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Nigeria Goes on Offensive Against Youth Protesting Police Brutality

Young people staged the biggest anti-government uprising in a generation, triggered by relentless police brutality. Rattled, politicians are promising reforms, but using repressive tactics, large and small.



Protesters in Lagos last month. The demonstrations against police brutality had brought the country to a standstill.

By Ruth Maclean

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LAGOS, Nigeria — Nigeria's leaders have made a show of responding to the demands of a massive youth-led uprising over police brutality that recently brought the country to a standstill and captured global attention.

The government has commissioned panels of inquiry into police brutality, and the president promised to disband the notoriously abusive police unit known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, or SARS.

But at the same time, protesters say that the government is conducting a targeted campaign against people associated with the uprising in order to harass, impede and break up the movement — destroying any good faith the government had hoped to build.

“They are persecuting peaceful, and actually quite patriotic young people,” said Chidi Odinkalu, senior manager for Africa at the Open Society Justice Initiative.

Nigeria — Africa’s most populous nation — was turned upside down last month by an uprising that grew into the largest popular resistance the government has faced in years. The demonstrations began as an outcry against the SARS police unit, but evolved into a larger protest over bad governance.

The government has adopted a two-pronged strategy to try to put a stop to the uproar. It has tried to persuade people that it is listening to the protesters — commissioning panels of inquiry and announcing that SARS is being disbanded. But it is simultaneously using its power to repress and intimidate activists by throwing many people in jail, and harassing others in ways large and small.

One example of the government’s two-faced approach was on display last week in a packed hearing room in Lagos overlooking the ocean, where a panel was supposed to be holding a hearing on police brutality.

Two young activists had been invited to join the panel to represent the protesters. But the youth panelists boycotted the hearing because Nigeria’s Central Bank had just frozen a bank account belonging to one of them, claiming it was linked to terrorists. In recent weeks, at least 20 activists and organizations have had their accounts frozen by the Central Bank.

“How can I be asking as a citizen of my country for better government, for an end to police brutality,” said Bolatito Olorunrinu, one of the youth panelists, a 22 year old student at Lagos State University, “and my government turns around to tag me a terrorist? It’s saddening.”

Warned of threats to their safety, some high-profile activists with the movement, known by the hashtag #EndSARS, have gone into hiding or left the country. There was a public outcry when Modupe Odele, a lawyer helping the protesters, said that her passport was confiscated at the airport. She says was prevented from traveling, but recently was given her passport back.

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The country’s top police official said earlier this month that his officers had arrested over 1,500 people during and after the protests suspected of taking part in violence.

The government has moved to use its authority to shut down the movement. Lagos, Nigeria’s biggest city, banned demonstrations. Powerful state governors in the country’s north last week called for censorship of social media, which had played a decisive role in mobilizing the marches.

Like the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, #EndSARS was triggered by viral videos of police brutality that documented a decades-long pattern of violence. And similar to the protesters behind the Arab Spring, young people used social media to coordinate protests on a scale that frightened authorities accustomed to being in control.

These days, Muhammadu Buhari is Nigeria's democratically elected civilian president. But in the 1980s, he was the country's military ruler, with a fondness for discipline — famously forcing civil servants late to work to perform frog jumps.

Despite trying to reassure young people last month that their voices had been heard “loud and clear,” his pronouncements have come across as highhanded and disingenuous. Nigerians are wary that his authoritarian tendencies, his General Buhari side, is showing through.

On Oct. 20, the military was deployed to the site of a long-running peaceful #EndSARS protest in Lekki, an affluent area of Lagos, shortly after sunset. Floodlights were turned off. Then the soldiers began to shoot.



A demonstration outside of Alausa, a government building in Lagos, after the governor of Lagos State declared a 24-hour curfew.

It is still not known how many people died that night, though a popular disc jockey who broadcast the shooting live on her Instagram — Obianuju Catherine Udeh, known as DJ Switch — said she saw at least 15 dead bodies, and that security forces took them away. Amnesty International said police and soldiers killed at least 12.

Abuses by Nigerian security forces are nothing new. In the northeast, home to the terrorist group Boko Haram, women have been raped by soldiers and babies and children locked up. In the capital, Abuja, and the nearby city of Kaduna, minority Shiite protesters have been killed.

But #EndSARS had attracted social media influencers, musicians, Nollywood actors and reality TV stars. The Lekki incident drew international condemnation, including from President-elect Joseph R. Biden and Beyoncé.

“It’s one thing to shoot protesters in the relative backwaters of Kaduna,” said Mr. Odinkalu. “It’s another thing to shoot protesters under the clear gaze of upmarket Lagos. The political ramifications are higher.”

The Lekki shooting was one of the things the Lagos inquiry has been investigating, before it was boycotted over the frozen bank account. Adesina Ogunlana, a lawyer who appeared at the hearing and said that he represented the #EndSARS movement, compared the Lekki shootings to tinko, a kind of Nigerian sun-dried meat. “Looks small. But when you put it in your mouth and chew, it gets bigger. Gets bigger. Gets bigger,” said Mr. Ogunlana, who carried a well-thumbed copy of Malcolm Gladwell’s “David and Goliath” to the hearings last week, and nibbled bitter kola to fortify himself.



A demonstration outside the Nigerian High Commission in London last month. The #EndSARS movement had garnered international attention on social media.

Lekki was just one case of abuse, “but it involves the military, it involves the Lagos state government,” he said. “And of course it involves thousands and thousands and thousands of young Nigerians.”

At the Lagos inquiry last month, the panel listened to a businessman testify that in 2018, SARS police threw him from a two-story building, breaking his spine. They heard a father of five describe having been tortured for 47 days by SARS operatives accusing him of theft.

Lawyers who have worked on many such cases are unable to name a single case in which a perpetrator in the security forces has been disciplined or prosecuted.

Where it can, experts say, the government has gone after #EndSARS protesters instead. But this has not been straightforward, because the movement has few easily identifiable leaders.

“There is no oga,” or big boss, said Jola Ayeye recently on the popular podcast she co-hosts.

As the #EndSARS protests waned, word began to spread that state governments were hiding food donated by some of Nigeria’s wealthiest individuals, which should have been distributed to its poorest to sustain them during the pandemic lockdown.

Many Nigerians suspect that governors had been holding onto the supplies in order to hand them out when they were in need of political support.

This sent more waves of people into the streets across the country. Crowds of people broke into warehouses, carrying off sacks of rice and cartons of noodles. In some places, people destroyed property.



Police fired tear gas at a crowd of people looting a warehouse that had food supplies that were not distributed during lockdown in Abuja.

Then came arrests.

“They just rounded up people on the streets with no evidence, no anything. Lots of people in jail,” said Yemi Adamolekun, executive director of *Enough Is Enough Nigeria*, a nonprofit promoting good governance and accountability. “Police brutality has increased significantly.”

Now that the protests have ended the streets are pretty much back to normal.

In Surulere, an old suburb of Lagos, traffic jams have replaced the crowds of demonstrators flapping the national green and white flag. Hawkers are back outside the market, selling strings of mock coral beads and books promising the secrets to amassing great wealth. Residents are no longer terrified of venturing out lest they catch a bullet.

But in a country where mostly older, wealthy men govern a population with a median age of 18 and an average annual income of \$2,200, now that the youth have discovered the power of their protest muscle, they say they very well might use it again.

“You never can tell what is going to trigger another protest,” said Ariyo-Dare Atoye, the convener of the Coalition in Defence of Nigerian Democracy and Constitution.

“People will have justification to do it again,” he said, because the government has been given enough time to respond to the issues.