

Nigerian government clamps down on protests

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Ten of Nigeria's 36 states have announced 24-hour curfews, with Lagos State, home to the country's commercial hub Lagos with a population of 20 million, announcing an indefinite curfew.

It is one of a number of measures employed by the state to try and halt the growing anti-police brutality movement. Protests have raged nationwide against the government of President Muhammadu Buhari for nearly three weeks.

Groups of young men wielding machetes, clubs and weapons, widely believed to have been deployed by the government, have attacked the #EndSARS protesters, including in the capital, Abuja. There are reports that some prisoners were released from jail to attack protesters and property, terrorising people in Lagos. Such forces have traditionally been used as proxies for the police and army, as a means of denying responsibility.

On Wednesday, the government deployed riot police nationwide to put down the unrest, with gunfire widely reported.

These measures follow the government's deployment of soldiers to fire on peaceful protesters blocking the tollgate at the Lekki-Ikoye bridge in Lagos on Tuesday. At least 12 people were killed, including two near the statehouse in Alhaua. The BBC reported more than 20 dead and more than 50 wounded. The protesters had been sitting down on the road, waving the Nigerian flag and singing the national anthem.

The deployment of Nigeria's army, which has been repeatedly accused of human rights abuses, followed its announcement last week that it was ready to maintain law and order and deal decisively with any situation created by "subversive elements and troublemakers." The authorities initially denied there were any fatalities, while the army denounced reports of soldiers shooting protesters as fake news, further fuelling the uproar.

The next day there was a wave of attacks on police stations and public buildings across Lagos, including several banks, government buildings, the Oba palace—home to the city's traditional, ceremonial ruler—the Lekki Toll Gate and the headquarters of a TV news station. The news station is owned by a company linked to Bola Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos who is widely believed to have presidential ambitions.

The Tinubu family is believed to own the Lekki Toll Gate which has reportedly lost hundreds of thousands of dollars since the sit ins began. Some youths surrounded Tinubu's compound on Bourdillon Road in the wealthy Ikoyi district.

On Thursday, a BBC journalist reported hearing gunshots in the Surulere district of Lagos and saw tyres burning, while another journalist posted a video of a shopping mall on fire in the upscale suburb of Lekki, a few miles from the site of Tuesday's massacre.

The protests in Africa's most populous country started in early October after the killing of a young man by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), an elite police unit notorious for kidnappings, extortion, torture and killings. A recent report by Amnesty International documented 82 alleged human rights violations by SARS across the country in the past three years, including hanging, mock execution, assault and waterboarding, and concluded that the squad operates with complete impunity. Most of the victims were young people between the ages of 18 and 35.

The protesters, largely peaceful, are mainly young. They come from all layers of society, irrespective of ethnicity, tribal group or religion. Demonstrations have also taken place in the northern and predominantly Muslim part of the country. These testify to the class-based nature of the oppression they face at the hands of the police, whose task is to protect the private ownership of the means of production, including the country's oil resources and the wealth of the ruling elite.

The main political parties have played no role in the protests. Neither have the country's trade unions, reviled for their close collaboration with the government and their sell out of the 2012 mass movement and national general strike against President Goodluck Jonathan's slashing of fuel subsidies and increase in electricity tariffs. The National Labour Congress has failed to follow through with a single protest since Buhari came to power in 2015.

As the protests grew, demonstrators were met with increasingly violent crackdowns from security forces which used tear gas, water cannon and live ammunition, killing at least 10 people. Dozens more were arrested and are still in custody.

On October 12, Buhari pledged to disband the hated SARS

and implement “police reforms.” His repeat of several previous promises was widely viewed with scepticism. According to International Political Science Association’s World Internal Security and Police Index, Nigeria has the worst police force in the world.

SARS’s replacement with a new unit, the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) only inflamed the protests. SWAT is the name of the paramilitary police killing squads in the United States—a country synonymous with police brutality and killings. In the northern, mainly Muslim part of the country, state governors opposed the disbanding of the SARS.

As videos circulated globally on social media, the protests elicited support around the world from sports figures, musicians, writers, celebrities and other prominent figures, while Nigerian diaspora communities have rallied in sympathy in Atlanta, Berlin, London and New York. On Wednesday, hundreds of people marched and protested outside the Nigerian High Commission in London, which is home to around 250,000 people of Nigerian origin. More than 210,000 people have signed a petition calling on the UK to sanction the members of the Nigerian government and police force for human rights abuses over the #EndSARS movement. Petitions must be considered by parliament once they reach 100,000 signatures.

In contrast, the response of Africa’s leaders and the imperialist powers has been to remain silent or issue pro forma statements urging Buhari to respect the right to peaceful protest, condemning the violence and calling for the Nigerian authorities to investigate the killings.

Far from disbanding, protesters have broadened their demands. They have called for an immediate release of all protesters, justice for all deceased victims of police brutality with appropriate compensation for their families, the establishment of an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct, the retraining of all disbanded SARS officers before their redeployment and increased salary for the police under the hashtag #5for5.

The protests are being fuelled by widespread anger over poverty, inequality and mass unemployment. Around 102 million people, more than half of the population, are living in poverty—a 10 percent rise following the pandemic and the collapse in the demand and price of oil. The official rate of youth unemployment in a country where half the population is under 19 years of age is now 35 percent and many graduates unable to find work are forced to migrate overseas. The mainly young and working-class Nigerians protesting are demanding an end to decades of corruption and mismanagement, with hashtags #EndBadGovernance, #BetterNigeria and #FixNigeriaNow being widely used.

Some are calling for Buhari, the 77 year old former general and military head of state from 1983 to 1985, to resign. Buhari originally took power in a military coup. Elected in 2015 and re-elected last year, he was backed by Washington as part of US

imperialism’s drive to consolidate its military and political domination over Africa. His predecessor, President Goodluck Jonathan, had increasingly come into conflict with the US, in part because of his moves to open Nigeria’s oil and gas industry to Chinese investment.

Buhari moved swiftly to implement measures that signalled his willingness to work closely with the US, militarise Nigeria under the guise of fighting Boko Haram and other Islamist groups operating in north eastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, and reassert control over its energy resources. The brutality of the armed forces has only strengthened a growing insurgency against the federal government in Abuja.

Buhari himself has remained almost invisible during the crisis, apparently hoping the protests would die down. He finally appeared briefly on television yesterday evening to appeal to the protesters to stop demonstrating and engage with the government. As a former general who has taken and lost power in military coups, he also has his eye on the military.

Colonel Sagir Musa, spokesman for the army, which has a long history of intervening in Nigeria’s political affairs, said it was prepared to intervene in support of the “democratic government”. This gave rise to suspicions that there was a faction within the military and the Department of State Security with its own agenda. Chief of Army Staff General Tukur Yusuf Buratai has remained silent as the crisis has escalated, even as the army intervened.

The end of police brutality and countering the threat of another military dictatorship requires an international struggle against capitalism. That struggle can only be successfully waged by a working class unified across racial, ethnic and religious lines and across national borders in a struggle for socialism.



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