

Tinubu government mobilises police and army to crush protests across Nigeria

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Young people have been taking to the streets across Nigeria since Thursday to protest the soaring cost of living, the removal of the electricity subsidy, high unemployment, and rampant corruption.

The protests, under the banner of #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria, are the fifth major action against the government since President Bola Tinubu, who has imposed a brutal austerity programme on behalf of Nigeria's creditors, came to power in a heavily disputed election in May 2023.

They have met a savage crackdown from the security forces, 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.

Amnesty International said that the security forces had killed 13—at least four of whom were bystanders—across Nigeria on the first day of the protests, with some Nigerian news outlets saying that at least 17 people have been killed, including in the federal capital Abuja and in Kano. It follows warnings that the authorities would impose restrictive conditions on the planned protests in Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria's largest city and commercial capital.

Police Chief Kayode Egbetokun had announced that the security agencies would “deal decisively” with anyone they considered a threat to public order. He accused protesters of trying to destabilize the country.

Military spokesman Major General Edward Buba said the army would intervene to forestall any protests that threatened to breach public order. He insisted that the military would not allow any repeat of the #EndSARS protests against police brutality in October 2020 that led to the deaths of 69 people and the wounding of hundreds across the country by government soldiers.

In Abuja, the federal capital, protests turned violent when police fired bullets and tear gas to stop protesters

marching on the city centre and satellite towns. Nigerian police said that nearly 700 protesters have been arrested across the country while nine officers have been injured by Saturday.

A journalist's car was hit by bullets and at least 50 journalists arrested. According to six journalists in Abuja who spoke to the AP news agency, the Department of State Service, notorious for its brutality, had dispatched hooded operatives to disperse the protesters and then fired gunshots at the journalists who were still at the national stadium. Nigeria is ranked 112th out of 180 countries in the latest World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders.

Hunger is by far the main issue. In Lagos, one of the placards read, “One day, the poor will have nothing else to eat but the rich oppressors.” Even though the protests there were relatively muted, there were armed police across the city, including in places far from the protest zones where there were no demonstrations.

The state governments of Kano, Jigawa, Yobe and Katsina imposed a 24-hour lockdown, banning people from leaving their homes on Friday, claiming “hoodlums” had hijacked the protests to loot and vandalise properties.

Borno state announced a 24-hour lockdown on Thursday night after anti-government protesters began marching in the state capital Maiduguri. According to police chief Egbetokun, this was because an “explosion” had killed four people within a crowd of protesters in Borno, while another 34 were “severely injured.” But on Wednesday night, a blast—believed to have been caused by the jihadist group Boko Haram—had killed 16 people at a teashop in the rural community of Kawori.

The government's crackdown followed attempts to pre-empt the demonstrations. Tinubu announced a hike in the national minimum wage from N30,000 to N70,000 (\$43) a month. This was far less than the N494,000 the trade unions had been calling for when they called off a general

strike after two days, with the lying claim that the government was considering N250,000 a month in June. He also promised the government would develop financial programmes to alleviate the impact of soaring prices and a falling currency.

Tinubu cynically announced that he would take just half his official salary. Given that he is one of the richest men in the country, that didn't cut much ice with Nigeria's unemployed. Neither did the offer by National Assembly members, some of the most highly paid legislators in the world who also receive additional and even larger sums that are not disclosed, to donate half their salaries to charity.

Tinubu mobilised some of the country's most senior imams, bishops, traditional leaders and retired military officers to intervene in a bid to forestall protests dubbed "Days of Rage" like those that had rocked Kenya and forced President William Ruto to abandon planned tax hikes and fire his cabinet last month. They warned that insurgents such as the Islamic State West Africa Province would try to take advantage of any instability in Nigeria.

None of this did anything to appease the youth who form the vast majority of Nigeria 222 million population and are unable to afford food, let alone education or find a job. Some 40 percent of Nigerians live in extreme poverty. The cost of food is so high and incomes so low that a staggering 37 percent of children in Nigeria are stunted (chronically malnourished or low height for age), more than half of them severely, while 18 percent of children suffer from wasting (acutely malnourished or low weight for height), half of them severely.

The protest organisers, NGOs and activist organisations, had called on social media for 10 days of street demonstrations starting August 1. Their demands, 19 in total, include: an end to inflation now running at 34 percent, jobs, increased security amid a rise in kidnappings for ransom, a reduction in government costs and electoral, judicial and constitutional reform.

These conditions have been exacerbated by Tinubu's removal of the fuel subsidy, introduced decades ago because despite being a major oil producer, Africa's largest, Nigeria has little oil refinery capacity. The removal of the subsidy, with 75 percent of Nigeria's electricity supply coming from diesel and petrol-powered generators, tripled the cost of fuel, putting electricity and transport out of reach and driving up manufacturing costs. In addition, after the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) floated the naira, previously pegged to the US dollar, to encourage foreign investment in the country, the currency

fell by 70 percent, fuelling inflation. The CBN has raised interest rates to an unprecedented 26.25 percent, pushing up the cost of debt servicing and eliminating any possibility of a social safety net.

Ethnic and religious conflicts have disrupted agriculture, including armed conflicts with jihadist groups in the northeast and Biafran separatists in the southeast, herder-farmer conflicts in north-central, the widespread operations of criminal gangs as well as kidnappings to extort a ransom. Nigeria, once a large net exporter of food, now imports some of its food products.

Nigeria is by no means unique. Similar conditions of poverty and police brutality are replicated across the continent that has seen youth-led mass protests and strikes in Kenya, Uganda, Senegal, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Algeria, Morocco and South Africa, as well as nine military takeovers in the past five years aimed at preventing the overthrow of the ruling elites.

The sheer scale of the continent's young population—some 60 percent are under 25 years of age, of whom few have any realistic prospect of a secure job and a decent future—testifies to the powder keg that is Africa.

Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo warned that Africa was staring at the abyss. Speaking in an interview with CNN affiliate *Citizen TV*, he said, "All over Africa, we are... sitting on a keg of gunpowder," adding, "There's virtually no exception (country) in Africa where the youth are not angry. They are unemployed... unempowered and they see nothing other than hopelessness." Obasanjo warned that "if no adequate attention is paid to the needs of the youth in Africa... it will be very ugly for all of us."



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