

# Mass Rebellion in Nigeria: #EndSARS Protests Met with State Repression and Police Brutality

Oil-producing country and Africa's most populous state impacted severely by economic crisis and the legacy of neo-colonialism

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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*A series of incidents involving the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad police unit (SARS) in the Federal Republic of Nigeria has brought to the surface underlying societal contradictions which have been simmering for many years.*

This year represents the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of national independence in Nigeria from Britain.

Moreover, 2020 marks yet another commemoration being the 1960 “Year of Africa”, where 18 former colonies won recognition and statehood amid a continental resurgence in resistance to colonialism. Events during the immediate post-World War II period throughout the continent took place at the same time as former colonies and semi-colonies in Asia and Latin America as well, experienced a yearning for genuine political power and economic liberation.

Nonetheless, the declaration of independence by numerous African colonies prior to and proceeding 1960 has been thwarted by the advent of neo-colonialism. Although most African states have been recognized by the United Nations, the former Organization of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the African Union (AU), founded in 2002, along with both capitalist and socialist states, the economic dependency of these post-colonial nations is continuing to hamper their ability to achieve genuine development and the consequent sovereignty required to determine the destiny of its people.

## **#EndSARS Mass Demonstrations Met with State Repression**

In Nigeria, with its population of 206 million, the initial demonstrations beginning on October 5 were largely peaceful. Young people held mass rallies and demonstrations in the commercial capital and financial hub of Lagos which eventually spread to other regions of the country.

Later in Abuja, the political capital and home to the national legislative structures, were the center of demonstrations as well that were brutally repressed by the police forces. After days of unrest, the military publicly threatened to intervene to restore order.

A Reuters news dispatch on the situation in Abuja on October 9 quoted participants as saying:

“They poured teargas on each and every one of us, it’s so hot I had to put

water on my face. This is what Nigeria has turned into. We just got there with our placards and decided, they started throwing us teargas. That was it.” (See [this](#))

At the Lekki Toll Plaza in Lagos, youth and their supporters had been blocking the area in order to make their voices heard in the demands being put forward to the All-Progressive Congress (APC) government of **President Muhammadu Buhari**. On the evening of October 20, it is reported in many accounts that armed units of the military entered the area, shutting off the streets lights only to suddenly open fire on the people engaged in the occupation.

The atmosphere prior to the evening of October 20 at Lekki Toll Plaza was one of a cultural festival where young people engaged in musical presentations, speeches, the waving of the Nigerian flag, the singing of the national anthem and other patriotic songs. Therefore, it was a shock to many when the military engaged in repressive tactics in order to clear the area of protesters.

A report documenting the reaction of demonstrators quoted them as saying:

“We never imagined they would start shooting at us because we were peaceful and not carrying weapons. The worst we expected was for the soldiers to throw tear gas to disperse us.” (See [this](#))

There are contradictory claims related to the number of casualties and deaths on October 20 and the early morning hours of the 21<sup>st</sup>. However, events in response to these acts of state repression were swift and violent.



Lagos State governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu, addressing protesters gathered at Alausa, Lagos ([CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

Several governmental institutions and private properties including the Nigerian High and

Appeals Court, prisons in several areas of the country, the family home of the Lagos state governor, 25 police stations, the ports authority, transport vehicles at the BRT, the Nation newspaper and the leading satellite television network in the country, TVC Nigeria, were attacked and set a light by roving groups of youth. Lagos State **Governor Sanwo-Olu** visited victims of the shootings by the security forces at the hospitals yet did nothing to restrain the actions of the police and military units deployed in the commercial capital city Lagos home to some 20 million people.

The governor's social media posts calling for calm and the announcement of a commission of inquiry were sharply criticized by youth and others from various political tendencies. Nigerian Human Rights lawyer Femi Falana was interviewed over Arise Television on October 22 where he accused the government of failing to seriously address the legitimate grievances of the #EndSars Movement.

President Buhari delivered a televised address on October 21 where he urged calm while strongly suggesting that the youth and community people halt their demonstrations while threatening even more repressive measures. There was no mention of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of 69 people, including 51 civilians along with 18 members of the police services and the defense forces.

Buhari's statement was condemned by a broad array of political forces for its lack of compassion and strategic vision for the immediate future of the country. Some of the protesting youth have called for the resignation of the president and the state governor of Lagos.

### **Neo-Colonialism and the Economic Crisis**

Undoubtedly the mass demonstrations against police brutality were influenced by events in the United States since the police execution of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis. Historically, there has been an intersection between the struggles for civil rights and self-determination among the tens of millions of people of African descent in the West and their allies, where political convergences during the 1950s and 1960s linked the movements against racism in North America with the independence campaigns to end colonialism on the African continent.

Nigeria is a vast oil-producing state where multi-national firms such as Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Total, among others, are involved with the extraction of petroleum and natural gas resources. Despite its tremendous wealth in energy, the character of the neo-colonial system of dependency has deprived the majority of people from benefiting from its advances in the economic sphere.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic during the early months of 2020, the world capitalist system has undergone a significant downturn. In the U.S. and Western Europe, millions of confirmed cases of the virus have forced the partial shutdowns and attempted restructuring of economies. Millions are losing their jobs placing them in danger of food deficits, foreclosures and evictions.

With states such as Nigeria being dependent upon the sale of its energy resources to capitalist corporations for national consumption, when there is a drastic decline in demand for oil, natural gas and other export commodities, the foreign exchange earnings of these African nations are negatively impacted. Some countries such as Zambia in Southern Africa,

has already reported the threat of financial default as it relates to their obligations to international financial institutions.



EndSARS protesters in Lagos ([CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

On October 22, the S&P rating agency declared Zambia's bond holdings as being in what they describe as "selective default." According to a news article:

"We view the nonpayment of debt service and the statement that the government will not make debt service payments as a default on its commercial debt obligations....With most debt denominated in dollars, sharp kwacha (Zambian currency) depreciation has exacerbated Zambia's fiscal problems and pushed debt from around 36% of GDP in 2014 to 92% by the of 2019." (See [this](#))

In specific reference to Nigeria, a financial publication has cited a recent statement by the African Department of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which accurately views the current unrest as a by-product of the economic crisis. The IMF has acted as a major impediment to African development since the 1960s through the conditionalities placed on governments, limiting their capacity for the strengthening of state institutions and a more equal distribution of income generated by the export of national resources.

This article stated in reference to the IMF report that:

"The Board blamed the civil unrest and the social instability in the Nation on the economic difficulties in the country as well as Nigeria's economy low growth prospect. IMF reiterated that the protest in the country is not just against police brutality, but also unemployment, poverty. The Department explained that the difficult event that followed since the wake of the decline in

oil prices in 2015-16 in Nigeria, has made economic prospects low in the country, and this dislocation has exerted pressure on standards of living, which fueled the protest.” (See [this](#))

Therefore, the long-term objectives in African mass struggles is to wrestle control of the resources of the countries in order to develop the states based upon the interests of the majority of working people, youth and farmers. These efforts must take place on a continental basis through the breaking of the stranglehold of economic dependency imposed by imperialism.

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**Abayomi Azikiwe** is the editor of Pan-African News Wire. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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