

Protests against police brutality in Nigeria amid economic catastrophe

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Nigeria has been hit by some of the largest protests in its history, as youth have taken to the streets in their thousands to protest police brutality.

The most populous country and largest economy in Africa has seen demonstrations by mainly young people in the capital Abuja, the port city of Lagos, Nigeria's commercial centre, and the south-eastern cities of Port Harcourt and Uyo against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS is the elite federal police unit whose name has become synonymous with extortion, kidnappings, grotesque abuses, and killings.

The unit, set up in 1992 to tackle rising violent crime, soon replicated the thuggery of the groups they were supposed to combat. Amnesty International has documented 82 alleged human rights violations by SARS across the country in the past three years, including hanging, mock execution, assault, and waterboarding. The squad operates with complete impunity. Most of its victims were young people between the ages of 18 and 35.

The protests have elicited support around the world from sports figures, celebrities, and other prominent figures—with the hashtags #EndSars and #SarsMustEndNow trending in multiple countries. Nigerian diaspora communities have rallied in sympathy in Atlanta, Berlin, London, and New York.

The protests were sparked by the killing of a young man in Delta State, in southern Nigeria, during a stop-and-search operation on October 3, although the police denied that SARS officers were involved. As the protests grew, demonstrators faced increasingly violent crackdowns from security forces which used tear gas, water cannon, and live ammunition, killing at least 10 people, according to Amnesty International. Dozens more have been arrested and remain in custody.

The family of 20-year old Jimoh Isiaq, one of those

killed during the protests, told *CNN*, “The bullet police shot hit his abdomen and came out from the back... His death is very painful. The protest was largely peaceful before the police fired that shot from the evidence we had gathered. We know the shots were fired by policemen stationed in Owode police station. We know the names of the officers that fired the shots. We are not short of evidence to prove police brutality.”

The scale of the demonstrations has forced the government to announce the disbanding of the squad and pledge to rein in the police. On Monday, President Muhammadu Buhari declared, “The disbanding of SARS is only the first step in our commitment to extensive police reforms. We will also ensure that all those responsible for misconduct or wrongful acts are brought to justice.”

Given the ferocity of the police's response to the mass demonstrations, these empty promises have done little to stop the protests from growing. The government has announced the disbanding of SARS on three previous occasions following similar protests—to no effect.

Protestors are demanding further action, including psychological evaluations for reassigned SARS officers and compensation for victims of police violence. Anuola, 26, told *The Guardian*, “First it's Sars and then it's the whole police system, because even with ordinary policemen and women we are not safe.”

The protests are also animated by the economic situation that has deteriorated even further in the wake of the pandemic, blaming the government for the soaring cost of living, rising unemployment, corruption, and economic mismanagement.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that Nigeria's economy, which is heavily dependent on its oil industry, will shrink by about 4.2 percent this

year, despite a 6.1 percent contraction so far.

In March, the government responded to falling oil prices by slashing petrol subsidies, fuelling mass opposition to wider budget cuts. The government also announced plans to cut health care spending at a time when the system is already under acute strain due to the pandemic, devalued its currency, and increased its borrowings from the IMF, which has led to soaring prices for everyday items.

Unemployment in Nigeria has surged to 27 percent, the highest in at least a decade. According to the World Bank, Nigeria has the largest number of people living in poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 79 million people considered extremely poor. Nigeria accounts for 20 percent of the total poor in the region.

Other estimates put the number of people living in poverty at even higher levels. The Nigeria Employers Consultative Association (NECA) estimates that 102 million people, or more than half of the population, are living in poverty, fuelled by a 10 percent rise as result of the pandemic.

The dire state of Nigeria's minimal healthcare system has resulted in doctors and nurses working without proper personal protective equipment (PPE), leading to more than 2,000 health worker infections. There have been several strikes and walkouts by doctors and other healthcare professionals that were isolated and sold out by trade unions, working hand in glove with the government, amid mounting struggles by oil workers, miners and public sector workers.

The federal government in Abuja also faces unrest and conflicts in several regions that threaten the breakup of the country. The brutal methods used by the security forces to suppress them have only served to deepen opposition to the Buhari government and spawn the rise of civilian vigilante self-defence groups.

The decade-long insurgency by Islamist jihadist groups in the largely Muslim north-eastern states has killed nearly 30,000 people, displaced 2.6 million and left nearly 22,000 people missing. In the last few days, Turkey's Anadolu Agency reported that at least 14 farmers were killed by Boko Haram after they seized farms in Borno State, the epicentre of the insurgency. The Nigerian military reported that 18 people—four soldiers, 10 police officers and four civilians—had been killed in an ambush on a government convoy.

The deteriorating situation has allowed splinter

groups of Boko Haram to gain a foothold in the region. Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Group of Partisans for Muslims in Black Africa), known as Ansaru, that was active in the north-west of Nigeria between 2011 and 2014, has made a resurgence. Other Boko Haram offshoots, notably the Islamic State in West Africa Province, have also arrived in the area.

The north-west of the country has seen a burgeoning insurgency with more than 8,000 killed and 200,000 internally displaced, while another 60,000 have fled to neighbouring Niger. Armed groups, spurred on by a burgeoning small arms trade and fierce competition over water and land resources between the Fulani herders and mainly Hausa farmers, have proliferated—engaging in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery. Their attacks on villages that have destroyed crops and livestock have further impoverished people living in the region. These armed groups have spread into several states, reaching as far as North Central Nigeria.

This is in addition to the long-running discontent and militancy in the Niger Delta, the oil-producing region.

Under these conditions, the government has turned to ever more repressive methods and state agencies, including police squads and militarised security forces that terrorise the population. As the demonstrations and rallies continue nationwide, Nigeria's army, which has been repeatedly accused of human rights abuses, declared on Wednesday it was ready to maintain law and order and deal decisively with any situation created by "subversive elements and troublemakers."

As instruments of class rule, these forced are tasked with upholding class exploitation by the kleptocracy that rules Nigeria—a country rich in oil, agricultural products, and other resources. As opposition mounts to the staggering growth of inequality and the ruling elite's criminal response to the pandemic, the Buhari government is seeking to abrogate democratic rights and crush social opposition from below to defend its massive wealth.



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