

An Appraisal of Government Response to the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance Protest in Nigeria

By

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Introduction

The August 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests, a significant event that reverberated across major Nigerian cities, echoed a similar public dissent seen in the country during the #EndSARS protests in October 2020. The protests, this time, were a response to the general hardship caused by the policies of the Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration, which came into power on May 29, 2023. The protesters, inspired by the successful GenZ-led protest in Kenya against financial bills, demanded accountability, transparency, and good governance (Ehigiator, 2024). This significant event was a turning point for Nigerian netizens, who believed that change was possible in their country (Ripples Nigeria, 2024).

This article critically appraises the Nigerian government's response to the protest, analyzing the strategies employed to manage the demonstrations and the effectiveness of those measures. It examines the balance between maintaining public order and respecting citizens' rights to peaceful assembly and the political and social implications of the government's actions. The article also explores the broader context of governance in Nigeria, highlighting the ongoing challenges and the public's persistent call for reform.

Factors behind the Protests

Multiple factors led to the #EndBadGovernance protests in Nigeria. Key among them are the rising cost of living, driven by two major policies of the Tinubu administration: the removal of the petroleum subsidy and the floatation of the naira (BBC, 2024). These policies have led to runaway inflation, worsening economic conditions, and increasing public dissatisfaction, making protests in Nigeria almost inevitable (Yadav, 2024).

The early signs of a nationwide protest emerged in February 2024, with sporadic "ebi n' pawa" (we are hungry) protests in isolated areas, which initially lacked national significance. Organized labor groups, including the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Trade Union Congress, then took over these hunger protests with a three-day strike. However, the focus of

the strike shifted to demands for a new minimum wage, leaving the broader issues of the high cost of living affecting the general public largely unaddressed (Ayodele, 2024).

When organized labor failed to rally the public against the hardships caused by misgovernance, the trigger for protest came from the success of a Gen Z-led protest in Kenya against the 'Financial Bill.' Observing the Kenyan government's response to the demands of its protesters, Nigerian netizens believed a similar movement could take hold in their own country. As a result, the hashtag #EndBadGovernance began trending on X, with various but uncoordinated demands. Despite the diversity of the groups involved, they reached a consensus to begin a 10-day street protest starting on August 1, 2024.

As the notices for protest became a top line trend on social media platforms, the government began to pay attention. It responded by sponsoring social media counter narratives and actions to stop the protest from taking place. This use of social media as a tool for countering the protest demonstrates the government's adaptability and resourcefulness in the face of a rapidly evolving situation.

The Efforts of Government to Stop the Protest

The signs that the #EndBadGovernance movement was gaining national momentum, along with the outcomes of similar protests in Kenya and Bangladesh, prompted the Tinubu administration to unleash the full power of the state to prevent the protests from occurring (ICYMI, 2024).

The first strategy involved was framing the protest as an "Igbo protest," subtly aiming to create ethnic tension. This tactic sought to mobilize the president's Yoruba ethnic group against the Igbos, another major southern ethnic group that had fiercely contested the 2023 presidential election. This strategy gained further traction when Mr. Bayo Onanuga, the president's spokesperson, accused Mr. Peter Obi, the Labour Party's presidential candidate and an Igbo man, of sponsoring the protest. Onanuga also threatened to hold him accountable should any incidents occur (Wahab, 2024). Additionally, some government supporters were mobilized both online and offline to promote the hashtag #Igbomustgo, led by the handle 'Lagospedia' on X (Agbakwuru, 2024).

When these efforts failed to gain significant traction due to counter-narratives from Igbo social media users distancing their ethnic group from the protest, the government shifted tactics. It began sponsoring fictitious groups to publicly announce their withdrawal from the protest. This strategy aimed to undermine the protest's momentum, fostering disillusionment and discouragement among potential supporters.

Besides that, the government invited religious leaders and traditional rulers to Abuja, encouraging them to dissuade their communities from participating in the protests (Amodu, 2024). As the August 1st protest date approached, the government's narrative focused on the high likelihood of the protest being hijacked by hoodlums, warning of its potential negative impact on the economy and social cohesion (Emenike et al., 2024).



Figure 1: Picture of arrested protester: Source: Thisdaylive 2024/08/08

When foreign governments such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada issued security alert advisories ahead of the August 1 protests, it heightened the sense of caution among Nigerians. People began to panic, stocking up on goods in preparation for potential unrest. The travel advisories warned citizens of these countries to avoid areas where confrontations between security agencies and protesters might occur. They highlighted the possibility of roadblocks, checkpoints, traffic congestion, and physical confrontations, based on past protest experiences (Paulcraft, 2024).

Most schools across the country moved their closing date forward to avoid their students getting cut up by the protest. Private organisations and even local governments staff were asked to stay at home during the first week of the protests (Ogunsuyi, 2024). Even though the federal and state governments did not ask their employees to take the days off, the intensity of the government's actions to prevent the protests compelled many workers to stay home out of precaution.

As the inevitability of the protest became apparent, the governments of Lagos state and the Minister of Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, took decisive action. They obtained a court order on the eve of the protest, restraining the protesters in those cities to specific locations-Gani Fawehinmi Park, Ojota, for Lagos, and National Stadium, Abuja. This move demonstrated the

government's determination to maintain control and order in the face of mounting public dissent (Ogunrinde, 2024).

The On-ground Protest

The first two days of the 10-day protest saw significant participation across major cities in Nigeria, as citizens took to the streets to demand good governance. The turnout on both days was remarkable, with people from diverse backgrounds joining the protests in cities across both the northern and southern regions. Meanwhile, in areas where protests did not take place, residents observed a sit-at-home action, turning those locations into ghost towns (Akenroye, 2024; Princewill & Busari, 2024). The demonstrations were peaceful in the early days, with protesters carrying placards and chanting slogans that highlighted the economic hardships faced by many Nigerians. This peaceful approach demonstrated the protesters' restraint and commitment to their cause (Akenroye, 2024).

By the third day, the protest had gained momentum and spread to more regions. However, this period also marked the beginning of the government's heavy-handed response. Security forces began dispersing crowds, leading to several arrests and reports of excessive force (Achirga & Ibrahim, 2024). The flying of Russian flags by some protesters in the north fuelled concerns about foreign influence, and these were exacerbated when police announced the arrest of a foreigner in connection with the flag (Ewokor & Muia, 2024; Ridwan, 2024) and calls for regime change emerged, prompting the government to label such demands as treasonous.



Figure 2: Cross section of #EndBadGovernance protesters in Lagos Source; Vanguard

By the 6th and 7th day there was a surge in violence. Clashes between security forces and protesters became more frequent, and allegations of human rights abuses, including beatings,

tear-gassing, and shooting of protesters, surfaced, which led to the loss of lives (Osae-Brown, 2024). Amnesty International reported that 13 people lost their lives during the protest, while the police claimed the number was 7 (Are, 2024). The unrest led to instances of looting and arson, further complicating the situation with some sub-national governments in the northern parts of the country where the protest was most intense, imposing a 24-hour curfew to control the violence (Adeyemi, 2024). As of the 8th and 9th day of the protest, there were growing calls from civil society and international bodies for productive dialogue. The protest officially ended on August 10, 2024. The underlying issues remained unaddressed while the streets gradually cleared (ICYMI, 2024).

Government Response and Its Effects

Even though the #EndBadGovernance protest was populist, the Tinubu administration was conscious of projecting strength prior to, during, and after the protests. This explains the government's reluctance to engage with protest leaders, whom they dismissed as "faceless." Instead of pursuing dialogue, the administration chose to mobilize security agencies in a show of force, aimed at intimidating protesters and discouraging them from taking to the streets (Akenroye, 2024).

To weaken and slow the momentum of the protest, the government mobilised street urchins or hoodlums (poor and homeless youths) to counter protests in parts of the country, particularly the southwest where the president came from by paying them token money to disrupt the protest (Atungwu, 2024). In a place like Lagos, traditionalists (African religious worshippers) were mobilized to go around parts of the city in their traditional regalia, doing incantations and professing curses on anyone that would come out to protest in the town. The Yoruba "Oro" festival, a sacred period during which the spirits of ancestors are believed to emerge in the form of masquerades to cleanse the land, was deliberately scheduled to coincide with the proposed protest date. This timing was intended to discourage people from participating in the protests by invoking cultural and spiritual traditions (Omobola, 2024).

When it became inevitable that the protest would take place in spite of the efforts of the government to stop it, there was heavy mobilization of security personnel across significant towns and cities to scare the people (Adepegba & Odeniyi, 2024). The government also issued statements that people should go about their regular businesses but all that was ignored as the protest witnessed huge compliances nationwide (Akerroye, 2024).

The heavy-handed approach of the security agencies deployed escalated the protest into violence, particularly in the northern parts of the country. The government further intensified the situation by obtaining an interlocutory injunction to confine protesters to a specific location, without adhering to due process. The mere act of restraining protesters heightened tensions, leading to clashes and riots in some areas, which tragically resulted in the deaths of several protesters. Additionally, around 1,000 protesters, arrested since the protest ended on August 10, 2024, remain in detention. This is due to injunctions obtained from sympathetic judges, either appointed by the administration or influenced to deliver favorable rulings for the government (Chibundu, 2024).

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who sought to project an image of a strong leader by refusing to engage with the youth-led calls for an end to bad governance, was eventually forced to address the nation on the third day of the protest. However, analysts widely agree that his speech failed to address any of the protesters' demands. Since the protests ended, the government has intensified its crackdown on the organizers, labelling them as terrorists and treasonable felons. In addition, the bank accounts of individuals suspected of sponsoring the protests have been frozen, a move seen as an attempt to weaken the opposition in Nigeria (Jannamike, 2024).

The government has further expanded its crackdown by targeting labor leaders, branding them as terrorists. Journalists have also been affected, with prominent investigative reporters, many of whom are influential social media figures, being arrested and detained without trial. These actions have heightened fears that the country is sliding toward tyrannical rule.

Conclusion

The protest brought international attention to Nigeria's economic and political challenges, but the violence and controversial demands, such as regime change, overshadowed its core message. The government's response, criticized for its heavy-handed approach, left many questioning the prospects for meaningful reform.

In the future, the administration must embrace a new approach to governance that goes beyond mere protest management and instead seeks to engage citizens, particularly the youths, in meaningful dialogue and policymaking. Youth participation in governance is not just a desirable goal; it is an essential component of any strategy to ensure accountability and drive reform. The Nigerian government must also take decisive actions to reduce the cost of governance and replace its reactive, knee-jerk approach to policymaking with a more

thoughtful, inclusive, and consultative process, particularly regarding significant economic policies.

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