

the August demonstrations. Some of the placards by those against it read, “Give Tinubu more time”, referring to President Bola Tinubu’s 14-month-old presidency. This edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly looks at the August protests and what they mean for the Nigerian people and their government.

Global Wave of Protests

Recorded protests worldwide have triggered regime changes, reforms and chaos. The scale and successes recorded across countries differ and at varied costs. Nevertheless, such demonstrations have bordered on police brutality, economic hardship, corruption, poor governance, and several forms of social injustice. Protesters have often called for policy reforms and retractions, the resignation of public officials and outright political action to address varied forms of institutional rot. The successes of these events require empirical inquiry, but they appear to shape demonstrations in other climates, especially with the spread of information technology. The [Arab Spring](#) wave triggered pro-democracy protests and uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. In June 2024, when Kenyans fiercely [protested against](#) a new tax law that would see the Kenyan government earn over [\\$2.7 billion](#) in revenue, their counterparts, mainly within the African continent, acknowledged their resilience. Many others called for similar protests in their home countries.

Political protest has become a popular feature in many countries. Over [700 significant anti-government protests have erupted worldwide](#), according to data from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Global Protest Tracker. In early 2021, [protests](#) broke out in Russia to support the detained political opposition leader, Alexei Navalny. There have been periodic protests in America, mostly

against police brutality and systemic racism. For 2023, Carnegie’s Global Protest Tracker documented [new protests in eighty-three countries](#) worldwide. In 2024, similar events include the anti-ruling government [protesters](#) in Venezuela, [Gen Z protest](#) in Kenya and anti-immigration [demonstrations](#) in Ireland. [Reports](#) say police forces across the United Kingdom are braced for further far-right protests. A court in Ghana has [barred](#) people from holding a scheduled seven-day protest. Beyond elections and opinion polls, millions of people are using demonstrations to communicate their grievances and push for institutional changes.

Nigeria in Focus

In Nigeria, protests date back to pre-colonial times. Sections of what is known as Nigeria today used it to push against colonial administration and practices. A classic example is the [Aba women’s riot](#) in 1929 against British colonial authorities’ tax policies. Post-independent demonstrations include the [Ali Must Go protest in 1978](#), a student-led rally against tuition fee hikes. Twenty-first-century Nigeria has recorded other forms of protest, such as the massive #OccupyNigeria movement in 2012 and the #EndSARS protest eight years later. These protests were against fuel subsidies and police brutality. The 2020 protest against police brutality was markedly different. Despite the age of Nigeria’s democracy, security operatives [clamped down](#) on protesters nationwide. The Nigerian Military was reported to have used live ammunition on peaceful protesters who mounted a tollgate in Lekki, Lagos, Nigeria, in defiance of the government’s pleas for dialogue. While the ECOWAS Court of Justice in Abuja on July 10, 2024, ruled that [Nigeria violated the rights of citizens during the EndSARS protest](#), the Nigerian government’s usual responses

to these protests are usually a mixture of concession, retraction of policies, curfew and repression through state-sponsored violence and security clampdowns.

The 2012 #OccupyNigeria protest against the intended fuel subsidy removal was championed by many political stalwarts in the opposition. Many of these actors are now stakeholders in the ruling party, the All Progressive Congress (APC). Critics say the protest achieved its aim until eleven years later. In his inaugural speech on May 2023, President Bola Tinubu [announced](#) the removal of the fuel subsidy. The announcement did not lead to any demonstration, but heated debates and a rising cost of living have followed suit. In 2020, the #EndSARS protest rocked then-President Muhammadu Buhari's government when young Nigerians, armed with social media, defiantly occupied the streets to show their discontent with the infamous police unit, Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS was [accused](#) of multiple extrajudicial killings and human rights abuses. The #EndSARS protests ended with the [Lekki tollgate shooting](#) in Lagos State and the government's announcement that SARS had been disbanded.

The Pulse of the August Protest

As amended, the [1999 Constitution of Nigeria](#) guarantees freedom of expression, assembly, and association. However, demonstrations in recent years have sometimes turned violent due to the activities of some protesters, hostilities from law enforcement agents and the infiltration by criminal gangs and street thugs. The Nigerian government, ethnoreligious and civil society groups have used this to discourage Nigerians from taking to the streets. Still, protesters remain unmoved, insisting that the demonstrations go as planned [peacefully].

News reports, eyewitnesses, and anecdotal accounts show that the protests began peacefully but have taken a violent turn in some [places](#) nationwide. Kano, Sokoto, Kaduna, Yobe, Katsina, Jigawa, and Borno state governments have declared curfews to curb the violence. An improvised explosive device (IED) [explosion](#) in Maiduguri resulted in the death of one victim while eleven others sustained various degrees of injuries. A 24-hour curfew was declared in the city to curb violence, given the several years of jihadist insurgency that led to thousands of deaths and millions of displaced people. There were also eyewitness reports of shooting and use of teargas by law enforcement agents and looting of public and private properties by alleged protesters in some parts of the country.

The August protests had tale-tell signs of violence. The 2020 police brutality protests and recent commentaries from anti-protest quarters suggested that protesters were out to meet resistance beyond law enforcement agents. Moreover, a leaderless demonstration, as described, will arguably lack a uniform pulse or mechanisms for group control. The openness of the membership meant that protesters had the leeway to demonstrate their grievances as they deemed fit. Also, Nigeria's current economic and security landscapes trigger such occurrences. As affirmed in a [study](#) by a team at the Brookings Institute, [peaceful] protests and strikes tend to rise during slowdowns and recessions, during times of decreased subjective well-being, increased incidence of suffering and deteriorating living conditions.

Some pro-protest groups refer to recent history, digging up old videos of President Bola Tinubu's commentary supporting the anti-fuel subsidy demonstrations. Also, reports argue that some [counter-protests](#) were staged, with the protesters allegedly

paying ₦5,000 or lured with the promise of getting food. In all, there is evidence to support pro-protest and anti-protest arguments. On the one hand, the ruling government, as an opposition pre-2015, had organised similar protests with less government resistance or crackdown. The APC was a formidable opposition before 2015, leading protests and criticising the ruling government's policies unequivocally.

On the other hand, the possibility of violence during the August protests had triggered calls for it to be shunned. Such calls are louder given Nigeria's ubiquity of security challenges, which, if violent, the protest can worsen. However, pro-democracy arguments trump the security implication argument for at least two reasons. First, the right to protest is covered in Nigeria's 1999 constitution, as amended. Also, law enforcement agents must ensure that protesters exercise their rights to peaceful protests, which are protected and carried out within the provisions of the law. Therefore, law enforcement agents' statutory duty is to maintain law and order. However, this task has become demanding, given the pockets of violence simultaneously happening in multiple locations.

The presidency has waded in on the protest since it started. President Bola Tinubu [addressed](#) Nigerians on Sunday morning, four days into a protest that began fiercely on August 1, 2024. The President's speech was a mix of carrot and stick. On the one hand, it encouraged protesters to suspend further actions and open channels for dialogue, asserting that Nigeria needs unity and cooperation across all divides. On the other hand, the President warned those taking undue advantage of the situation. He also held that he must ensure public order, and the government will not stand idly and allow a few with clear political agendas to tear the nation apart.

The President's speech came after three days of fierce protests, which resulted in violence in some states. The Nigerian Police Force, after the first two days of the protest, [said](#) seven people had been killed, and thirty-four others were severely injured. The Force says it has arrested 681 individuals who allegedly committed various criminal offences such as armed robbery, arson, mischief, and destruction of public and private properties. Amnesty International holds a different view. It [says](#) security forces were responsible for the deaths of the 13 people in Niger, Borno and Kaduna states. The Nigerian Police Force [disputed](#) the figures.

Symptoms of Nigeria's Federalism

Nigeria's centralised fiscal federalism makes protest periods hard for the federal government. Protests against bad governance, corruption, economic challenges and social injustice have often targeted the federal government, with little to no recourse for subnational governments with statutory obligations to Nigerians. Although state governments' properties are also affected in the wake of rioting, much of the needed official reactions are expected from the federal government. Therefore, state governments are often immune from the pressure of reforms but not from the violence that may follow. The top-down revenue-sharing strategy means state governments are also usually overlooked when grievances arise due to poor economic conditions. However, suppose a true federalism was in place. In that case, protests in response to sociopolitical or economic issues may be sectionalised, meaning that different states and regions may react differently to such conditions, and accountability strategies could be better targeted. It also provides an opportunity to isolate issues and address them. For instance, protests against police brutality would arguably

be better addressed if state police were in place. In this sense, it is expected that each state's police will have a different institutional character and accountability mechanisms will be narrowed to a smaller group rather than a nationwide check of police officers. Also, protests against police brutality may no longer be nationwide but on a state level, where each subnational government can address the issues raised without the nation being brought to its knees in the wake of rioting and outright violence.

The Slippery Slope of the August Protest

Violence was recorded from the first day in some states for a scheduled ten-day protest. Some states have placed curfews on movements to douse the tension. With eight days to go, some possible scenarios are likely if adequate measures are not undertaken.

Continued Looting and Vandalism: Looting and vandalism have been recorded in some states. Private and public properties have been robbed and destroyed. With the current pulse of the protests, such occurrences may spread to other states.

Human Rights Abuses: There are reports of hostilities against protesters by law enforcement agents. Pictorial evidence shows the use of teargas and water canons to dispel the protests. Also, armed thugs have reportedly attacked protesters, preventing them from exercising their constitutional rights. This could continue if adequate protection mechanisms are not put in place.

Attacks on Citizens and Tribal Feuds: Beyond public officials' commentaries to discourage the protests, other individuals have warned people not to come out to protest, indicating the possible use of

force. Also, anecdotal accounts show that some residents have been attacked and their items looted, whether or not they are part of the protesters. Some residents have also been profiled as belonging to some ethnic groups and prevented from protesting. These anomalies will further mar the protest, which has begun fiercely from the first day.

Curfews and Bans: At least three states have declared curfews in the wake of rioting and anarchy that heralded the protests. If violence spreads, more states may follow suit. The demonstrations may be suspended based on national security. Already, explosions linked to Boko Haram have been reported in Borno State, a hotbed of terrorism. The violence that has followed the protest may make or mar its objectives.

Attacks on Security Operatives: Unprofessional acts from law enforcement agents and hostilities from protesters may snowball into a face-off between both parties. Already, some security personnel have come under attacks and life-threatening injuries, same as protesters who have been caught in the clampdown. The more the protest takes a violent turn, the likelihood that security forces will intervene, putting them in a difficult position with aggravated protesters and others that have hijacked the intended peaceful protest. Reports claim that the police may invite the armed forces if the violence further escalates.

Reactions to the President's Address: President Bola Tinubu's speech may influence the protest positively or negatively. However, such influence may not be wholesome, as protesters in the states may have varied reactions to it. However, it can douse certain groups' tensions and ignite them in others

Navigating the Storm

Nigeria stands at a crossroads. First, to manage the increasingly fierce protests, leading to human and material losses. Second, to address the issues that have pushed people to hit the streets. These situations do not require a silver bullet but more strategic policy actions. The nature of protests in Nigeria suggests growing public awareness of political and economic issues, but it also hints at the pulse of the people as they struggle to navigate rising living costs and security risks. All of these, the protesters link to bad governance. Some solutions have been proffered to mitigate the violence heralding the protests and the contributive factors.

Strategic Communications and Building Public Trust: The buildup to the protests was dotted by anti-protest commentaries from government corners and key stakeholders. The Nigerian government should have focused more on sensitising people on how to conduct themselves during the protests. This will portray the government as supporting the demonstrations and recognising the citizens' rights to lawful assembly. Remarkably, some states and law enforcement units showed solidarity through commentary and distribution of refreshments to protesters.

Security and Rights Protection: Thousands of law enforcement agents were mobilised to maintain peace during the protests. However, the first day of the protest showed that more needs to be done to provide security and protect those exercising their rights to protest lawfully.

Reviving the Economy: Beyond managing the protests, addressing its root cause will mitigate the crisis. The rising cost of living is affecting millions of people. These are tell-tale signs of dissatisfaction with the government. There is a need to revitalise

the economy and provide the enabling policies and environment for economic activities to thrive. The Government should also pay more attention to rising youth unemployment, as most August protesters are young.

Cutting the Cost of Governance: Cutting the cost of governance will demonstrate the government's commitment to growing the economy in the face of numerous challenges. Several public procurements have suggested the government's indifference to the plight of the people. For instance, while multimillion procurements have been made for public officials' use, the minimum wage saga had stalled until recently, when ₦70,000 was approved as the new wage.

Fixing Insecurity: Fixing insecurity will provide a conducive environment for economic activities. Insecurity has impacted people's safety and ability to grow their food, attend schools, work or conduct business. This reality adds to the economic hardship and makes it harder for people to thrive. Millions of deaths, displacements, injuries and kidnapped victims have been recorded in the wake of security challenges nationwide.

Pushing for a True Federalism: Nigeria should push for true federalism, where powers and responsibilities are clearly and adequately shared across the central government and subnational units. This will help address issues case-by-case, provide subnational units with a more constitutional framework to intervene, and be held accountable by the public. Subnational governments will no longer be immunised from public grievances. Instead, they will be at the forefront of economic growth and the accountability mechanisms upheld by the public.

Conclusion

Solving Nigeria’s socioeconomic challenges and managing the fierce protests requires a multifaceted approach. This will require the political will to address the root causes of the problems, opening up to genuine citizens’ engagement. The government must also aim to rebuild trust with the public, as public announcements appear to be overlooked in the face of menacing economic and security conditions. Furthermore, managing the protests requires tact, walking the lines between constitutionally recognised rights and ensuring law and order.

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