

Bulletin FrancoPaix

Vol. 6, n°4

April 2021

UQÀM



CHAIRE **RAOUL DANDURAND**
EN ÉTUDES STRATÉGIQUES ET DIPLOMATIQUES
Centre FrancoPaix



#EndSARS: Movement Against Police Violence in Nigeria

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#EndSARS: Movement Against Police Violence in Nigeria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Nigeria, the #EndSARS movement against police brutality has drawn attention to the abuse of power by a unit of the Nigerian police, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which has become a symbol of state violence and corruption.

On October 3, the death of a young man following his arrest by the SARS triggered large-scale mobilizations. They were fueled by the anger of demonstrators facing years of impunity for numerous abuses by this Nigerian police unit: extrajudicial executions, extortion and torture.

On October 11, the SARS was dissolved and replaced by the Special Weapons and Tactics Unit. Despite that decision, the mobilizations continued.

Young women are playing a leading role in this struggle. Through online crowdfunding, protesters and victims are receiving support in an unprecedentedly transparent way.

On October 20, the protesters organize a sit-in at the Lekki toll booth. They are violently repressed by the police. For security reasons, the organizers of the #EndSARS movement decide to keep a low profile.

Although the "Lekki massacre" marked the end of the protests, a number of mobilizing initiatives continue to emerge, particularly in view of the 2023 presidential election.

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#EndSARS movement protesters

The month of October 2020 saw the rise and seeming denouement of #EndSARS, a generation-defining, youth-led popular movement against police brutality in Nigeria. Over the course of three weeks, #EndSARS protests drew tens of thousands of Nigerians into the streets, bringing global attention to a rogue unit of the Nigerian Police Force – the Special Anti-Robbery Squad or SARS – which has a documented history of power abuse. After a decade of short-lived mobilizations around political and economic insecurity, #EndSARS achieved its unprecedented growth by developing a novel grassroots organizing approach that centers women's leadership and decentralized power. The Nigerian government systematically suppressed this movement culminating in the massacre of more than a dozen of peaceful demonstrators and the banning of public protests. The #EndSARS uprising joins a rising tide of global radicalism – and government repression – which illuminates the global dimensions of police violence and the growing power of youth around the world, who are increasingly resistant to incremental reform efforts and are demanding structural change now.

SARS was created in 1992 as a tactical federal police unit to curtail a rise in violent crimes such as armed robbery and kidnappings, as Nigeria was in its fourth decade of military regimes. Over the years, SARS has become the most egregious source of state violence and corruption. A 2020 Amnesty International report documented eighty-two horrifying incidents between January 2017 and May 2020. These include extra-judicial killings, extortion, and torture, including "hanging, mock execution, beating, punching and kicking, burning with cigarettes, waterboarding, near-asphyxiation with

plastic bags, forcing detainees to assume stressful bodily positions, and sexual violence¹."

The function of policing as an apparatus of state violence is deeply rooted in Nigeria. Armed police forces were key to British colonial occupation and plunder beginning with the conquest of Lagos in 1861 and through the violent expeditions that brought native communities and rulers under British control. Legacies of imperial policing were deeply embedded in the post-colonial organization of paramilitary forces². Alongside Nigeria's string of military regimes from 1966 to 1999, "armed men from the military and police [have] ruled the nation, governed the states and patrolled the streets, indiscriminately meting out unchecked violence upon ordinary people" for more than a century³. While #EndSARS has targeted the specific dimensions of Nigeria's current policing formation, the movement should also be understood as an accumulation of generations of grievances around state violence, policing, militarism, and imperialism.

A Perfect Storm

On 3 October 2020, two days after Nigeria marked sixty years of independence, a tweet went viral, raising alarm that SARS "just shot a young boy dead" in the town of Ughelli located in the southern Delta State⁴. Within hours, the post was retweeted 10,000 times and additional videos began trending with the hashtag #EndSARS. Tweets documented the horrifying scene of a lifeless body abandoned by the roadside. One of the posted videos was recorded by a group of young men themselves while they were chasing the officers who also stole the Lexus Jeep of the young man who had been killed. The video was accompanied by a tweet stating: "SARS Officers Are Now Rogue Criminals in Uniform. #EndSARS. It's Time The Youths Declared

#WarOnSARS⁵." The public anger around the recording was eerily reminiscent of the circumstances of another killing. In December 2017, a video showing a group of people chasing after a SARS vehicle after a shooting in Lagos went viral with the same hashtag: #EndSARS⁶. Though the 2017 murder led to an online campaign to "reform" SARS, it was followed only by minor public mobilization. However, frustrations continued to grow as the government remained inactive and SARS abuses continued⁷. The October 2020 killing renewed attention to police brutality and drove tens of thousands of citizens into the streets in different cities across twenty-eight out of Nigeria's thirty-six states⁸. There were also Pro-SARS protests that took place in the remaining eight states in Northern Nigeria. That can be explained by the fact that these states are strongholds of the president and because security threats connected to "Boko Haram" insurgency undergird demands for an increase rather than decrease in security forces⁹.

In Lagos, where #EndSARS protests first began on 8 October, youth demonstrated in front the Governor's House and slept outside overnight. In response, state lawmakers convened an emergency parliamentary sitting and called for a public inquiry of SARS and its replacement. The next day, protests expanded to multiple cities including the federal capital, Abuja, where youth similarly camped out at the headquarters of the Nigerian Police Force to demand the Inspector-General of Police address them, but were instead met with tear gas, water cannons, and live bullets. In Ogbomosho, a city in southwestern Oyo State, police attacked protesters, killing at least four people, including Jimoh Isiaka, the first youth casualty of #EndSARS protests. Protesters frequently referenced his name and his murder intensified protests.

Three days into protests, on 11 October, the Inspector General of Police announced that



"The #EndSARS uprising joins a rising tide of global radicalism - and government repression - which illuminates the global dimensions of police violence and the growing power of youth around the world, who are increasingly resistant to incremental reform efforts and are demanding structural change now."

SARS would be "disbanded" and, two days later after continued pressure, that it would be replaced with a new entity, SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics Unit). However, mobilizations continued over the next week as protesters didn't trust the decision. Since 2015, the Nigerian government has promised six times to "reform," "restructure," "reorganize," and most recently to "disband" SARS. Furthermore, throughout the same time period, the government has failed to prosecute a single officer for abuse even after having passed anti-torture legislation in 2017.

Therefore, despite the announcement of the Inspector General of Police, mobilizations continued. As the movement grew, protesters began to blockade major roadways, airports, and the National Assembly. In several cities, these actions were violently confronted by police and government-sponsored youth¹⁰. Demonstrations were also organized in countries with significant Nigerian diasporas: Canada, Germany, Ghana, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The protestors had five core demands, labeled as "#5for5": that the government (1) release arrested protesters, (2) compensate the families of victims of police violence, (3) create an independent body to prosecute officers, (4) psychologically evaluate SARS officers before their redeployment, and (5) increase police officer salaries to dissuade them from extortion.

The rapid expansion of the #EndSARS movement could be partly explained as an

outgrowth of multiple popular movements and online mobilizations that have taken shape throughout the last decade. In 2011, Enough is Enough (EiE) Nigeria appeared during the presidential election as an online campaign targeting President Umaru Yar'Adua, ethno-religious violence, and fuel scarcity. In 2012, Occupy Nigeria formed after the removal of the fuel subsidy by the Goodluck Jonathan administration sparked massive national protests and international actions. In 2014, the famous "Bring Back our Girls" campaign developed as a grassroots mobilization that moved to social media, becoming the first time a Nigerian hashtag movement benefited from large-scale international solidarity. The lessons of these mobilizations contributed to the new organizational approach of #EndSARS, which centers women's leadership, decentralized power, and non-reformist demands.

"Governance is Not Rocket Science": Women's Leadership and Decentralized Power

Within the first days of the protests, young women took a visible leadership role in mobilizing #EndSARS online and in the streets¹¹.

In particular, the Feminist Coalition, coordinated by 14 women, emerged as a core engine of the struggle through their coordination of a vast network of mutual aid that resourced protests across the nation. The group crowdfunded more than 147 million Naira (nearly \$400,000) that was swiftly redistributed, with unprecedented transparency, to provide protest clusters with food, water, medical care, security, legal aid, and relief for victims of police brutality and their families. As Chioma Agwuegbo tweeted, "we've seen more responsiveness, proactive accountability, resilience, agility, innovation, collaboration, and inclusion from [Feminist Coalition] than Nigeria has EVER given us. Governance is not rocket science."¹² This model of women-centered leadership based on mutual aid reflects a form of grassroots organizing that is gaining popularity globally and is especially noteworthy in Nigeria, where women face significant barriers to political participation.

Yet, even as the Feminist Coalition became recognized as the anchor for resourcing the movement and visible Twitter influencers took a leading role in disseminating information, #EndSARS protesters collectively insisted, "we have no leaders", rejecting the elevation of any individual or organization as the face of the movement. According to Edwin Abraham, an #EndSARS protester, the fact that there are no clear leaders or organizers makes it difficult for the government to co-opt it¹³. That has already been the case with other movements, like #OccupyNigeria. The decentralized leadership approach and



#EndSARS movement protestors



"Then at nightfall, the streams broadcast the chilling sounds of live gunfire, frantic screams, and protesters running for their lives, while many were still faithfully singing the anthem."

its critique of established leadership offers the emergence of new forms of governance in Nigeria.

The "Lekki Massacre" and the Suppression of The Movement

After initially appearing responsive, the Nigerian government drastically shifted to outright suppression of the movement, once it became clear that the struggle was gaining popular support. In the first week, protesters first reported that police and government-sponsored agents were attacking and infiltrating demonstrations; they were also reported to have destroyed property in order to discredit the movement. The Feminist Coalition tweeted that their bank accounts were frozen, which forced them to turn to bitcoin cryptocurrency as "censorship-resistant fundraising"¹⁴. Then, on 20 October, a day which now lives on in tragic infamy for Nigerians as Black Tuesday, thousands of protesters staged a sit-in at the toll gate in Lekki, a rapidly gentrifying area of Lagos. Live streams from the day captured a crowd of youth jubilantly sitting on the ground singing the national anthem and waving Nigerian flags¹⁵. Then at nightfall, the streams broadcast the chilling sounds of live gunfire, frantic screams, and protesters running for their lives, while many were still faithfully singing the anthem. Within hours, the Twitter account of the Nigerian Army callously tweeted that reports of the military gunning down protesters were "fake news", even while survivors shared images and videos of military-grade shell casings and the bodies of slain protesters.

In his first televised address in response to #EndSARS two days after the massacre, President Buhari called for an end to protests, stating that the government would not "allow

anybody or groups to disrupt the peace of the nation". Without directly acknowledging the killings or the grievances behind the protest, the message was clear: the Nigerian government would continue to use force to put down the #EndSARS movement. The president's address had an immediate demobilizing impact. With at least fifty-six protesters killed in two weeks¹⁶, a protest ban, curfews, and the thinly veiled threat of further state violence, #EndSARS organizers called for protesters to "stay safe, stay home". The Feminist Coalition announced it would cease collecting funds for protests.

Since then, the Lekki Massacre has been a source of continued struggle for accountability and repair. Within a week of the tragedy, the Lagos State government convened a judicial panel of inquiry to investigate SARS brutality. However, by February, the panel authorized the re-opening of the Lekki Toll Gate where the deadly shooting occurred before the conclusion of the investigation. In response, Lagos activists called for a peaceful "Occupy Lekki Toll Gate" protest of the decision, which police forcefully dispersed by beating and arresting demonstrators¹⁷.

The demand to dismantle rather than reform SARS shows a significant development in the struggle against police brutality in Nigeria. However, given the violent repression of the #EndSARS movement, and the deep history of police violence in Nigeria, the transformation of SARS into SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics Unit) is likely a process of rebranding of the same policing structure, which will have similar patterns of action.

Beyond #EndSARS

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes: "Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its own mission, fulfill it, or betray it." This is true for the Nigerian youth, who have led the #EndSARS protests. This generation, which is the first to have grown

up entirely under civilian regimes has plainly expressed that corrupt leaders and political elites have "messed with the last generation"¹⁸. During the 2020 protests, in order to communicate, youth have created a radio channel on-line called "Soro Soke", which translates as "Speak Up" from the Yoruba language. The channel was used as a way of auto-identification for this new generation to dismantle structures of imperialism, colonialism and militarism in Nigeria.

Though the Lekki Massacre marked the end of #EndSARS street protests – for now – this new cohort of grassroots organizers has already announced a number of plans for how to sustain the movement's momentum even beyond the fight against police brutality. Protesters have called for the resignation of President Buhari under the hashtag #BuhariMustGo. Others have called for a new youth-led political party, the Youth Democratic Party, ahead of the 2023 elections. Time will tell whether #EndSARS will be able to harness the enlivened energy of youth activism amidst the growing threat of state anti-radicalism. However, one thing is clear: the movement's non-hierarchical leadership and feminist organizing praxis herald a future of youth power and grassroots movement building that fundamentally challenges the patriarchal, stratified politics that have long plagued Nigeria's democracy and legitimized state repression.

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- ¹¹ Haynes, S. (21 October 2020). "['We Are Able to Get Things Done.' Women Are At the Forefront of Nigeria's Police Brutality Protests](#)". *Time*.
- ¹² Chioma Agwuegbo. [@ChiomaChuka] (2020, October 22). "[A reminder that we've seen more responsiveness, proactive accountability, resilience + agility, innovation, collaboration, and inclusion from @feminist_co than Nigeria has ever given us.](#)" [Tweet].
- ¹³ Olurounbi, R. (15 octobre 2020). *Nigeria: #EndSARS movement avoids pitfalls of 'leadership'* The Africa Report.
- ¹⁴ Harper, C. (2020, October 16). *Nigerian Banks Shut Them Out, So These Activists Are Using Bitcoin to Battle Police Brutality*. Yahoo! News.
- ¹⁵ Moe [@Mochievous]. (20 October 2020). "[People in Lekki sitting on the floor, signing the national anthem & waving the Nigerian flag just a few minutes before fire was opened on them.](#)" [Tweet].
- ¹⁶ Amnesty International. (21 October 2020). *Nigeria: Killing of #EndSARS protesters by the military must be investigated*.
- ¹⁷ Al Jazeera. (13 February 2021). "[Nigerian police beat, arrest protesters at site of Lekki shooting.](#)"
- ¹⁸ Amnesty International. (21 October 2020). *Nigeria: Killing of #EndSARS protesters by the military must be investigated*.

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

→ Niagalé Bagayoko

published on April 2021 "Hybridity and Reform of Sahelian Security Systems" in the journal Global Brief. She also conducted the study "ECOWAS and the Governance of the security sector in West Africa : 1999 - 2019" published by the African Security Sector Network, and coordinated a study published by the People's Coalition for the Sahel "[Sahel : what needs to change towards a new People-Centered Approach](#)".

→ Daniel Eizenga

published "[Burkina Faso: Military Responses to Popular Pressures](#)" in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. He also participated in the podcast *Ufahamu Africa*, episode 114: "[A conversation with Dan Eizenga on Idriss Déby and Chad](#)".

→ Maxime Ricard

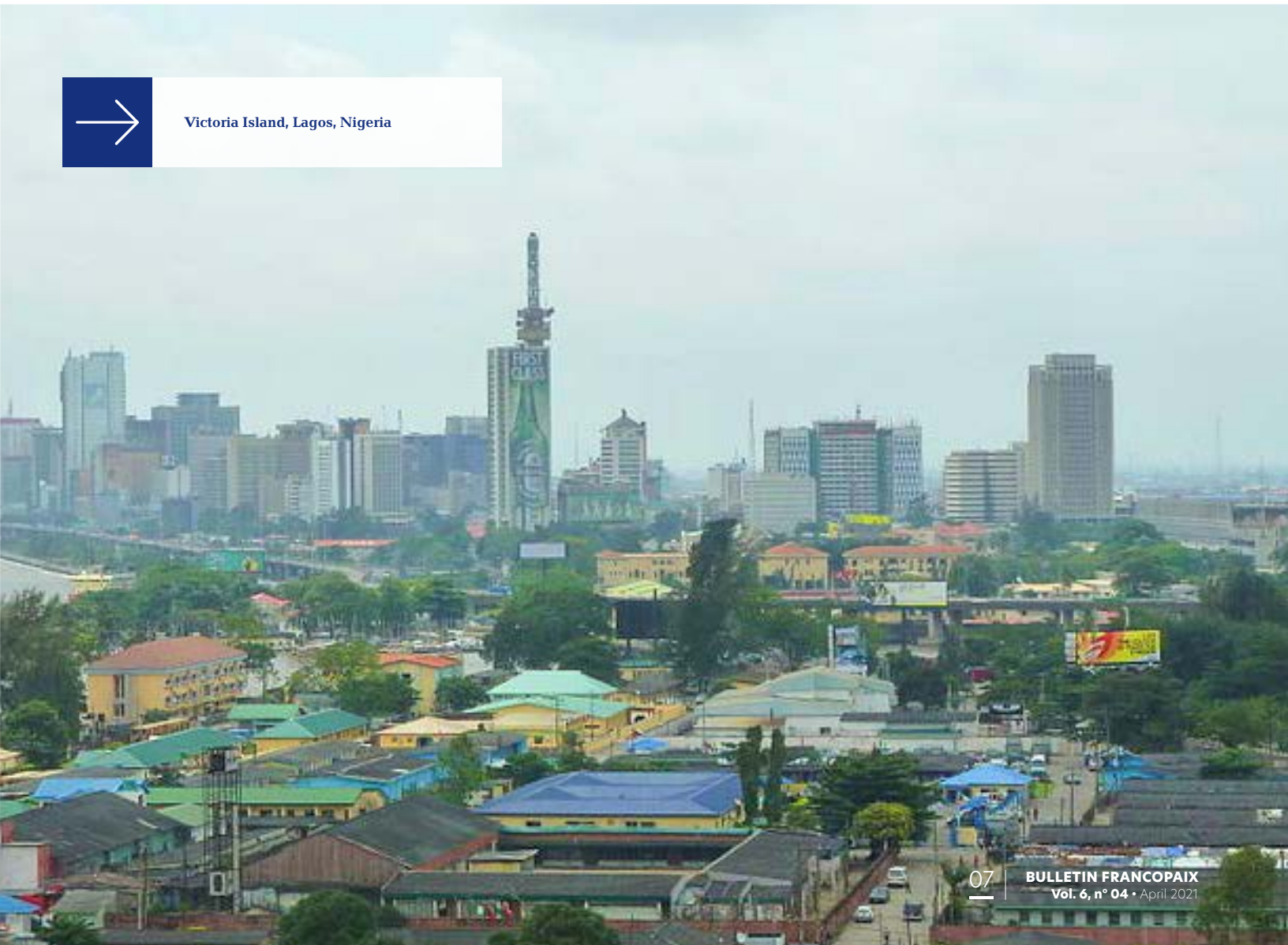
has co-organized on Wednesday, April 28, the IRSEM Africa Breakfast on "[Civil Resistance and Rebel Governance in Côte d'Ivoire](#)" with the participation of Dr. Sebastian van Baalen (Uppsala University).

→ Marina Sharpe

was appointed to the editorial board of the *International Journal of Refugee Law*, published by Oxford University Press.



Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria



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