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Nigeria's youth rises up

The #ENDSars protests mobilised young Nigerians against police brutality. But they have since broadened their demands

It all started on 3 October 2020, when a video of the Nigerian police shooting a man at Ughelli, a community in the South-South region of the country, was met with outrage and anger on social media. It was even reported that the men of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), who carried out the shooting, drove off in the victim's SUV.

Ironically, the SARS police unit was created in 1992 to attend to special crimes such as robbery, vehicle theft, kidnapping and firearms. Its officers have, however, since become notorious for wrongful profiling, extortion and extrajudicial killings. The public outcry for its disbandment started since 2017. But the action depicted in the 'Ughelli video' generated an unprecedented upswell of emotions on social media, especially Twitter, which would later play an influential role in informing tactics for the protest.

The subsequent decision by a couple of musicians to lead protests against #EndSARS galvanised young people in a country where celebrities enjoy enormous respect. While these celebrities spurred the movement in the initial days, protesters rejected any attempt to have centralised leadership or spokespersons. The demonstrations were hence 'leaderless': any young person with a smartphone deemed capable of organising protests in his community. The protesters themselves have ascribed the success of the movement to their idea that 'we are all leaders', believing that a centralised leadership could have sold out the struggle.

A leaderless movement

Why are Nigerian youth so sceptical towards political leadership? One factor is certainly the recent decision of the leadership of the trade union 'Organised Labour' in Nigeria to abort a general strike five hours before its planned start on 28 September, reinforcing the youth's mistrust of trade union tactics. At the protest themselves, such as Alausa,

demonstrators shouted down a speaker calling for solidarity between protesters and the trade union. Also, the recent #BlackLivesMatter in the US heavily influenced #EndSARS in its decentralised outlook, especially its use of social media to generate ideas.

By 10 October, the protests had spread across Southern states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in the North Central. And the number of demonstrators was multiplying. At this stage, the protesters' demand was only the disbanding of the notorious police unit. One day later, the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mohammed Adamu, announced its dissolution. But the protesters greeted the action with distrust, citing instances in the past when radical declarations by the Police Chief did little to end police brutality. Similarly, in places like Kano and Kaduna in the North-West, another wave of protests erupted against insecurity, banditry and kidnapping in that part of the country.

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Following the IGP's announcement, the protesters' demands broadened. #EndBadGovernance competed with the trending hashtag #EndSARS, as more and more people questioned, for instance, the salaries of political office-holders. In the middle of the second week of demonstrations, street protesters went as far as calling for Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari to resign with chants such as 'Buhari Must Go'.

At the same time, five concrete demands that circulated online around issues of police brutality gained wider currency: the immediate release of all political prisoners, justice and compensation for victims of police brutality, an independent body to oversee cases of police brutality, psychological evaluation of all disbanded SARS officers and increased pay for police officers. It was immediately dubbed 'The five' and became as popular as other demands for the removal of the president and reduction in the salaries of elected officials.

A broadening movement

The evolution of the protesters' demands was an indication that economic issues, not only police brutality, lie at the bottom of current grievances. Older Nigerians reacted sympathetically to the protests from the beginning, but noted that such a protest should also address inflation and recently increased electricity and fuel prices. Regardless of whether the youth took note of this critique or arrived at it instinctively, it mobilised more social layers into the movement – including artisans and

older women whose children were victims of SARS excesses.

The sustained protests and the IGP's capitulation made young Nigerians confident that they could win more than dissolution of the police force. Young Nigerians are not without grudges against bad governance. The population of unemployed youngsters in Nigeria is larger than the population of Rwanda. However, the effect of a leaderless movement made itself felt, as there was neither a coherent understanding of demands among protesters nor spokespersons to build support in the public. The government made attempts to portray the movement as ungrateful and violent. And these accusations were unchallenged in the media landscape.

The spokespersons of the government began an aggressive media campaign in the second week of protests, painting the movement as susceptible to violence. In some places like Abuja and Lagos, hoodlums indeed fomented trouble, axing protesters and burning down vehicles. There are shreds of evidence suggesting that the government mobilised these hoodlums to prepare for a crackdown on the movement. Fear of insecurity resonated with a layer of society in a country beleaguered by Boko Haram terror attacks in the North and banditry seeping into much of the south.

Meanwhile, the protests had paralysed administrative and commercial activities in the city of Lagos. On 19 October, protesters shut down the commercial hub of the country and a significant proportion of workers lent support to the demands of the protesters. The Lagos Chambers of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) had reported that the nation allegedly lost 700 billion Naira (roughly €1.5bn) because of the protests.

The Lekki Massacre

In this context, the government made a series of reactionary attacks to defeat the movement in order to sustain the status quo. The most lethal of these attacks occurred in the night of 20 October, a day after the call for a general strike, at the Lekki Tollgate, where protesters had been demonstrating peacefully for days.

The Governor of Lagos State, the epicentre of the protest, had declared a 4pm curfew in the afternoon of 20 October. In a city of 20 million people, traditionally bogged by traffic logjams, the declaration of a 4pm curfew was condemned as unrealistic. The state government announced a re-adjustment to 9pm.

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But as early as 7pm, protesters at the Lekki Tollgate were under heavy gunfire from what is believed to have been personnel from the Nigerian Army. Protesters present at the Tollgate have put the number of dead at over 30. The Nigerian Army, however, dismissed the news that its men committed such atrocities as fake news, despite the fact that the Lagos governor – in a press briefing the morning after the brutal attacks – affirmed that the shooting was perpetrated by personnel from the Nigeria Army.

The attack at Lekki and Alausa, the epicentres of the movement in Lagos, depressed the #EndSARS protesters. Mostly comprised of well-off youth, they were shocked by the turn of events. None of them had prepared to be shot at while holding the national flag or while chanting the national anthem. But the protest has succeeded in drawing more youth of varying consciousness into its ranks before the Lekki killing. While youth from Nigeria's elite retreated to Twitter to express outrage and depression, the poorer sectors have gone on a rampage, destroying public infrastructures, looting shops and properties belonging to politicians damaged in the aftermath of the Lekki Massacre.

Will there be a national youth party?

The rampage after the shooting at Lekki and Alausa has exposed some important facts. Warehouses were found across the country where Covid-19 food and relief materials meant for the people during the period of lockdown were stored. That shows the crude insensitivity of Nigeria's economic and political elite and again legitimised the demand for end to bad governance.

It is too early to say if the movement has ended with the Lekki shootings. Young people are still visibly touched by the loss of lives and reviewing the weaknesses of the first phase of the protests. The youth did a tactical withdrawal following the shooting, but a culture of resistance has been formed in a country known for its deference to authorities. In the three weeks of protests, some significant gains have been made. The protest movement has forced the government at different levels to introduce some youth empowerment programmes. For instance, the federal government announced 25bn Naira intervention fund for youth empowerment.

Similarly, in some states inquiry panels have been constituted to

investigate complaints of police brutality. Nigeria's youth has realised it will take consistent pressure to defend the gains that have been won, while the state continues to violently clampdown on peaceful demonstrations. But the protests in Nigeria have etched a mark on the consciousness of young people, with many now even calling for the formation of a national youth party.



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