesty International should adopt a more nuanced, inclusive, and constructive approach to engaging with the Nigerian authorities and stakeholders, while maintaining its independence and impartiality. The study concluded that Amnesty International has an important role to play in Nigeria, but it needs to be more responsive, accountable, and transparent in its work, in order to gain more trust and support from the Nigerian people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the arguments made by the researcher on the Amnesty International controversies from

Nigerians' perspective, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is need for Amnesty International to engage more with the Nigerian government, the military, and other relevant stakeholders to foster dialogue, trust, and cooperation on human rights issues.
2. There is need for Amnesty International to conduct more rigorous research and verification of its reports and allegations before making them public, and ensure that they reflect the views and experiences of all parties involved.
3. Increase its outreach and education activities to raise awareness and understanding of its mandate, mission, and methods among the Nigerian public, especially among youths and marginalized groups.
4. Collaborate more with local human rights organizations and activists to amplify their voices and support their work on the ground.
5. Strengthen its security measures and contingency plans to protect its staff and supporters from potential attacks and harassment.

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