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Nigeria

# Spontaneous uprising in Nigeria

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV550 - November 2020 -

Publication date: Monday 16 November 2020

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**Seen from the outside, the uprising that has shaken Nigeria since 8 October came out of the blue. But given the overall political and economic situation in the country, it was only a matter of time and needed only one occasion to let the pent-up anger of the population take its course.**

## The occasion

In early October, a video from 3 October appeared in the social media documenting the shooting of a youth in the village of Ughelli in the southern Niger Delta by the paramilitary police force SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad). Although its authenticity was immediately denied by the government and the author was imprisoned, the video spread throughout the country at lightning speed via the social media. Starting on 8 October, initially peaceful mass protests began across the country under the slogan of the corresponding hashtag, "EndSARS".

SARS was founded in 1984 (not, as propagated by German media and also Wikipedia, in 1992). It makes sense that the same man was in government at that time Muhammad Buhari – with the difference that he was then the military dictator, but is currently serving his second term as democratically elected president. The police unit was designed to take targeted action against the escalating violent crime, especially in the greater Lagos area, the then capital, and was set up as a special unit of the criminal investigation department under the leadership of Fulani Kwajafa, a police commissioner at the time. Kwajafa, by the way, has now spoken out, asserting that today's SARS has nothing in common with that of the past and in the same breath expressing his regret at having founded the unit at all. He succinctly noted that it had become a bandit force.

SARS, like the Mobile Police, MOPOL (nicknamed Kill and run), is hated and feared because it steals, kills, imprisons and tortures for no reason. Amnesty International published a report in June listing 82 cases of torture, ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions by unit officers between January 2017 and May 2020. According to Amnesty, the victims are mainly young men between 18 and 25 from the poorer classes. It happens again and again that (civilian-clothed) SARS police officers, for example, pull young men with attractive smartphones into cars on the street, accuse them of theft, rob them, beat them up and then (in the best case) throw them out again.

Whether the case in the Delta was true or not is basically irrelevant: It was believed and thus the trigger for the protests, because everyone believed SARS to be such a disease for good reason and many have their own personal experience with it.

## The reasons

But the causes for the protests that spread like a conflagration within a few days in numerous states - most violently in the 20 million metropolis of Lagos - lie deeper. Due to the effects of the COVID pandemic and the constantly low oil price, the Nigerian economy has suffered severely and the already ridiculously small government aid measures for the poor majority of the population often did not get there (see below).

Nigeria's Naira has lost massively in value since the beginning of the year, and the prices for food, 60 % of which

must be imported at world market prices, have soared accordingly, in some cases by as much as 30 %. At the same time, many people lost their income during the nationwide lockdown in the summer, partly because companies did not continue to pay wages, and partly because the curfews also paralysed the informal sector.

Added to this was the widespread corruption, against which the protests were also directed, and the misappropriation of state funds.

## The protests

Starting on 8 November, mass demonstrations, road and toll blockades under the slogan "End SARS" took place in numerous urban centres, first in Lagos and the Niger Delta, then in the capital Abuja, but also in the north and southeast. The people, mostly younger people from all walks of life, did not let the imposed curfews stop them at first. With increasing duration, the protesters in Lagos, for example, also included the so-called area boys (loose groups of unemployed youths from the poorer quarters) and militancy increased. Road blockades were erected, police stations were razed to the ground, supermarkets were burned down, in Lagos the private house of the provincial governor was set on fire and the palace of the Oba (traditional ruler) of Lagos was stormed. In this context, warehouses were discovered and cleared, in which the food donations, that were actually intended for the poor population affected by the pandemic, were stored, and the contents were distributed in the streets. After the storming of the Oba Palace in Lagos, videos circulated showing that traffic policemen also helped themselves to the supplies taken from there. Of course, criminals also took advantage of the situation and there were numerous lootings, which caused most supermarkets to close down abruptly. In addition, at least two prisons were stormed, the inmates released and an airport blocked.

Interestingly, the demonstrators demanded not only the dissolution of SARS, but also an end to corruption and finally better pay for the police. Because everyone in Nigeria knows that the ordinary police officers are so badly paid that they have little choice but to keep their heads above water with bribes.

## The reaction of the government

After a few days it was clear that this was a truly spontaneous mass movement that could not be achieved by military means alone. The protests met with unanimous support from the masses of the population. Nigerians from all walks of life expressed their sympathy for the author, especially with regard to the storming of the aforementioned warehouses, but also with regard to the attacks on the police stations. And the uprising was also supported by broad sections of the young people from the middle class, who were shaken by the Corona and economic crisis, which made it impossible for the government to label the whole thing as the action of criminals.

As a result, the ruling class took the initiative and decided to adopt a carrot and stick strategy: on the one hand, strict curfews were imposed in many cities and regions and the military was sent out into the streets, leaving at least 69 dead when the fire was opened on the demonstrators. On the other hand, President Buhari addressed the population in a long speech, announcing that he would meet the movement's essential demands. He said that SARS would be dissolved with immediate effect (while at the same time a new force was set up and SARS members were merely transferred to other areas), a police reform was initiated, including better pay, and a fund was established to support unemployed youth. In addition, the governors of 13 states announced committees of inquiry into police brutality.

# The Achilles' heel of the movement

The protests subsided after a few weeks, for several reasons. For one thing, no one in Nigeria can afford not to make money in any way over a long period of time and instead demonstrate. Secondly, the government's military measures had an effect. Almost no one else believed the government's promises; they were seen for what they were: delaying tactics.

But the biggest problem was the lack of a political leadership that could have bundled the demands and transformed them into coordinated action. It was an essentially spontaneous and uncoordinated movement; a political force capable of making it really politically effective does not exist and is not in sight at the moment.

The dissolution of SARS and the undeniable fact that both the central government and the state and local governments have been clearly frightened by the force and suddenness of this outbreak of collective anger remain as a success. After the uprising is in this case before the uprising, because there was no defeat. The state leadership is also aware of this. The President of the Senate, Dr. Ahmed Lawan, warned in a statement on 11 November: "We have survived this "EndSARS" protest - we might not be able to survive another one".

*14 November 2020*

*PS:*

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