

# Nigeria's #EndSARS Protests Aren't Just Opposing Police Brutality — They're Opposing Neoliberalism

Friday 27 November 2020, by [HUSAINI Sa'eed](#), [JACOBS Sean](#), [SHOKI William](#) (Date first published: 18 November 2020).

**The #EndSARS movement has convulsed Nigeria for weeks, demanding an end to police brutality. But the protesters have something else in their crosshairs: the unequal, austerity-ridden status quo and the political class that defends it.**

In October, protests erupted in Nigeria calling for the government to #EndSARS, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. The federal policing unit was established in 1992 to respond to a wave of crime in Nigeria's large cities, like Lagos and Abuja. But as time went on, the plainclothes police were accused of harassment, torture, and extrajudicial killings, mirroring the gangs they were supposedly meant to be targeting and brutalizing Nigeria's urban youth in particular.

On October 11, in a concession to the historic protests, Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari announced he would disband SARS. But the youth-led demonstrations have persisted, and [despite government repression](#), the movement has come to represent not simply a challenge to police violence, but a [deeper frustration](#) with the unequal, austerity-ridden, neoliberal status quo and the political class defending it.

Late last month, as part of the [new video series "AIAC Talk,"](#) *Africa Is a Country's* Sean Jacobs and William Shoki spoke with [Sa'eed Husaini](#), a *Jacobin* contributor and Lagos-based socialist activist, about the roots of SARS in neoliberal "structural adjustment programs" and how the historic protests are upending assumptions about what's politically possible in Nigeria. Their conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

**WS** | Before we get to the protests, can you give us some background on the police in Nigeria?

**SH** | The critical point when we're talking about SARS specifically is the late '80s and the early '90s. This is the period where structural adjustment programs were introduced in Nigeria, where Nigeria was undergoing quite a dramatic economic decline. And it's a period where crime became quite widespread, particularly in urban areas.

There was quite a bit of public outcry demanding more forceful policing methods. It was not uncommon throughout the period of military dictatorship, but particularly in the 1990s, to see dramatic acts of "extra-judicial justice," such as police harassing people in the street and public executions on Bar Beach (a formerly public beach park in Lagos). So it's out of that context SARS emerges: an authoritarian government responding to this wider desire for some order in the midst of political and economic insecurity and turmoil.

Since then, there has been a lot of resistance to SARS — this isn't the first time we've seen protests specifically calling for its disbandment. But we never had any concrete indication that this unit was over and that more fundamental police reforms were going to be enacted.

Rather, we continued to see SARS snatching up people, young people in particular, and putting them through all sorts of very violent, or at the very least extremely embarrassing, experiences. This led up to the particular case in [Delta State](#) in early October, which went viral and contributed to the most recent wave of protests.

**WS** | What you're describing seems to mirror a global trend in 1980s and '90s: a crime wave broke out and political leaders started talking tough on crime and emphasizing how social disorder was primarily the responsibility of individual communities, completely disconnected from questions around political economy. Was Nigeria caught in this global trend, or was it mostly a localized response?

**SH** | It's a good question. Obviously, governments learn from each other, and there was a lot of circulation of ideas in that period around how you structure an economy, how you deal with issues of crime and policing.

But I think a lot of it was local. There was domestic demand for more forceful forms of policing, particularly in the midst of a military dictatorship that initially was very popular. I think that's something we shouldn't shy away from: the reality that there is a domestic constituency for a very forceful exercise of state power — conservative, some would even say fascist, forms of state power.

What makes the current protests particularly interesting is that it has unified people across the class divide, because a lot of the initial agitation for a much more forceful imposition of law and order tended to target people who were perceived to come from communities that were producing the criminals: the people on the urban margins, primarily ethnic minorities or religious minorities.

So to see unity across class lines, and certainly across religious or ethnic lines — this is what's new and what makes me feel quite hopeful.

**SJ** | Your point reminds me of a piece you wrote a while back, where you noted the existence of right-wing movements and constituencies in Africa. It's definitely a global phenomenon, but there was a localized manifestation of it and in some cases it predates what happened in the West.

But the question I wanted to ask you is, who is organizing End SARS? When we look at it from the outside, it seems to be lots of young people, sort of atomized. What kind of organization is there to it? How would you characterize what makes up the movement?

**SH** | We're still trying to wrap our heads around what has happened and what's happening. But despite End SARS being described as leaderless, there certainly are leaders of various sorts. At the protests I've gone to, there have always volunteers co-coordinating on the ground.

There have also been organizations coordinating a lot of the online activism. The [feminist coalition](#) seems to be one of the online organizing hubs, coordinating a lot of the fundraising for protests, the legal response, and helping direct ambulances and some of the security.

Aside from the new groups that emerged both online and offline, there are also movements that have been pushing to end SARS, or for various wider concerns, that stepped up. Before the protests kicked off, [Omoyele Sowore](#), who ran for president on the African Action Congress's ticket and has been the leader of the #RevolutionNow movement, tweeted the suggestion, that, hey, should we have a nationwide protest addressing this issue of police brutality? Who's with me?

There were a bunch of other people with large platforms online and offline, including celebrities like [Falz the Bahd Guy](#) and [Seun Kuti](#), who is a long-standing public opponent of police brutality and wider forms of oppression. So there were leaders of various sorts and even organizations of various

sorts that have been involved throughout the protest.

I think what distinguishes #EndSARS is that the variety of movements and figures didn't come together to form any umbrella organization or elect any leadership. There's a very interesting debate to be had about the strengths and weaknesses of that approach. It's an approach that we've seen in other contexts: the Occupy 2012 movements, to some extent Black Lives Matter, and perhaps FeesMustFall.

But it's raised important questions about how you organize a successful resistance to specific forms of state violence and wider forms of class oppression or economic exploitation in the absence of organized or structured forms of organization.

Personally, I'm quite optimistic that this conversation is actually being had, that we've come to the point where strategic questions are on the table for those who want to see a better Nigeria. That itself is progress from where we were even a couple months ago, when conversations around a progressive Nigeria seemed to get stuck on points like, Can that sort of organizing actually ever occur here? Can Nigerians ever organize across ethnic and religious lines? Can young people actually ever express an opinion, or are they not just caught within gerontocratic or authoritarian forms of order?

So the fact that we're at the point where we can have the conversation at the strategic level seems to me to be a hopeful one, and one we can certainly build on.

**WS** | One commenter asks the question, "What sorts of alternative visions and ideas about policing are emerging?"

One thing that has emerged out of the movement is a [list of five demands](#), which seems to express at least for now the extent of what protestors want. One thing that I found surprising about that list is they're saying, we should pay police officers better. That would seem like a jarring proposal if it came out of Black Lives Matter. So could you unpack some of these alternative visions that people are putting forward?

**SH** | This is one of the challenges of doing leaderless or structureless organizing: not all the various perspectives about alternatives to the status quo are necessarily given the same platform, or the process through which the demands of the movements are articulated is not necessarily a transparent one.

Nonetheless, it was quite amazing to see that in such a disparate and decentralized-seeming movement, any concrete agenda could emerge. The fact that a clear list of demands emerged and that it received support from a lot of the key figures leading it, and that even the government had to come out and say, yeah, we recognize these demands, they seem legitimate — that fact in itself, I think is worth saluting.

Aside from the five demands, there've been attempts by several left groups to articulate a wider vision of alternatives to the policing we've had here. Conversations around the abolition of police and the full spectrum of reforms are springing up in various protests.

There was an [article](#) that came out on *Review of African Political Economy's* blog that was raising these wider concerns, not only around what you do with policing specifically, but the economic questions that underlie security or insecurity: who exactly the state and police are protecting, and against whom.

So a lot of those conversations are at a very nascent state, and they weren't fully reflected in those

demands. But that is a direction I would anticipate the conversation going — something with more radical prospects.

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