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AN EVALUATION OF NON-VIOLENT APPROACHES TO CHANGE AND THEIR SUITABILITY FOR NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study examines the diverse forms of non-violent change and identifies the most suitable approach for achieving sustainable socio-political transformation in Nigeria. Drawing on Gandhi's Non-Violent Democratic theory and Sharp's Consent theory of power, the research employed a qualitative design based on documentary and content analysis of secondary data from scholarly works, institutional reports, and credible media sources. The findings reveal that while advocacy, dialogue, and civic education play vital roles, mass civil resistance, characterised by peaceful protests, strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience, remains the most effective catalyst for reform in Nigeria's semi-authoritarian democracy. Historical evidence, including the *Occupy Nigeria* protests (2012) and the *#EndSARS* movement (2020), demonstrates that broad-based civic mobilisation compels policy reversal and institutional accountability where elite negotiation or litigation alone fails. Non-violent action enhances legitimacy through inclusive participation, exerts economic and moral pressure on power structures, and aligns with Nigeria's constitutional guarantees of peaceful assembly. However, success depends on disciplined organisation, adaptive strategy, and sustained coalition-building across civil society, labour unions, youth, and faith groups. The study concludes that mass civil resistance, reinforced by strategic non-cooperation and guided by ethical principles, represents the most viable form of non-violent change for Nigeria. It recommends civic education, institutional dialogue mechanisms, and protection of protest rights as essential to consolidating democratic governance and preventing violent escalation.
Keywords: Non-violent change, civil resistance, strikes, protests, Nigeria, democratic transformation, Gandhi, Gene Sharp

Introduction

Globally, non-violent movements have increasingly been the instrument of choice for populations seeking social and political change. Iconic leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated early in the 20th century how sustained civil resistance and nonviolence can mobilise broad publics, challenge entrenched power and contribute to reform (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Quantitative research shows that between 1900 and 2006, 53% of major nonviolent campaigns succeeded, compared to about 26% of violent

campaigns (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Non-violent resistance draws broad-based participation, including women, youth and marginalised communities and can erode the foundational pillars of authority by withdrawing legitimacy and cooperation (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; "Why Civil Resistance Works," 2019). Furthermore, non-violent strategies avoid the devastating human and economic costs of armed conflict, making them both morally and economically attractive (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

However, non-violent movements confront multiple contemporary challenges. Analyses indicate that the success rate of non-violent campaigns has declined since about 2010, with fewer than 34% achieving their aims fully (Fisher, 2020). Authoritarian regimes have responded with sophisticated repression tactics such as infiltration, divide-and-rule, propaganda, internet shutdowns and provocation of Violence to delegitimise peaceful protest (Fisher, 2020; The Future of Nonviolent Resistance, 2020). Internally, movements often struggle with inadequate strategic planning, loss of non-violent discipline, fragmented leadership, and difficulty maintaining wide participation beyond initial bursts of activity (Fisher, 2020). To mitigate these weaknesses, activists and international networks have emphasised grassroots organising, coalition-building, training in non-violent tactics and digital mobilisation (The Future of Nonviolent Resistance, 2020).

In the African context, the continent has witnessed a surge in non-violent civic activism. Analysts describe an "African Spring" of sorts, noting that at least 25 new mass movements emerged across Africa in the last decade, nearly double the number seen in Asia in the same period (Longba'am-Alli, 2023). These movements have at times produced dramatic political change. For example, the 2019 protests in Sudan forced the removal of President Omar al-Bashir, and mass demonstrations in Burkina Faso in 2014 helped end President Blaise Compaoré's 27-year rule (Longba'am-Alli, 2023). Youth-led networks such as Y'en a Marre (Senegal), Balai Citoyen (Burkina Faso) and LUCHA (DR Congo) illustrate how contemporary African activists fuse non-violent tactics and digital mobilisation (Longba'am-Alli, 2023).

Yet Africa's experience also highlights the limitations of non-violent change. Many transitions during 1989-1994 (when 35 African countries moved from one-party regimes to multiparty systems) did not translate into deep governance transformation, accountability or institutional reform (Longba'am-Alli, 2023). Recent hashtag-driven and social-media-fuelled protests (for example, Nigeria's #EndBadGovernance) often generate rapid momentum but risk remaining transient unless anchored in sustained civic infrastructure and institutional change (Longba'am-Alli, 2023).

In Nigeria, the continent's most populous country, non-violent civic action has a long history. The colonial era tax protest of 1946 in Abeokuta, led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the Abeokuta Women's Union, compelled the abdication of the Alake of Egbaland and demonstrated the effectiveness of organised non-violent resistance (historical accounts). Under military rule, civil society, students and labour groups utilised strikes, boycotts and rallies to demand democracy. June 12, 1993, pro-democracy protests exemplified citizen defiance under dictatorship (Amnesty International, 1994).

In the democratic era, peaceful civic mobilisation remains a key strategy. The Occupy Nigeria movement in January 2012 used nationwide strikes and mass demonstrations against fuel subsidy removal, paralysing economic activity and prompting partial government reversal of policy (The Guardian, 2012). In October 2020, the #EndSARS movement protesting police brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) mobilised youth across the country through streets and social media; the government announced the dissolution of SARS shortly thereafter, though many demands remain unmet (Bello Shehu Bello et al., 2023). This movement illustrates both the potential and the fragility of peaceful civic action in Nigeria (Bello Shehu Bello et al., 2023).

Labour and academic union strikes provide further illustration of non-violent strategies in Nigeria. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) declared its 18th nationwide strike in 26 years in October 2025, following unresolved long-standing demands from the federal government (Adekunle, 2025). Simultaneously, the Federal Government invoked the *"no work, no pay"* policy during the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike, warning that lecturers would not be paid for periods of work stoppage. In response, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and other unions condemned the stance and threatened a counter-policy of *"no pay, no work"*, giving the government a four-week ultimatum to resolve the dispute (Vanguard, 2025; Punch, 2025). These industrial actions represent non-violent forms of protest designed to exert pressure through withdrawal of labour and disruption of institutional normalcy (Punch, 2025; Daily Trust, 2025).

Another illustrative instance is the campaign for the release of Nnamdi Kanu and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)-related protests. On multiple occasions, peaceful demonstrations calling for Kanu's release in Abuja were met with tear-gas, water-cannons and arrests of protesters as well as journalists (Reuters, 2025). While this struggle includes secessionist undertones, the mobilisation nonetheless underscores the invocation of non-violent protest tactics, albeit constrained by harsh repression.

Beyond Nigeria, the global solidarity movement for Palestine presents a further case of non-violent mobilisation. Non-violent Palestinian resistance has been documented since the 1970s, including land-day protests in 1976 and the "Great March of Return" in Gaza (American Friends Service Committee, n.d.; Waging Nonviolence, 2024). Protest marches and encampments in the United States, Europe, Asia and elsewhere calling for "Free Palestine" have drawn hundreds of thousands of participants (Crowd Counting Consortium, 2023). Despite the heavy militarised context, many activists maintain non-violent tactics, community organising, international solidarity and documentation efforts (War Prevention Initiative, 2024).

Unlike many classical cases of non-violent resistance such as India's independence movement or the U.S. Civil Rights struggle where protest repression eventually gave way to negotiated reforms, Nigeria's experience is marked by sustained state militarisation, weak institutional responsiveness, and limited policy follow-through. For instance, while the 2020 #EndSARS protests conformed to global norms of decentralised and youth-led non-violent mobilisation, the Nigerian state responded with lethal force at the Lekki Toll Gate, resulting in deaths of unarmed civilians and a subsequent climate of fear and fragmentation (Amnesty International, 2021). This contrasts with contexts where repression triggered elite defections and structural change, as observed in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). In Nigeria, state violence has often disrupted protest continuity, weakened organisational capacity, and constrained the institutionalisation of reform, making non-violent action less likely to translate into durable governance change compared to global cases.

This study is therefore significant because it moves beyond celebrating non-violence as a universal solution and instead interrogates its contextual limitations within Nigeria's semi-authoritarian democratic environment. While global research demonstrates the superior success rate of non-violent campaigns over violent ones, it also warns that regime adaptability and repression increasingly undermine non-violent effectiveness, especially in hybrid regimes (Chenoweth, 2020). By systematically analysing Nigeria's unique protest ecosystem, where civic mobilisation coexists with entrenched security dominance and policy inertia, this study contributes original insight into why non-violent campaigns produce only partial reforms in Nigeria and how strategic adaptation is required for deeper institutional transformation.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the forms of non-violent change and determine the most suitable approach for achieving sustainable socio-political transformation in Nigeria.

Literature Review

1. Conceptual Framework

Evolution and Historical Context of Non-Violent Change

The concept of non-violent change is historically rooted in moral and religious traditions of non-injury and ethical resistance, but contemporary scholarship increasingly treats it as a strategic form of political action rather than only a moral stance. While ahimsa and satyagraha provided the philosophical foundation for early non-violent movements, recent studies emphasise that modern civil resistance derives its effectiveness not simply from ethical appeal but from its ability to mobilise large and diverse populations and disrupt the functioning of power structures through sustained non-cooperation (Nepstad, 2015). Empirical research has demonstrated that non-violent campaigns historically achieved higher rates of success than violent ones. Chenoweth and Stephan's comparative dataset of 323 resistance movements showed that non-violent campaigns were almost twice as likely to succeed as violent insurgencies (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). However, more recent scholarships have cautioned against treating this result as universally applicable. Chenoweth (2021) observes that the global success rate of non-violent movements has declined significantly since the early 2000s, largely due to authoritarian learning, protest fragmentation and declining levels of mass participation. This suggests that the effectiveness of non-violent action is not static but contingent on changing political contexts and state capacities for repression.

Furthermore, recent studies highlight that non-violent action operates through a mechanism of disruption rather than persuasion alone. Civil resistance works by interrupting the "normal functioning" of political, economic and social systems, thereby increasing the cost of repression or inaction for governing elites (Schock, 2023). A comparative analysis of non-violent movements in hybrid and semi-authoritarian regimes shows that regimes with strong coercive apparatuses and weak institutional accountability tend to neutralise peaceful movements more effectively, especially when movements lack organisational continuity beyond spontaneous mobilisation (Kadivar, 2018). This finding is particularly relevant for post-colonial and African contexts, where non-violent uprisings often achieve short-term concessions but struggle to convert mobilisations into structural democratic transformation due to militarised governance structures and limited institutional openness (Meléagrou-Hitchens & Brandon, 2022). These insights point to the necessity of analysing non-violent change not as a universal solution, but as a context-dependent strategy shaped by state capacity, protest organisation and socio-economic conditions.

Forms of Non-Violent Change

Scholars classify non-violent action into multiple forms that vary in method and strategic intensity (Sharp, 1973; Commons Library, 2020). These include:

1. Peaceful Protest and Persuasion – Demonstrations, marches, vigils, petitions, and public assemblies designed to raise awareness or symbolically challenge injustice. Examples include King's March on Washington (1963), Egypt's Tahrir Square protests (2011), and Nigeria's *#EndSARS* movement in 2020 (USIP, 2021). Peaceful protests rely on visibility and collective voice to generate moral and political pressure on authorities.
2. Non-Cooperation (Strikes and Boycotts) Withdrawal of labour, services, or consumption to disrupt normal governance or economic activity. Classic cases include

the 1930 Salt March in India and the 1955–1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott in the U.S. In Nigeria, the *Occupy Nigeria* general strike of January 2012 paralysed the economy, forcing government policy reversal on fuel subsidies (The Guardian, 2012). Similarly, ASUU and the Nigeria Labour Congress have used strikes to negotiate funding and wages (Vanguard, 2025).

3. Civil Disobedience and Non-Violent Intervention – Open defiance of unjust laws, or direct actions such as blockades and sit-ins. The June 12, 1993, pro-democracy demonstrations in Nigeria epitomised this approach, as activists defied military bans to demand recognition of election results (Amnesty International, 1993). The #EndSARS protesters' highway occupations in 2020 likewise exemplified modern non-violent intervention (Amnesty International, 2021).
4. Advocacy, Dialogue, and Education – Persuasive efforts including policy advocacy, inter-group dialogue, civic education, and media campaigns. Nigerian civil society groups like SERAP and YIAGA Africa have successfully employed advocacy to achieve the Freedom of Information Act (2011) and Electoral Act (2022) reforms (Adeleke, 2012).
5. Hybrid and Transnational Movements – Contemporary activism often combines digital mobilisation, street protests, and institutional lobbying. The global *Free Palestine* campaign and Nigeria's *#EndBadGovernance* protests of 2024 illustrate how online and offline strategies interact to produce global solidarity (CIVICUS, 2024).

Each form functions by non-cooperation with injustice, shifting political costs and forcing negotiation. Together, they embody a continuum of peaceful pressure that balances moral legitimacy with strategic disruption.

Non-violent change has been widely studied in various contexts. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) demonstrated that the larger the participation base, the higher the probability of success. Fisher (2020) found that digital activism has enhanced coordination but also increased vulnerability to repression. In Africa, Longba'am-Alli (2023) highlighted how the "second wave" of non-violent movements, such as Sudan (2019) and Burkina Faso (2014), achieved regime change but struggled to institutionalise reforms. These insights are relevant to Nigeria, where recurrent protests, labour strikes, and advocacy campaigns reflect persistent citizen engagement but inconsistent outcomes.

Thus, this study adopts non-violent change as a conceptual lens to analyse Nigeria's civic activism. It examined the evolution of these forms of protests, strikes, boycotts, and advocacy and evaluated their relative effectiveness in achieving accountability and governance reform.

2. Theoretical Framework

Gene Sharp's Consent theory of power

Sharp's (1973) consent theory argues that authority rests on voluntary obedience; when citizens collectively refuse cooperation, rulers lose their capacity to govern. This withdrawal occurs through economic, social, and political non-cooperation, which erodes the regime's foundations. Sharp's typology of 198 methods of non-violent action, from symbolic protest to direct intervention, has guided empirical studies globally (ICNC, 2020). In Nigeria, this theory explains how nationwide strikes and demonstrations, such as the *Occupy Nigeria* movement (2012) and ASUU's repeated work stoppages, function as institutionalised mechanisms of peaceful coercion.

Gandhi's Non-Violent Democratic Theory

Gandhi's theory complements Sharp's framework by introducing ethical and spiritual dimensions. Grounded in *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, it posits that nonviolence is both a means and an end, producing not only political reform but moral regeneration (Dalton, 2012). For

Gandhi, resistance must reflect truth and love, aiming to convert rather than humiliate opponents (Gandhi, 1927/2001). His model inspired global figures, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, who used reconciliation rather than vengeance to dismantle apartheid through dialogue and negotiation (Mandela Foundation, 2020).

Both theories illuminate Nigeria's experience. Sharp's structural perspective clarifies how non-cooperation (e.g., strikes and boycotts) undermines state authority, while Gandhi's normative approach underscores the importance of moral discipline and inter-ethnic unity during mobilisation. Nigeria's #EndSARS (2020) and #EndBadGovernance (2024) protests exhibited both elements: strategic coordination via social media and a moral appeal for justice that transcended religion and ethnicity (USIP, 2021; CIVICUS, 2024). However, state repression, such as the October 20 2020, Lekki Toll Gate shootings, revealed the fragility of non-violent resistance in militarised democracies (Amnesty International, 2021). These dynamics justify examining how theoretical insights can inform practical strategies for sustainable civic change in Nigeria.

Empirical Review and Research Gaps

1. Empirical Review

Empirical studies across regions consistently affirm the transformative potential of non-violent change while also highlighting its contextual limitations. Chenoweth (2020) observes that globally, the success rate of non-violent movements peaked in the late 20th century but declined to below 35 per cent after 2010 due to increasing authoritarian adaptation and weakened movement structures. In Africa, Longba'am-Alli (2023) found that between 2010 and 2023, at least twenty-five major non-violent uprisings occurred, nearly double the number in Asia. These included Sudan's *Forces of Freedom and Change* movement (2018–2019) and Burkina Faso's *Balai Citoyen* uprising (2014), both of which successfully toppled entrenched dictatorships but later experienced military regression. This demonstrates that while non-violent change can initiate political transformation, sustaining democracy afterwards requires institutional follow-through (Crisis Group, 2019).

Several cross-national analyses, including those by Fisher (2020) and Bhavnani and Jha (2018), emphasise that non-violent campaigns succeed when they combine mass participation, diverse tactics, and disciplined leadership. These elements increase legitimacy and make repression more costly for regimes. However, movements that are spontaneous or overly dependent on social media mobilisation often lose momentum quickly once initial enthusiasm fades. This pattern has been evident in contemporary digital-based protests such as the *Free Palestine* campaign (2023–2024) and Nigeria's *#EndBadGovernance* demonstrations (CIVICUS, 2024).

In Nigeria, empirical research on non-violent change reveals a complex landscape of civic activism and state resistance. Studies by Adeleke (2012) and Ibeanu (2020) illustrate how advocacy-led efforts, such as the campaign for the Freedom of Information Act (2011) and the Electoral Act (2022), achieved legislative success through persistent non-violent lobbying and coalition-building. Similarly, the *Occupy Nigeria* protests of January 2012, analysed by Okafor (2013) and The Guardian (2012), demonstrated how strikes and public assemblies can reverse unpopular economic policies. The nationwide mobilisation halted economic activities for a week, compelling the Federal Government to reinstate fuel subsidies partially, thus affirming the efficacy of coordinated non-violent disruption.

More recent empirical attention has focused on the *#EndSARS* movement of October 2020, one of the largest youth-led non-violent uprisings in Nigeria's post-democratic history. USIP (2021) and Amnesty International (2021) document that the protests were initially peaceful, with demonstrators demanding police reform, compensation for victims, and institutional accountability. Within ten days, the government disbanded the notorious SARS unit, an early policy concession attributed to the movement's moral legitimacy and civic

discipline. However, the Lekki Toll Gate massacre on October 20 2020, where security forces opened fire on unarmed protesters, exemplified the systemic risks faced by peaceful movements in militarised democracies (Amnesty International, 2021).

Parallel empirical cases include the 2024 *#EndBadGovernance* protests, which erupted nationwide over inflation, unemployment, and corruption. CIVICUS Monitor (2024) reported that at least thirteen protesters were killed, hundreds were injured, and dozens were detained. The Free Nnamdi Kanu protests of October 2025 also revealed persistent civic engagement, as demonstrators peacefully demanded compliance with court orders for the separatist leader's release (Associated Press, 2025; Reuters, 2025). These instances confirm that Nigerians continually resort to non-violent means to express grievances, despite recurrent repression.

In the labour sector, strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) represent institutionalised non-violent mechanisms of resistance. Vanguard (2025) and Punch (2025) reported that in October 2025, after the Federal Government invoked a *"no work, no pay"* policy against striking lecturers, the NLC retaliated with a *"no pay, no work"* ultimatum and threatened national industrial action. These cycles of peaceful confrontation demonstrate that non-violent change is deeply embedded in Nigeria's political culture, serving as a recurrent negotiation tool between the state and organised civil society.

2. Research Gaps

Existing research increasingly shows that the effectiveness of non-violent change depends less on moral appeal alone and more on organisational capacity, strategic adaptability, and engagement with institutions. Recent political science literature emphasises that successful civil resistance movements tend to combine broad-based participation with diversified tactics and sustained organisational infrastructure, especially under conditions of repression (Schock, 2023). However, studies of hybrid and semi-authoritarian regimes suggest that where states possess strong coercive capacity and weak accountability mechanisms, non-violent movements are more vulnerable to repression, fragmentation, and policy reversal (Kadivar, 2018). Nigeria's experience reflects these constraints. Despite large-scale mobilisations such as the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests and the 2020 #EndSARS demonstrations, state responses have frequently been characterised by militarised repression, limited institutional reform, and weak policy implementation, thereby interrupting the consolidation of protest gains into durable governance change (Amnesty International, 2021).
The Nigerian context therefore reveals a persistent gap between global civil resistance theory and practical outcomes in post-colonial African democracies. While global scholarship has largely focused on success or failure at the moment of regime concession or policy change, fewer studies have interrogated why many African mobilisations fail to translate protest victories into long-term institutional reform (Schock, 2023). Furthermore, most Nigerian-focused studies examine isolated cases such as #EndSARS, labour strikes, or fuel subsidy protests independently, without systematically comparing how different non-violent strategies protests, strikes, boycotts, advocacy and structured dialogue operate simultaneously under similar socio-political pressures. This has limited a holistic understanding of which methods generate deeper institutional effects and which remain merely episodic reactions within Nigeria's semi-authoritarian democratic structure, shaped by structural inequality, youth unemployment, and weak political trust (Ibeanu, 2020).

In addition, a clear theoretical–methodological gap exists in the integration of classical non-violence theories with contemporary Nigerian realities. While Gandhi's and Sharp's frameworks remain useful for understanding normative and structural dimensions of non-violent power, recent scholars argue that context-specific reinterpretation is necessary, especially in societies where security institutions operate with high autonomy and low

civilian oversight (Meléagrou-Hitchens & Brandon, 2022). Moreover, existing studies on Nigerian protests rely heavily on descriptive or single-case qualitative approaches, with limited deployment of comparative or mixed-methods frameworks capable of linking protest strategy with policy outcomes and state behaviour. This study addresses these limitations by conducting a comparative analysis of multiple non-violent forms in Nigeria, using a theoretically integrated framework grounded in Sharp's consent theory and Gandhi's non-violent democratic philosophy, while incorporating insights from recent civil resistance research. By doing so, it contributes to African peacebuilding scholarship by offering a context-sensitive model of how non-violent change can move beyond episodic disruption toward structural democratic transformation.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design based on documentary and content analysis of secondary data derived from peer-reviewed journal articles, authoritative books, reputable NGO and intergovernmental reports, official government documents, and credible archival media coverage. The study examined both global and Nigerian experiences of non-violent change in order to identify recurring patterns of success, failure, and strategic adaptation. The analysis was guided by Gandhi's Non-Violent Democratic theory and Sharp's Consent theory of power, which provided the conceptual lens for interpreting how different forms of non-violent action align with moral and strategic principles of peaceful transformation.

To enhance methodological rigour, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Included materials satisfied the following conditions: they focused on non-violent movements, civil resistance, or protest politics; were published between 1990 and 2023 to ensure contemporary relevance while retaining historical grounding; were produced by peer-reviewed academic outlets, recognised international organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group and United States Institute of Peace, or reputable government and institutional sources; and directly analysed cases of non-violent action either in Nigeria or in comparable political contexts. Materials were excluded if they were opinion pieces without empirical or analytical grounding, contained unverifiable claims, lacked institutional or scholarly credibility, were purely speculative commentaries, or focused exclusively on violent insurgencies without reference to non-violent movements. This helped to maintain analytical accuracy and relevance while reducing the risk of dataset contamination by low-quality or non-scholarly sources.

Using thematic coding and triangulation techniques, the study systematically organised the selected materials around key analytical categories including forms of non-violent action, state response, movement strategies, and policy outcomes. Triangulation allowed for cross-validation across multiple source types, including academic literature, NGO reports, and media documentation (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2018). No primary data collection was undertaken; instead, the study relied on interpretive qualitative synthesis to capture the complexity of civic resistance dynamics in Nigeria's democratic landscape. This approach is consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2018) qualitative research design framework, which emphasises contextual depth, analytical transparency, and methodological coherence in documentary-based studies.

Findings and Discussion: The Most Viable Form of Non-Violent Change for Nigeria

Drawing from the preceding analyses, it is evident that no single method of non-violent change guarantees success in isolation. Successful movements are typically adaptive and multi-layered, combining moral persuasion, civic mobilisation, and economic disruption (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Within Nigeria's contemporary context, mass civil resistance, a coordinated blend of peaceful street protests, strategic non-cooperation, and nationwide strikes, emerges as the most effective and context-appropriate form of non-violent change.

Such movements simultaneously project people's power through visible mobilisation and exert economic pressure on the state, compelling reform while preserving democratic order.

Historical Efficacy

Empirical evidence shows that non-violent campaigns are nearly twice as successful as violent ones in achieving major political change, with success rates of approximately 53 per cent versus 26 per cent, respectively (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Nigeria's historical experience reinforces this global trend. The *Occupy Nigeria* protests of 2012, which combined mass demonstrations with a general strike, forced the government to reverse its decision on fuel subsidy removal (The Guardian, 2012). Similarly, the *#EndSARS* movement in 2020 compelled the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad following nationwide protests (USIP, 2021). Earlier pro-democracy agitations during the 1990s also contributed to the collapse of military rule and the restoration of civilian governance in 1999 (Amnesty International, 2019). By contrast, isolated advocacy or elite negotiations often yielded minimal outcomes unless preceded by grassroots mobilisation. Electoral transitions alone have also proved inadequate in dismantling entrenched corruption and impunity. Hence, mass non-violent resistance provides a broader mandate for systemic change by engaging citizens directly beyond the ballot box (Pasiri, 2022).

Inclusive Participation and Legitimacy

Non-violent movements draw their strength from inclusivity. Protests, strikes, and boycotts transcend class and regional divides, legitimising collective demands. Research suggests that successful movements typically require the mobilisation of at least 3.5 per cent of a population to achieve irreversible political momentum (Chenoweth, 2020). While this benchmark is high, Nigeria's experiences, particularly *#EndSARS*, demonstrate that even partial national participation can trigger substantial policy responses. Millions of young Nigerians engaged in civic action for the first time, broadening democratic participation and redefining political accountability (United States Institute of Peace, 2021) Such inclusive engagement fosters national solidarity and moral legitimacy, ensuring that campaigns reflect citizens' collective will rather than sectional interests.

Pressure on Power Structures

Civil resistance exerts both moral pressure through mass mobilisation and economic pressure through strikes and boycotts. These tactics directly target the "pillars of power" legitimacy, resources, and institutional loyalty that sustain authoritarian behaviour (Sharp, 1973). The 2012 general strike illustrated how paralysing economic activity while sustaining peaceful street demonstrations created a dual-front crisis that compelled state concessions (The Guardian, 2012). Moreover, repressive responses to non-violent campaigns often backfire, diminishing regime legitimacy and inviting both domestic and international condemnation (Chenoweth, 2020; CIVICUS, 2024). The Lekki Toll Gate massacre of October 20 2020, exemplified this dynamic: global outrage following the shooting of peaceful protesters intensified scrutiny of governance and human-rights practices in Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2021).

Democratic Alignment and Reduced Risk of Escalation

Mass non-violent resistance aligns closely with Nigeria's constitutional guarantees of free expression and peaceful assembly (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, s. 39). By relying on persuasion rather than force, it strengthens rather than undermines democratic institutions. Violent uprisings, such as those in the Niger Delta during the 2000s, tended to fuel cycles of retaliation and insecurity (Ikelegbe, 2013), whereas peaceful agitations promote dialogue and negotiation. As Gandhi's theory emphasises, moral

discipline and self-restraint enable movements to maintain ethical high ground and sustain opportunities for reconciliation (Dalton, 2012). This approach reduces ethno-religious polarisation, fostering unity in a multi-ethnic society.

Inclusivity, Adaptability, and Movement Sustainability

Recent African experiences confirm that successful movements are adaptively capable of shifting from marches to stay-at-home strikes or digital advocacy as repression intensifies (Adese, 2025; Pasiri, 2022). Nigerian civic activism exhibits similar flexibility: from the 2012 fuel-subsidy protests to the *#EndSARS* and *#EndBadGovernance* movements, activists have effectively alternated between street actions and online mobilisation. Such adaptability preserves momentum, sustains safety, and keeps public attention focused on reform agendas. In contrast, strategies confined to elite dialogues or isolated advocacy seldom achieve systemic transformation without the catalytic force of popular mobilisation.

Addressing Counterarguments

Critics argue that policy dialogue, institutional reform, or litigation should take precedence over street activism. However, empirical evidence suggests that such efforts in Nigeria often yield results only after public mobilisation creates sufficient pressure for negotiation (Akinola, 2019). National conferences and judicial pronouncements have repeatedly stalled in the absence of civic enforcement. Furthermore, disciplined non-violent campaigns often turn repression into a strategic advantage, a process Sharp (1973) calls "political jujitsu," where state brutality against peaceful citizens provokes moral outrage, galvanising wider support. The aftermath of the Lekki shootings illustrates this principle, as sustained advocacy and judicial panels emerged directly from public indignation (Amnesty International, 2021).

Broad-based civil resistance anchored in peaceful protests, strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience constitutes the most viable form of non-violent change for Nigeria. It combines moral and economic leverage, aligns with democratic ideals, and has demonstrated measurable success in Nigeria's history. Advocacy and dialogue remain valuable but are most effective when complementing, not substituting, mass mobilisation. Sustained coordination, coalition-building, and disciplined adherence to non-violence are therefore critical for future movements seeking democratic reform and accountability.

Conclusion

Globally and domestically, evidence increasingly affirms the efficacy of non-violent civic action as a pathway to political transformation. For Nigeria, where recurrent governance failures, inequality, and repression persist, peaceful civil resistance offers a constructive alternative to Violence. By uniting citizens across ethnic and religious divides, it strengthens democratic legitimacy and fosters inclusive participation. The study concludes that organised, inclusive, and resilient mass civil resistance, reinforced by strategic non-cooperation and guided by Gandhian and Sharpian principles, represents Nigeria's most promising avenue for achieving lasting peace and accountable governance. However, this approach demands sustained civic education, organisational discipline, and institutional responsiveness to translate moral victories into enduring structural reforms.

Recommendations

1. Civil Society and Movement Organisers

Civil society organisations should prioritise capacity-building in non-violent mobilisation training activists in strategy, coordination, and de-escalation. Collaboration with international non-violent training bodies can enhance technical skills and movement resilience. Broad-based coalitions involving unions, youth, women, and faith leaders should be institutionalised to build legitimacy (Pasiri, 2022). Movements must maintain non-violent discipline, develop

contingency plans against repression, and employ digital security tools to preserve coordination (Dalton, 2012).

2. Nigerian Government and Security Agencies

Authorities should guarantee citizens' constitutional rights to peaceful assembly and expression (Constitution of Nigeria, 1999, s. 39). Security agencies must adopt human-rights-based policing and adhere to UN and African Commission guidelines on managing public assemblies (UN, 1990). Establishing permanent dialogue platforms between government and civil society will help institutionalise protest demands, prevent Violence, and build public trust (CIVICUS, 2024).

3. Media and Technology Platforms

Independent media should provide factual, balanced reporting on civic movements while exposing abuses of power. Following the precedent set by investigative coverage after the Lekki Toll Gate shootings, journalists should uphold ethical reporting and counter disinformation (Amnesty International, 2021). Social-media companies and telecom providers must resist censorship and ensure open communication channels during protests (USIP, 2021).

4. International Community

Regional and international actors ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations should extend diplomatic protection and technical support to peaceful Nigerian movements. Timely public statements can deter state repression, while funding for legal defence and cross-regional training programmes can strengthen local capacities. The Nigerian diaspora and global civil-society networks should amplify local voices and sustain transnational solidarity (Pasiri, 2022).

5. Educational and Religious Institutions

Educational and faith-based institutions should mainstream peace education and civic engagement, highlighting Nigeria's long history of peaceful resistance from the Aba Women's Protest (1929) to the Abeokuta Women's Union (1940s). Religious leaders can promote reconciliation, tolerance, and non-retaliation, using their moral authority to de-escalate tensions. Schools and universities should serve as hubs for civic dialogue and democratic training, nurturing a new generation of non-violent change agents.

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