

# **The Nigerian protests are about much more than police violence**

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**SARS's abuse reflects the moral bankruptcy of the system the corrupt Nigerian ruling elite has put in place.**

Those in Nigeria's halls of power must have been flummoxed when protests erupted in response to Inspector General of Police Mohammed Adamu's October 11 announcement that the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) would be disbanded. They had made the fatal error of thinking that the #EndSARS demonstrations were just about the police unit and suspending it would take care of the problem.

But the Nigerian youth know better. This was the fifth time in as many years that this thorny unit had been "reformed" or "disbanded" and it is abundantly clear that the government is not serious about tackling police violence. The scepticism of protestors proved justified, as on October 13 Adamu announced the creation of a new unit - Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) - to replace SARS.

By now, to anyone clued into Nigerian politics, two things are clear. First, the frustrations expressed in the streets of Nigerian cities, from Lagos to Port Harcourt to Abuja, are about far more than the crimes of a police unit. Second, Nigerian youth are rediscovering their power, picking up the mantle of the cultural and political resistance that in the past helped snatch the country back from the jaws of military dictatorship.

The SARS unit has come to embody some far deeper fissures in Nigerian society. Formed in 1992 to combat a wave of armed robberies and kidnappings, SARS was initially not a visible presence in Nigeria: its officers operated in the background without uniforms to catch violent criminals by surprise. The unit rapidly expanded in 2009 as the government sought to take on the rising tide of fraud and cultism on university campuses. But instead, it became the centre of consistent scandal, as officers indiscriminately used harassment and extortion against Nigeria's young people.

A worrying pattern of extrajudicial murders, kidnappings and rapes has emerged over the years. Amnesty International has reported at least 82 cases of torture, ill-treatment and murder at the hands of SARS between January 2017 and May 2020.

Tales of stray bullets killing bystanders as officers open fire in crowded markets abound. The protests have highlighted SARS crimes by amplifying the voices of victims' families, who have been seeking justice to no avail for years. They have also brought to the fore stories of SARS's daily harassment of ordinary Nigerians: searches of phones and vehicles without warrants, extortion of money, beatings, etc.

This culture of violence and wanton disregard for human rights within the unit did not emerge on its own. Rather, it reflects the moral bankruptcy of the system the Nigerian ruling elite have maintained in the country, as they have sought to enrich themselves illegally. SARS was just one of many police

units used to protect the criminally rich from the consequences of the extreme poverty that surrounds them.

Investigations by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) estimate that between 1960 and 2005, around \$20 trillion was stolen from the national treasury. According to Oxfam, while the five wealthiest Nigerians have a combined net worth of \$29.9bn, 112 million Nigerians continue to live in poverty.

Among the poor, however, are also the police officers tasked with protecting the rich. Their salaries are desperately low and paid irregularly.

According to a 2018 pay scale, a police sergeant made 582,000 naira (\$1,600) per year. By contrast, a senator's basic salary was over 750,000 naira (\$2,100) a month, in addition to an expenses allowance of 13.5m naira (\$37,500).

The same year, after a showdown with labour unions, the government increased the national minimum wage to 30,000 naira (\$83) a month – far below the 50,000 naira (\$138) that had been demanded.

Severe underpayment plagues the whole public sector, which has turned corruption and extortion into a means of supplementing unlivable wages for public servants. So long as the gross inequality exists, disbanding SARS is simply a case of moving the problem around, not resolving it.

This understanding is reflected in the #5for5 set of demands that have circulated widely online:

1. Immediate release of all arrested protesters.
2. Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families.
3. Setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct (within 10 days).
4. In line with the new Police Act, psychological evaluation and retraining (to be confirmed by an independent body) of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed.
5. Increase police salary so that they are adequately compensated for protecting lives and property of citizens.

The movement remains buoyant, in the face of physical and rhetorical attacks from the government. The authorities' suppression tactics of old are proving ineffective. The initial reaction – shooting into crowds, the use of water cannon and intimidation of protestors – has only served to prove the righteousness of the protestors' cause. A government that struggles to provide water to put out fires seems able to find enough water to use it against young people demanding the right to life.

So far, at least 10 people have been killed by police in the ruckus, but this has not discouraged protesters. In fact, it has motivated more people to join the demonstrations, and increased the pressure on civil society leaders to speak out. Over the past few weeks, we saw the Mothers' March and some of the country's most prominent pastors speaking out in support of the protesters, including Pastor Enoch Adeboye, general overseer of the five-million-strong Redeemed Christian Church of God.

Young people are still turning out daily in huge numbers to shut down the operations of major toll gates such as the Lekki-Ikoyi bridge in Lagos and roundabouts such as the Berger Junction in the Federal Capital Territory.

Mobilising on social media, protesters are raising funds to distribute supplies such as food, water

and raincoats to the front lines, with an efficiency that has shamed the government's failed attempts to distribute supplies at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite a budget of 36.3 billion naira (\$95.2m)

The movement is being supported financially not only by the large diaspora and Nigeria's biggest stars, but also by foreign celebrities, such as American rapper Noname. Major recipients of funds, such as the Feminist Coalition, have set up transparent reporting on how the money is spent. Twitter personality FK Abudu has also set up a response line for protesters seeking support and has put a remarkable effort into coordinating lawyers and ambulances to help the detained and injured.

Nigerian youth are rediscovering a power that few suspected they had. The brutality with which pro-democracy movements were crushed as they arose periodically had produced a profound fear of challenging those in power. Everyone knew Nigeria is in a bad state, the corruption flagrant, the public services nonexistent, but to do something about it was unthinkable.

The history of Nigerian resistance to authoritarian rule was erased so effectively that when General Sani Abacha, who seized power shortly after the annulled 1993 election, died in 1998, many saw it simply as divine intervention.

The young people in the streets are making history, leading a struggle that is not that different from their parents' and grandparents'.

At the same time, these protests reflect the growing ingenuity of Nigeria's youth in the face of hardship. Tech, culture and enterprise have thrived despite the significant material and bureaucratic barriers. You would be hard-pressed to find a young Nigerian who is not trying to start a business – from food, to hair, to tech – while waiting for job opportunities to open up in the increasingly tough economic climate.

This entrepreneurial spirit has earned Nigeria the title of Africa's unofficial tech capital and it is being brought to bear in this struggle. For a leaderless movement, the swiftness and moral clarity with which the protestors have been able to counter disinformation has been striking. Although major Nigerian TV stations ignored the protest as they emerged, #EndSARS started trending globally almost immediately.

Thousands of young Nigerians were tweeting at major celebrities to build awareness and get solidarity. Drake, Diddy, Trey Songz and Jack Dorsey, among other celebrities, supported #EndSARS on social media.

In 2018, President Muhammadu Buhari claimed that Nigeria's youth want to "sit and do nothing, and get housing, healthcare, education free", sparking an outcry on social media under the banner #LazyNigerianYouths. It seems that this attitude, that the government does not owe its citizens anything, is coming back to bite.

As Seun Kuti, son of the late Fela Kuti, pointed out, the youth are but a reflection of the societies that produce them. He is right. Challenging the deference to power that has been instilled in them, Nigeria's youth are renaming themselves the Soro Soke (speak up) Generation. They have been forged through extreme hardships and despite this, in the face of violence and suppression, they fight to make Nigeria afresh for all Nigerians.

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