

Focus

Police roadblocks and politics of sanitising highways

By Oditia Sunday

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Policeman on check point

Ordinarily, the sight of the Nigeria Police on the roads should, at every point in time, usher in the feeling of relief and the assurance that one's life and property are well protected. But incidentally, the contrary has been the case all over the country with

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uniform. Such abuse included bribery and extortion of motorists, notably the public transport operators; the shooting of innocent people and the unprofessional approach to pulling over vehicles or causing traffic jams and at times, accidents in a bid to arrest motorists.

It was in the bid to arrest this ugly situation that the then Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Abubakar, in March 2012, made a declaration banning all forms of roadblocks and checkpoints across the country. Road users and, indeed, Nigerians who were daily tormented by fierce looking policemen on the highways across the country then, greeted Abubakar's pronouncement with jubilation.



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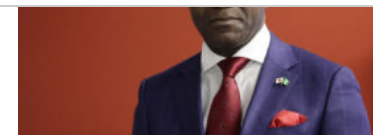
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Consequently, statistics were rolled out indicating the gains of the ban as reflected in reduction in the rate of aforementioned crimes associated with police roadblocks and checkpoints. Naturally, the average policeman resists change and anybody pushing for change is perceived as an adversary and often exposed to risk or targeted for retaliation.

Recently, the Inspector General of Police, Mr. Idris Kpotum Ibrahim renewed the call for a total ban on roadblocks on Nigerian roads as he ordered the dismantling of all roadblocks nationwide with immediate effect. However, the new vista might be embraced with cynicism since the same IGP told newsmen last week that the ban would not affect checkpoints.

The routes that are affected by the latest ban include Lagos-Ibadan, Sagamu-Benin, Benin-Onitsha, Okene-Abuja, Kaduna-Kano, Katsina – Kano, Otukpo – Enugu, and Enugu – Port Harcourt express ways. A statement issued in Abuja by Force Public Relations Officer (FPRO), Jimoh Moshood that fateful day, said the directives became necessary to enable ease of doing business in Nigeria, safeguard, and guarantee free passage of goods and travellers throughout the country.



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across the country must wear their uniforms, a bold nametag, and service number.

According to him, special x-squad teams of the Force have been deployed throughout the country with strict instructions to arrest, investigate and discipline any police personnel violating this directive.

Moshood said the IGP also directed the Assistant Inspectors General of Police (AIGs) in charge of zonal commands, commissioners of police in charge of state commands and heads of departments to ensure that every patrol vehicle in their respective formation carries a conspicuous and legible inscription of patrol vehicle identification number, and dedicated emergency phone numbers for ease of identification and report of distress by members of the public.

“The IGP has also directed the special x-squads to embark on removal of other forms of illegal blockage and obstructions on highways and roads, created by unlawful revenue/tax collectors, road transport unions, labour and trade-related unions inhibiting vehicular movement.”

But curious newsmen were shocked, last weekend, when the IGP told them during his visit to Lagos that the ban would not cover police checkpoint. According to Idris who spoke at the commissioning of office facilities for policemen at GRA, Ikeja, “There is difference between roadblocks and checkpoints. No policeman can ban police checkpoints. A roadblock is when policemen block roads. In the case of checkpoints, you can create a checkpoint for special purposes where vehicles suspected to have committed an offence can be stopped and checked.”

In March 2012, Mohammed Dahiru Abubakar, the then IGP declared that his directive on roadblocks would not be reversed. He had reasoned that the suggestions that roadblocks be returned to the highways because of robbery operations did not suffice, arguing that when the roadblocks were in place, crimes still took place on the roads

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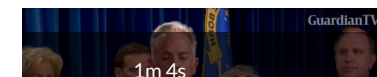
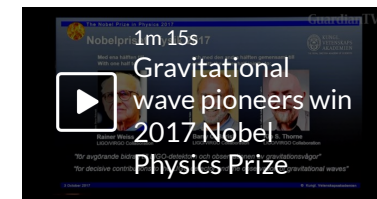
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defying Abubakar's directives for the dismantling of roadblocks across the country then. The officers were apprehended in different parts of the country for defying the order and setting up roadblocks to extort money and hinder free flow of traffic.

The police boss's hard stands against roadblocks earned him respect and accolades from various quarters. But there was a return to the old order, in full swing, in 2014 during the tenure of Suleiman Abba as IGP. Till recently when Idris reactivated the ban, the trend of police roadblock had become a huge source of worry to road users as the policemen would stop motorists demanding documents such as Driver's license, tinted glass permit, Insurance papers, MOT and others.

In Lagos, for instance, roadblocks were common scene along Murtala Muhammed International airport road, LASU-Iyana-Iba road, Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, Onipanu-Fadeyi area, Lagos-Benin Expressway, Isheri-Idimu road, Aswani road, among many others. Pundits are worried that policemen do usually not obey the ban.

According to a trader in the Southeast, "The IGP should not only make pronouncement, he should monitor to ensure his men obey. There should be more of patrols than mounting of roadblocks. The IGP should pay more attention to the Southeast where police checkpoints have persisted in spite of the ban. The police in the southeast zone have converted the zone into an occupied territory of conquered people."

Roadblocks mounted by policemen had also been fingered to be responsible for most accidents on the highways. A resident of Lagos told The Guardian that the sole aim of the policemen on roadblock is to extort people. It was also said that most Divisional Police Officers (DPO's) back these policemen who extort freely on the roads.

"Everyday, these policemen stop me to ask for my documents. If they couldn't fault your document, they would simply ask you, 'anything for the boys?' It is really embarrassing for a country like Nigeria "



you present the document they requested for, they would play another trick on you.”Unfortunately, extortion, in police parlance is corruption. At a police graduation ceremony in July 1998, former IGP, Ibrahim Coomassie warned the new officers against corrupt practices, and said he had ordered the removal of all police roadblocks. However, the culture of police roadblocks appeared to have been deeply rooted requiring strong political will to confront it. Coomassie’s successors – Musiliu Smith and Tafa Balogun – were not known to have made efforts to sustain the ban.

However, there was a change in paradigm under IGP Sunday Ehindero who was renowned for his slogan ‘Policing with Integrity’. Ehindero’s agenda was not only against roadblocks but also against all nefarious activities of all Nigerian policemen. The country has recorded incidences of policemen opening fire at innocent Nigerians who dare to query them while on roadblocks.

Notable cases, which had portrayed police checkpoint in bad light, included the killing of one Emmanuel Victor, a 20-year-old young man at a checkpoint in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State on October 16, 2011, for allegedly condemning the extortion and bribery at the checkpoint by three policemen on duty that day.

Another story was the killing on June 13, 2013 of nine year old Timilehin Ebun by some policemen while trying to extort money from a commercial bus whom in a bid to evade gratifying the policemen had them opening fire on him, which sadly was a stray shot that pierced through the Ebun family’s SUV, killing the young Timilehim, with other family members inside the vehicle.



Drunken policemen who staged roadblock at Falomo Bridge ten years ago killed schoolboys Nnamdi Ekwuyasi and his friend. The list is inexhaustible. But there are structural and institutional issues that must be addressed before any IGP, even if he or

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complainants and accused people for money to buy as simple a thing as stationery to record statements. Police rely on complainants to 'mobilize' them to investigate cases. And cases are usually resolved in favour of the highest bidder. Police have vehicles that they have to maintain and fuel but no funds. Often, when accused persons are unable to pay the bribe demanded by the police, they suffer abuse. Police abuse leads to public resentment. Lack of accountability for abuse leads to impunity. There is need to adequately fund, train, equip and motivate the police to perform effectively and to respect the human rights of the citizens. Government should dust up the reports of various reform committees and panel and implement genuine reforms, which will address most of these symptoms.

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