

Nigerian government goes on offensive against youth protesting police brutality

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The government of President Muhammadu Buhari has launched an all-out offensive against people who played a prominent role in the weeks-long nationwide rebellion against police brutality.

The crackdown follows the brutal suppression of the #EndSARS protests—the most widespread in decades—that led to the deaths of 69 people and the wounding of hundreds across the country.

It is aimed at intimidating and criminalising peaceful protests and media reporting in the interest of Nigeria's kleptocrats and the transnational energy corporations that have looted the country's wealth.

Some 1,500 people have been arrested, some in Gestapo-like operations. Detainees include a number of activists and journalists arrested in the capital Abuja who face charges of criminal conspiracy, unlawful assembly, inciting public disturbance and public nuisance. Others have been arrested for managing a WhatsApp platform to coordinate the protests in Osun State, while an artist who had played a prominent role in the protests in Lagos and was planning another protest, was seized at his home and thrown into jail.

Pelumi Onifade, a 20-year-old reporter with Gboah TV who was arrested and wounded by the Lagos State Task Force on October 24, was found dead two weeks later. Wearing a jacket clearly identifying him as a reporter, he had been filming clashes between protesters and the Task Force.

Having set up panels of inquiry into the well-founded accusations of systematic intimidation, extortion, kidnapping and murder by the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) as a means of placating the protesters, the government is using them as a means of harassing and intimidating activists.

Two youth panelists have boycotted the hearings after one of them had his bank account frozen by Nigeria's Central Bank, which has frozen the accounts of at least 20

activists involved in the protests as well as six financial institutions, alleging they are involved in "terrorism financing." While protest organisers have sued the central bank to have their accounts unfrozen, they are unlikely to get a speedy court decision.

The authorities at Lagos's international airport seized the passport of Moe Odele, a lawyer who arranged free legal aid for protesters and is involved in the defence of Eromosele Adene, a musician who helped organise protests in Lagos and was released on bail after being held for 11 days without charge. Prevented from travelling, Odele was only given her passport back a week later after a public outcry.

Other high-profile activists have reportedly gone into hiding or left the country. Those targeted include journalists and the broadcast media. Gatefield, a communications firm based in the capital Abuja, had an account dedicated to funding independent journalism frozen. Adewunmi Emoruwa, lead strategist at Gatefield, accused the government of clamping down on the protest movement and instilling fear, saying "The instruments of state are being weaponised in unprecedented ways, especially the [central bank], which should be highly independent and steer clear of political issues such as this."

Police are also clamping down on gatherings, banning a symposium on the "lessons and tasks" of the #EndSARS movement that the family of the late internationally renowned Afrobeat musician and activist Fela Kuti had planned to hold at their music venue, the New Afrika Shrine, in Lagos.

The protests in Nigeria, with a population of over 206 million and Africa's largest economy, started after a video clip of the killing of a young man by SARS went viral. Taking their cue from the mass worldwide protests against the police murder of George Floyd in the US, Nigeria's youth—the country's median age is 19—took to

the streets. United across ethnicities, tribal groups, and religions, they attracted support from the Nigerian diaspora throughout the world.

The government's pledge to replace SARS with a new unit, the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), only inflamed the protests. Last month, it emerged—after initial denials—that the UK, the former colonial power whose Shell Oil company has major investments in the Niger Delta, had in 2019 provided training and equipment for Nigeria's police and security forces, widely recognized as one of the worst in the world. The program was organized through the Foreign Office's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), whose funding comes from the Department for International Development's so-called "aid" budget.

What began as an outcry against the widespread brutality of the police and security forces soon turned into a mass protest against rampant corruption, banditry, organised crime syndicates and the government's economic mismanagement and mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic.

The military's firing of live ammunition at peaceful protesters blocking the toll gate at the Lekki-Ikoye bridge in Lagos on October 20, killing at least 12 people and wounding 50, further inflamed tensions. The protesters had been sitting down on the road, waving the Nigerian flag, and singing the national anthem.

The protests continued in defiance of curfews, with crowds setting fire to police stations, banks, TV and media buildings and government offices. Shopping malls and government food warehouses storing food were looted amid widespread accusations that federal government officials had misappropriated pandemic relief funds and were hoarding food for their families and friends.

The authorities have announced their intention of introducing some form of censorship of social media following the worldwide spread of images, videos, and an Instagram live feed of the deadly shootings at the Lekki toll gate. Information Minister Lai Mohammed said that "fake news" was one of the biggest challenges facing Nigeria and that "the use of the social media to spread fake news and disinformation means there is the need to do something about it."

Mohammed has also threatened to sanction CNN, the US cable news network, over its investigative report into the shooting of protesters by soldiers at the Lekki Tollgate, Lagos, accusing the network of disseminating false news and disinformation. He denied that the soldiers

had fired at the protesters, contradicting a previous statement denying the soldiers' presence at the tollgate. While he did not specify what action the government would take, his silence was assumed to mean that the government would revoke CNN's broadcasting license, sparking outrage across the country.

CNN defended its reporting, saying it was carefully and meticulously researched and based on statements from dozens of witnesses and verified footage of soldiers shooting in the direction of protesters.

These measures signal that Nigeria's ruling elite will use every possible means to silence and suppress workers and youth who face social misery and hunger as food prices soar. The official rate of unemployment is 27 percent, amid falling oil revenues and the pandemic-induced recession. Major food items cost significantly more than a few months ago, with a 50kg bag of rice that used to cost ₦26,000 now costing ₦32,000 and onions quadrupling in price, which the government has blamed on the protests and looting. At the same time, the government has increased the price of fuel and electricity, even as power cuts are the norm not the exception.

Average annual income is just \$2,000 in this oil rich country. Public education, with high user co-payments, is in an appalling state. Health care is virtually non-existent as the COVID-19 pandemic grows and yellow fever has made a comeback, with more than 70 people dying of the disease since September, compared to 47 throughout the whole of 2019.

Similar conditions of poverty and police brutality are replicated across the continent, with protest hashtags trending in at least seven countries, including Congo, Zimbabwe and Namibia, prompting the hashtag #AfricaIsBleeding. The sheer scale of the continent's young population—some 20 percent of Africans are between the ages of 15 and 24, few with any realistic prospect of a secure job and a decent future—testifies to the powder keg that is Africa.



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