#EndSARS in Nigeria

written by Emma Wilde Botta | November 13, 2020

A movement against police brutality has swept across Nigeria. Mass protests have brought out tens of thousands of people in cities across the country. At the center of the fury is SARS, a notoriously brutal special unit of the police. On October 11, the Nigerian Police Force announced it was dissolving SARS, but, wary of prior unfulfilled promises and convinced more has to be done, protesters continued street demonstrations. On the evening of October 20, after the imposition of a 24 hour curfew, the army opened fire on peaceful, unarmed protesters in Lagos, killing at least a dozen in what has been called the Lekki Massacre. Despite the violent crackdown, the movement is not deterred and demands have widened to oppose all forms of repression and intimidation by the state.

The protests have tapped into deeply rooted social and economic issues. Nigeria has a sharp class divide, with one in every two workers unemployed or underemployed and lacking basic services despite the country's massive oil wealth. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the crisis and fueled anti-government sentiment. Earlier this summer, trade unions and health care workers pressured the government to provide economic relief during the pandemic. The recent protests have renewed calls for unemployment assistance, access to free health care, and an end to food and fuel price increases.

Nigeria has not faced this level of upheaval in decades. The movement poses a significant challenge to the Nigerian ruling class and, by extension, those who support it. Military campaigns have strengthened the repressive arm of the Nigerian state, facilitated in part by foreign aid and training—including funds from the U.S.—in the name of the "war on terror" campaign against Boko Haram in Nigeria's north. This dynamic has been on full display in the crackdown at Lekki and nationwide.

Emma Wilde Botta spoke with **Kasope Aleshinloye**, a Nigerian activist who has participated in the Lagos protests, about the development of the #EndSARS movement and the expression of Black Lives Matter globally.

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EWB: Many people outside of Nigeria are hearing about SARS for the first time. Can you explain what it is, what it does, and its relationship to the Nigerian state's repression?

KA: Established in 1992, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), sometimes referred to as F-SARS, was a branch of the Nigerian Police Force dedicated to tackling armed robbery, kidnapping and other violent crimes. As an elite unit with special privileges, its members typically operated in plainclothes, in order to blend in with the general population, so as not to arouse suspicion among the people they target.

More recently, within a wider culture of police brutality in Nigeria, SARS has been known for abduction, torture and extra-judicial killings. According to Amnesty International, the unit is notorious for targeting young Nigerians, often detaining them at random and framing them for crimes in a bid to extort money from them. In some instances, detained persons have disappeared in SARS custody even after their families have paid bribes to secure their release. There is no greater irony than SARS committing the very crimes—kidnapping and robbery—the unit was set up to investigate and tackle.

Young Nigerians have had enough. Photo courtesy of Aleshinloye.

EWB: What sparked the recent protests, and how have they developed? Who's involved? What have been the most prominent demands?

KA: Although there were earlier iterations in 2017 and 2018, the current #EndSARS movement garnered massive support and participation largely through social media following the release of a video purportedly showing SARS officers fatally shooting a young man in Ughelli, a small city located in Delta State, before driving off in his vehicle.

The foremost demand of the protesters is an end to the rogue unit's activities and, in the spirit of accountability, justice for victims and survivors of its brutality. Both of these are contained within the most widely circulated list of demands—the #5for5 agenda—although this does not necessarily speak to all of the protesters' asks. Additionally, #EndSARS seems to be a precursor to a larger call for far-reaching political reforms in Nigerian society.

Protests are typically organized in real-time on Twitter to occupy strategic locations such as major interstate roads, seats of government, toll plazas, or other prominent landmarks. One of the earliest protests this October was a 72-hour occupation of the entrance to the Lagos State House of Assembly at Alausa. On occasion, when crowd numbers are low, protesters put out a call for reinforcements on Twitter, directing people on where to join the occupation or march as the case may be.

And while their colleagues occupy the streets, online cadres were hard at work keeping #EndSARS at the top of trending topics on an almost daily basis, garnering 301 billion impressions during the first three weeks of October 2020. Early in the life of the protests, these online activists were responsible for drawing international media attention to the protests and pressuring brands, entertainers, sportspeople and other celebrities to weigh in on the cause.

With the protests independently organized at multiple locations, the movement itself is decentralized and peculiar for its insistence on being leaderless, causing a somewhat bemused response from states and the federal government who do not know exactly who to engage with (or threaten).

The protests themselves have been overwhelmingly peaceful, in some instances, evoking a carnival-like atmosphere that brought together young people from a wide range of ethnic groups and social classes. There is a sense of being in a giant meeting room, where questions about protest strategy are debated and implemented in real time. I personally attended protests at three locations around Lagos—Airport Road Toll Plaza, Surulere (National Stadium), and the Ojodu Berger interchange—and they were all marked by a spirit of defiance. Nonetheless, it was particularly chilling to hear the names of individual SARS victims read out, reminding all in attendance that it could have been any one of us.

To sustain their momentum, revolutions must be fed, nursed, and documented. Thus, another key feature of the current #EndSARS movement is the mobilization of care for protesters. From the earliest days of the protests, independent organizers mobilized meals, legal assistance for detained protesters, emergency shelter, transportation for the stranded and even private security, when armed thugs threatened the protesters with violence in the absence of police protection. There was also a coordinated medical response in the form of ambulances, blood donations and dispatch, settling hospital bills for the injured, and mental health counselling. All of these mutual aid efforts culminated in the establishment of an #EndSARS helpline to support protesters' online and offline. The most well-known of the organizing groups, the Feminist Coalition, served as a clearinghouse for

donations for this mutual aid campaign, channelling funds to support more than 150 individual peaceful protests across 25 states in Nigeria.

One final note on the emergence of the protests. Although the movement has primarily been powered by digitally savvy millennials and Gen Zs via social media, protesters have gradually expanded their campaign messaging to include outdoor billboards, offline WhatsApp broadcasts & voice notes, downloadable Youtube/Instagram explainers and skits performed by protesters themselves, and finally, pamphlets and fliers in multiple local languages to broaden the #EndSARS appeal. This quest for inclusivity is designed to generate maximum public sympathy, particularly when considering the physical disruption (often to traffic) and economic slowdown the protests have caused, and to convey the importance of the cause to a wider audience, including the less educated and older generations.

EWB: What is the state of the movement outside of the major cities? Do you see the lockdowns widening beyond Lagos and Delta states?

KA: Due to incidents of vandalism and looting across the country during the week of October 19, local curfews have been instituted in at least 11 states, including Lagos and Delta, and, as of October 25, other states like Cross Rivers, Enugu, Kaduna and Adamawa have joined their counterparts to announce restrictions on movement. In particular, there have been several incidents across the country where warehouses holding COVID-19 food palliatives, which were donated by the private sector and meant for distribution to vulnerable populations, were looted, precipitating many of these curfew announcements.

EWB: How has President Muhammadu Buhari responded to the movement? How is his relationship to the military apparatus impacting the current situation?

KA: The President's response to #EndSARS has been lacking, belated, and more focused on ending the protests than taking concrete action on ending SARS. Among the proposals floated is one to replace the functions previously carried out by SARS with a new Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) squad, which is problematic to say the least. Meanwhile, as the Commander-in-Chief of Nigeria's Armed Forces, he has been curiously silent regarding the alleged killing of unarmed protesters at the Lekki Toll Plaza by military personnel, despite extensive open source video evidence documenting the incident.

Policing is federally regulated so deep structural reforms are required to implement effective responses to protesters' demands. Even though the federal government has tentatively accepted the #5for5 list of demands and initially actioned some items on this agenda, it is instructive to note that SARS has already been reorganized (2017), overhauled (2018) and disbanded (2019) during President's Buhari's tenure alone. The non-implementation of these previous pronouncements has created a massive trust deficit between the Nigerian government and its citizens regarding police reform. Furthermore, there have been several reports indicating that SARS officers are still operating across the country. Thus, the absence of clear timelines and key priorities within this administration's response to #EndSARS has sustained the 2020 protests, even though the unit has once again been scrapped.

Meanwhile, at the state level, some governors joined the physical protests and engaged with protesters. Furthermore, at least 27 states, including Lagos, have set up judicial panels of inquiry to investigate cases of police brutality but given recent Nigerian history with panels whose recommendations are never implemented, it remains to be seen what tangible action will result from these investigations.

EWB: What has been the response to the #EndSARS movement from other African leaders?

KA: Beyond a series of tweets from Ghana's President Nana Akufo Addo and cursory statements from the ECOWAS and AU missions, not many other African leaders have joined the international community to acknowledge the protests as well as advise the Nigerian government to respect human rights and take action on police reform. This is not surprising. They don't want to encourage local protests in their own countries,

On the other hand, it has been heartwarming to see the support from activists leading social movements across the continent (e.g. #ShutItAllDown on Namibia, #CongoIsBleeding in DRC, #AnglophoneCrisis in Cameroon, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter in Zimbabwe, #StopGBV in South Africa). These activists are also leveraging the popularity of #EndSARS to amplify their own domestic causes.

EWB: Earlier this summer, the police murder of George Floyd sparked sustained anti-police brutality protests across the U.S. You've lived in the U.S. and in Nigeria. Do you have any thoughts on why we're seeing movements like this now?

KA: We can trace this climate of sustained protest that we're seeing now in 2020 to earlier political and social movements within the last decade and a half. I see these international social movements as cyclical, and they often piggyback off each other to create this snowball effect at a certain period in time. To illustrate, during the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street protests, which both initially emerged as responses to economic inequality and anti-democratic regimes, I was in college in the U.S. This is the period within which I definitively associate my own personal political awakening and the spirit of these movements crossed international boundaries. In fact, Nigeria experienced its own Occupy moment in early 2012 with protests largely focused around a controversial fuel subsidy program.

Similarly, just as the Black Lives Matter movement emerged in the summer of 2013 following Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson, we are living in another protest moment centered around police violence on marginalized communities. I remember speaking with friends from college about this in the aftermath of the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor just as renewed Black Lives Matter demonstrations picked up steam in the U.S. Many Nigerians participated in global #BlackLivesMatter from the summer, by linking to local cases of police brutality. And we're seeing similar solidarity from #EndSARS supporters in the U.S. and elsewhere. This is the expression of Black Lives Matter everywhere. It's a very international movement.

A demonstration in front of police headquarters. Photo courtesy of Aleshinloye.

Moreover, we know what's been happening in Thailand. Activists from Hong Kong have shared helpful tips for organizing sit-ins and marches in the face of riot police. Protesters are learning effective strategy from all of these movements and how best to articulate our demands for a Nigerian context.

The Nigerian diaspora has also made a big push on #EndSARS with protests across more than 100 cities continuing to this very day and intense campaigns targeted at foreign governments like the United Kingdom to put pressure on the Nigerian government to respect our rights to protest and not to be killed by police or other security forces.

EWB: What can activists outside of Nigeria do to support the #EndSARS movement?

KA: Activists can help amplify #EndSARS and engage with the issues in the form of explainers like

this that show why #BlackLivesMatter is global. Write to your Congressperson. Donate if you're able to. Above all, keep applying pressure. This is a marathon, not a sprint, so we're in for the long haul.

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