

Police brutality is just tip of the iceberg for protesters in Nigeria

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Police violence prompted latest protests but anger at the government is growing

The signs held up by protesters have been clear. “We have no leaders,” said one. “The power of the youth is stronger than you that is in power,” ran another. A third read: “[Nigeria](#) bleeds.”

This last statement has been all too true over the last 24 hours. At least seven people are thought to have been killed when [soldiers opened fire](#) on a protest site in an upscale part of Lagos, the commercial and cultural centre of Africa’s most populous nation.

Authorities have denied the deaths, but not the crackdown. Lagos and several other cities are under a 24-hour curfew, imposed on Tuesday evening. Between 15 and 35 people have died in violence linked to the demonstrations over recent days.

The protests began this month, a renewed outburst of anger over a familiar grievance: the continuing abuses perpetrated [by the Special Anti-robbery Squad \(Sars\)](#), a police unit with a reputation for corruption and torture. But the demonstrations soon evolved into a much broader expression of the anger and frustration felt by huge numbers of Nigerians.

“We’ve entered a really new chapter. We are seeing a rapid unravelling of the average Nigerian’s respect for the state and government. The protests are about police brutality but that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” said [Matthew Page](#), an expert on Nigeria at the London-based thinktank Chatham House.

The causes for discontent are diverse: a stagnating authority, soaring unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, deep inequality – and a widespread sense that nothing is likely to change. One slogan seen at the protests has been: “Stop killing the leaders of tomorrow,”

[Nigeria](#) has some of Africa’s biggest and most globalised cities, and a population with a median age of 18. As elsewhere on the continent, protesters have been drawn predominantly from a young, urban demographic, with popular icons from the worlds of music and film playing high-profile roles.

“The demographic structure is not what it was 10 or 20 years ago, and in urban areas especially there is less patience with the old way of doing things,” said Nnamdi Obasi, an International Crisis Group analyst based in Lagos.

There is also deep disappointment with the president, [Muhammadu Buhari](#), who took power in 2015 and is set to remain until 2023. Buhari, who faces the challenge of managing an economic slump made worse by the coronavirus pandemic, has remained largely silent since the protests began more than two weeks ago

Authorities initially offered concessions, [promising to disband Sars](#) and reform the police. But these

pledges failed to convince protesters, who pointed out they had also been made after previous bouts of unrest. Officials then [signalled a crackdown](#).

Innovative tactics have allowed protesters to stay ahead of the security forces and other government agencies. When two Nigerian banks closed one protest group's accounts, they converted their savings to bitcoin and started fundraising in cryptocurrency.

Social media has also played a significant role, allowing activists to crowdfund protests and access the resources of the massive Nigerian diaspora, of whom many are sympathetic to their aims.

Donations soared after the Twitter chief executive, Jack Dorsey, [posted a tweet](#) on Wednesday encouraging his nearly 5 million followers to contribute. One group raised more than 73m naira (£145,000), which was used to hire private security guards, pay for private ambulances and cover the legal bills of demonstrators arrested across Nigeria.

It is unclear whether the violence on Tuesday night will mark the climax of the movement, or the start of an escalation.

"The government need to be more communicative," said Obasi.

"The protests are an attempt to bypass a system in which lawmakers are not addressing the grievances of their constituents, a system that is not providing opportunities for expression. The elected officials are seen as just looking after themselves and their families and so this [protest movement] is an indictment of democracy in Nigeria."

Jason Burke

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