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Nigeria

#EndSARS rebellion, repression & resistance in Nigeria

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Scores of thousands of young people took over dozens of cities and towns in Nigeria for two weeks. This rebellion, with the slogan and hashtag #EndSARS, was sparked by the reported killing of a young man by the special anti-robbery squad (SARS), in Ughelli, a town in the Niger delta region on 3 October.

With each passing day, the supposedly “leaderless” movement waxed stronger. And while #EndSARS remained the primary and binding demand, calls for more radical measures to #EndInjustice increasingly gained support within the ranks of protesters. The regime’s efforts to break the movement with guile and attacks by its hired hands failed. In desperation, it called in the troops on 20 October to smash the major demonstrations in Lagos, the commercial capital.

According to Amnesty International “at least 12 peaceful protesters” were killed in the two major protests that day alone. The figures are probably much higher. According to protesters, soldiers carted away dozens of bodies. The immediate response of the army and top government officials was to describe the massacre as “fake news”. Forced by evidence to recant, they continue with attempts at cover-up on the one hand and repression on the other. The fires of the #EndSARS movement appear to have simmered down by November, but looming clouds of revolts are heavy over the country.

While the government continues to pursue neoliberal policies, the rebellion and repression in October have reawakened a popular spirit of resistance.

Background of the rebellion

The special anti-robbery squad personified the bestiality of the police. From 1984, local police commands had anti-robbery squads. But in 1992 these were condensed into one elite federal squad. This was ostensibly due to increased crime rates. The structural adjustment programme which commenced in 1986 had brought about a steep climb in youth unemployment and disillusionment.

Online scams, better known as “419” in Nigerian parlance, became more pronounced in the 2000s with internet penetration. And with this, SARS turned its attention more to this form of crime rather than armed robbery. But that was just half of the story. SARS itself became a scam.

Young people would be arrested on “suspicion” of being online scammers just because they were driving flashy cars or had a recent iPhone model. SARS also indulged in the crassest of profiling - wearing dreadlocks or having tattoos was supposed to designate a deviant who was most likely a criminal. But they were more interested in getting substantial amounts of money from the “suspects”. If those arrested or their family members could not cough these out, “confessions” would be extracted with torture. Many died in SARS custody before bribes could be paid by their families to secure their release. Many were also killed on the streets.

These extra-judicial SARS killings drew public condemnation several times over the last four years. But, as Amnesty International points out, SARS operatives have not been convicted for most of the murders. And where they have been convicted, no penalty was implemented. There have been anti-SARS protests every year since 2016 in response to killings by SARS. They were localised and had low turnouts, except for one which was held

simultaneously in three states. But the public outcry was enough to make the federal government announce reforms of SARS and banning of its stop and search operations thrice in this period. This did not reflect in SARS' activities.

Demonstrations against police brutality in general were also organised by the Coalition for Revolution (Core) in six cities in the period leading to and during the #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd global mass movement, earlier in the year. They had on average barely a hundred protesters.

Deeper roots

We need to look beyond the real resentment of police brutality to understand why the protest was more explosive in October. The pervasive use of social media for mobilisation, which many point to, might also not be enough to explain this, because these were used in earlier less successful anti-SARS protests. Social inequality is at its peak in the country's history. Nigeria overtook India This rebellion, with the slogan and hashtag #EndSARS, was sparked by the reported killing of a young man by the special anti-robbery squad (SARS), in Ughelli, a town in the Niger delta region on 3 October.

Social inequality is at its peak in the country's history. Nigeria overtook India as the country with the largest number of extremely poor people in 2018, despite the country's oil wealth. 105 million of its population of 214 million people live in abject poverty. But the three richest billionaires have as much wealth as half of the population. And the wealth of the five richest people is enough to totally wipe out poverty in the country, according to Oxfam.

Unemployment figures have steadily increased, worsened by tens of thousands of job losses in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Young people are worst hit, with about half of working age youths being jobless. And for those with jobs, precarious employment (particularly in the informal economy which employs two thirds of the labour force) is the norm. The take home pay of workers, including graduates, can hardly take them home. Meanwhile, what Aliko Dangote (the richest African) "earns" in a day is 8,000 times what an average worker earns in a year. The combustible mixture of rage at the news of yet another young person killed by SARS and increasing economic hardships was a recipe for the October #EndSARS rebellion.

Anatomy of the revolt

Youths in Delta state where the triggering incident took place hit the streets on 6 October. Two days later, thousands also took to the streets in Lagos and Abuja. And within days, the protests swept like wildfire through more than 20 of the 36 states of the federation.

A great deal of the mobilisation was done through social media, particularly twitter. All sections of the left, except those associated with Core, were caught off-guard. It would be well after the first week of the rebellion before most even so much as issued press statements. Core was the only Left formation with a nationwide spread. It had also organised a series of "RevolutionNow" protests across the country since last year.

As the #EndSARS movement unfolded, Core activists involved across the country stressed the systemic connections between the police brutality and elite rule. They pushed for the inclusion of demands such as cuts in elected officials' salaries and regime change. The liberal wing of the movement, which was dominant on twitter and in fund raising, attacked this position with the argument that #EndSARS was a "non-political" movement. They also claimed that Core, being associated with African Action Congress, a revolutionary-democratic party which ran in the 2019

elections, was trying to use the mass movement for its own partisan aims.

Core activists on the ground took a non-sectarian stand. Without foregoing their more class-based analysis, they stood firmly with the popular #EndSARS battle cry which grew more trenchant.

In a bid to nip growing mass movement around this slogan in the bud, the federal government announced the ban of SARS on 11 October and called for cessation of the demonstrations. But being thrice bitten, protesters refused to leave the barricades. On 12 October, a coordinated wave of repression commenced. Security forces dispersed protesters in Abuja and some other states with tear gas, water cannons and live ammunition. Several of them were also arrested. At the end of the day, Amnesty International stated that at least 10 people had been killed by the police since the protests began.

Despite the state's bloody reaction, defiant protesters regrouped in all the locations, in even greater numbers. Hoodlums, some of whom were ferried in police and secret police vehicles, attacked them in the first of what would be a constant feature till the rebellion was crushed. But they were generally repulsed by the mass. Several days later, they took their pound of flesh in Abuja. Since they could not break the mass phalanx of demonstration, they burnt dozens of protesters cars.

Realising that repression could not work, a presidential panel on police reforms was hurriedly set up and it summoned a "multi-stakeholders forum" on 13th October. The bulk of "civil society" invited were NGOs and philanthro-capitalist bodies like the MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundation and Amnesty International. The liberal wing of the supposedly "leaderless" EndSARS movement was also represented by leaders of some NGOs and Folarin "Falz" Falana, a celebrity musician. They presented a five point set of demands of the movement dubbed "5for5", which they had come up with two days earlier.

These demands were for:

- immediate release of all arrested protesters;
- justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and compensation for their families;
- an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct;
- psychological evaluation and retraining of all disbanded SARS officers before their redeployment; and
- increase in police salary.

The Inspector General of Police who presided over the meeting accepted the five demands. A few hours later, he announced the replacement of SARS with a Special Weapons and Tactical (SWAT) unit. This was like adding fuel to the fires of mass anger, as the protesters saw this as simply SARS in new clothes.

The more radical demands pushed without much success by Core in the first week of the revolt now became dominant. And beyond the central theatres of peaceful demonstrations, on 19th October angry streetwise youths attacked one of the most hated police stations in Lagos. Likeminded youths also broke into two prisons in the mid-western Benin city, releasing prisoners.

Repression and emergent resistance

On 20 October, the regime drowned the #EndSARS movement in blood. Lagos state was the centre of the massacre which drew the curtains on this first dramatic act of rebellion. First, Mr Babajide Sanwo-Olu, the state governor, declared a 24-hour curfew.

There were two major occupied sites of the revolt in Lagos. One was in front of the state house of assembly in Alausa. The other was at the main toll gate plaza in the middle-class suburb of Lekki. Core activists held the fort at Alausa, organising congresses.

The bulk of protesters there were working-class youth. Activities in Alausa were grossly underreported by the mainstream media. But the experience of revolutionary activists contributed to the reduced intensity of the massacre there.

By 4:30pm, the first contingent of combined security forces came to Alausa. Their vehicles were mobbed, albeit in quite a peaceful manner. Realising the endgame the state might be about to deal, Core activists took on the task of an orderly dispersal of about a thousand people still left in the occupied space. Many more had left after the curfew was declared. Core activists also spotted snipers taking up positions in the tall state secretariat buildings close to the House of Assembly and redoubled an organised retreat. Despite this, at least two people were killed in Alausa by the snipers when the killings started just before 7:00pm. Two others were critically wounded.

The Lekki Toll Gate Plaza massacre started at about the same time. But first, the CCTV cameras in the area were disabled. The floodlights in the plaza which had been on throughout the protest were also switched off. Soldiers, who were part of Operation Mesa (a shadowy joint security outfit), then lit fires in the two possible exit points from the Plaza. And then they started shooting into thousands of protesters singing the national anthem and several of them holding the national flag.

We may never know the total number of people killed at Lekki Toll Gate on that Red Tuesday. The soldiers took many bodies away in their vehicles. Calls for help, including medical services for the wounded, were made through social media. Paramedics who responded to these were forced to go back by the soldiers. Protesters resorted to helping each other remove bullets from bullet wounds.

The immediate response of the army and top government officials was to describe any involvement of soldiers as "fake news". A week later, Mr Abubakar Malami, Attorney-General of the Federation, still claimed that if there was any shooting in the first place, it must have been by hoodlums wearing military fatigues and not soldiers.

But things became clearer, to some extent at least, after the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry and Restitution for SARS-related abuses & Lekki Toll Gate Incident commenced sitting at the beginning of November. Without batting an eyelid, the army now agreed that it was on the scene but only used rubber bullets. It also debunked the claim of the governor that he knew nothing about the army going to the tollgate. The army, we now know, were there on the invitation of the governor.

But before the Lagos judicial panel was set up, (and several other states also set up judicial panels), all hell was let loose in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. Violent confrontation with the state and against private property took the place of the peaceful protests that had been snuffed out, in defiance of curfews. At least 205 police stations were burned down, and 22 police officers killed. There were also attempted prison breaks in at least three prisons as prisoners revolted in the spirit of the orgy of violent rebellion that had seized the streets.

Malls were also looted. But the main ire of the streetwise youths was directed against ruling class figures deemed to have been against the mass movement. The television station and newspaper publishing house of Alhaji Bola Tinubu were torched. Tinubu is a former governor of Lagos State and a leader of the ruling All Progressives Congress. Hours before the massacre he had issued a terse warning to the protesters. The palace of the Paramount King of Lagos was also vandalised, and his staff of office taken away.

When President Muhammadu Buhari eventually made a nationwide broadcast on 22nd October, he condemned such attacks on royalty and general looting and issued a stern warning to crack down on hoodlums. But he did not say a word about the massacre two days earlier.

Increased repression

And despite concessions such as the judicial panels and allocation of funds for youth employment, the main response of the regime has been repression. The bank accounts of twenty persons and entities were frozen. These were volunteers who had provided free medical and legal services to protesters and also supported the families of some of those killed with monies raised through crowdfunding. Identified #EndSARS volunteers and organisers have been barred from traveling out of the country. Thousands of “hoodlums” have been arrested. But the majority of these were found not guilty of looting private property.

As lumpen youths launched a violent fightback immediately after the massacre, tens of thousands of people had marched on government warehouses where grains, beans, noodles, and other food items were kept. These were Covid-19 palliatives which were not shared to the poor during the lockdown.

Some state governments claimed that they were keeping these for a second wave of the pandemic, even though some of the foodstuffs were already getting spoilt. And during the initial confinement, for those that received food rations at all, these were as absurdly inadequate as providing a loaf of bread and less than a kilogram of rice for residents of 240 houses to share! In several states, house-to-house searches were conducted to retrieve these expropriated foodstuffs. And those caught with them were amongst those lined up as “looters” and “hoodlums”. The blending of the “food revolt” into the #EndSARS rebellion provides an inkling of things to come.

There were efforts to reignite the #EndSARS movement by Core in November. But these were crushed by the police. Six Core activists in Abuja were arrested and granted bail almost a week after. Another, Eromosele Anene, was arrested for having his phone number on a flyer calling for protests, even before the demonstration was dispersed by force. He was released on bail after three weeks.

Revelations of the extent of SARS callousness continue to pour in at the judicial panels of inquiry. It is not impossible that this could spark another wave of anti-police brutality protest, especially if the continued law and order onslaught results in yet another killing. The shape of things to come, emerging from ongoing resistance, could however be more complex and thoroughgoing.

Organised workers

Health workers, as well as workers in the education and aviation sectors have been on strike in several parts of the country and nationally, in response to hardships and lack of workplace safety during the pandemic. Increases in fuel price and electricity tariffs led the two trade union centres to issue a 28th September general strike notice.

They called this off at the last minute without any tangible concession from the state. The General Secretaries of both federations later expressed the fears of the trade union bureaucracy that the strike would have been “hijacked” by more revolutionary forces. Fuel pump price has been increased yet again in November, the third time this year. This is part of the conditionalities of a recent \$3.4bn IMF loan.

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Entry of organised labour into the, for now muted, popular struggle would deal a devastating blow to the regime. How long the bureaucracy can hold back rank and file workers is yet to be seen. But it is instructive to note that the health sector strikes and protests started as rank and file action in defiance of the sectoral unions' officialdom.

The 2012 general strike in response to a sharp hike in fuel pump price deepened spontaneous mass protests into an uprising. But calling off the strike as the uprising moved towards more revolutionary demands also took the wind from the sails of the movement.

With the experience and inspiration of the #EndSARS movement it will be difficult if not impossible to force back the genie of revolution into its bottle when rank and file pressure forces the trade union leadership to enter the fray of resistance in the unfolding period.

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