

Will the Lekki Toll Gate Atrocity Change Nigeria?

Blog Post by Guest Blogger for John Campbell

October 26, 2020



A view shows a road blockade at the Lekki toll gate, as Nigeria's Lagos State eases a round-the-clock curfew imposed in response to protests against alleged police brutality, after days of unrest, in Lagos, Nigeria on October 24, 2020. Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters

"Dr. Richard A. Joseph, professor emeritus at Northwestern University and previously of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, is a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations. His 1987 book Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic has done much to shape academic analysis of Nigeria and, in this op-ed, he places Nigeria's current protest movement within a broader historical and comparative context. I owe an intellectual debt to Dr. Joseph in my upcoming book Nigeria and the Nation-State: Rethinking Diplomacy with the Postcolonial World." - John Campbell

On March 21, 1960 in Sharpeville, South Africa, sixty-nine persons were killed and many wounded during protests at a police station against the detested pass laws. The massacre intensified the struggle against apartheid, but the heinous system persisted another three decades. During the Soweto Uprising of June 1976 against the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, hundreds of student protesters

were killed and thousands wounded. These tragedies were brought to mind by the October 20 atrocity in Lagos, Nigeria. A campaign against police brutality had endured for two weeks. After the largest demonstration in that city, as night fell, a barrage of live ammunition was unleashed by security forces against unarmed protesters.

Nigeria's governance system is oppressive, though it lacks an evocative name like apartheid. A small percentage of the population benefits from the country's wealth while most citizens are condemned to lives of deprivation and penury. In his second book on Nigeria, *Nigeria and the Nation-State: Rethinking Diplomacy with the Postcolonial World*, former U.S. Ambassador John Campbell describes its essential features. Campbell contends that viewing Nigeria through the prism of the nation-state is a mistake. The federal government is largely sustained by income from petroleum exports. An "elite cartel" competes for, and controls access to, a significant part of this income. Whatever effective governance exists, he argues, is usually found in subnational states and associational groups.

Africa in Transition

John Campbell and Michelle Gavin track political and security developments across sub-Saharan Africa. *Most weekdays.*

Email Address

Submit

[View all newsletters >](#)

Leading scholars strain for terms to describe Nigeria. Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka once remarked that "it was too complex an entity." Oxford scholar Wale Adebaniwi entitled his book on the struggle to curb corruption *A Paradise for Maggots*. For the

international edition, Adebanwi borrowed a milder title from a song by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti: *Authority Stealing*. In a similar vein, Harvard scholar Biodun Jeyifo entitled his collection of essays *Against the Predators' Republic*.

Four decades ago, I published my first essay on “prebendalism” in Nigeria. The concept concerns the treatment of state offices as “prebends” to be captured in a variety of ways. Their resources, or access to them, are primarily used for self-enrichment and the nurturing of clientelistic relations. This analytical framework provides the scaffolding for much subsequent analyses of Nigerian politics and government.

The tragic episodes of brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), while dismaying, are not new occurrences. Reports from human rights organizations are replete with details of violent abuses of state power. Traffic policing involves, to a significant degree, the extortion of bribes from road users. When soldiers or police are summoned to control public disturbances, excessive force often follows. As a consequence of the May 25 slaying of African American George Floyd, the Nigerian campaign against police misconduct had already attracted international attention. The October 20 atrocity has not only been shocking but raised alarms about what exactly is happening in Nigeria.

In June 2018 the World Poverty Clock declared that Nigeria has the largest number of poor people in the world (i.e., exceeding India, which has a population several times greater). Protesters are shouting “we want change” and have expanded their complaints to “government corruption, economic mismanagement, and nepotism.” I have argued in several documents during the past year that Nigeria was confronting possible existential challenges. Commentators who use such expressions as “Nigeria is falling apart” or “burning to the ground” are not being alarmist. Here are further considerations:

The multiparty democracy inaugurated in 1999, following fifteen years of military

government, has stalled. The costs to maintain it are high while its output in development policies is meagre.

Muhammadu Buhari, Nigeria's current president, was also its first military leader after the overthrow of the Second Republic on December 31, 1983. At seventy-seven years of age, and after many years in government leadership positions, he appears diminished in authority, vitality, and responsiveness.

State excesses are reminiscent of abuses during the first Buhari era in 1984–1985. (SARS, held responsible for the early October killings, is reminiscent of a mobile police unit during the 1980s and 1990s nicknamed “Kill-and-Go”.)

A respected former minister of education and World Bank vice president, Dr. Obiagiele Ezekweseli, estimated in January 2013 that “\$400 billion of Nigeria's oil revenue has been stolen or misused since the country's independence in 1960.” Over 80 percent of these revenues, she contended, “ended up in the hands of 1 percent of the population.” Moreover, “as much as 20 percent of the entire capital expenditure [of government] will end up in private pockets annually.”

Tens of billions more have likely been diverted from government revenues since 2013. Landry Signé, of the Brookings Institution and Stanford University, and his colleagues argue that illicit financial flows are equivalent to two-thirds of foreign direct investments in Africa. Matthew Page has tracked the laundering of “fugitive funds” from Nigeria in substantial property holdings overseas.

Violent conflicts in Nigeria are perennial: militant groups in the southern, oil-producing Delta; Boko Haram and other self-declared jihadis in the northeast; cattle raiders and teams of bandits in the northwest; and armed herders in the midwest now involved in conflicts with farmers in the upper southwest. Insecurity, accompanied by distrust of federal police and army units, is pervasive.

Amb. Campbell calls, in *Nigeria and the Nation-State*, for a “rethink” of what is Nigeria. Nigerian public commentators contend that “the country is not working” and that a fundamental “redesign” should be contemplated.

The October 21 declaration by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in a *New York Times* op-ed that “Nigeria could burn to the ground” should be taken seriously. Amb. Campbell’s 2011 book, *Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink*, did not elicit an appropriate response, especially from Nigerian politicians and political analysts. The country has since fallen far from the “brink”.

The brutal killings and wounding at the Lekki Toll Gate, after being thoroughly investigated, should not be ribbon-wrapped along with the enunciation of grand reforms. Such gestures are no longer adequate. A country of over 200 million is in distress. Moreover, several states in the region no longer enjoy legitimacy or effective capacity.


The 2023 national elections are “in the beyond”. Party political gamesmanship, replete with the “underground” campaign (i.e., thuggery, vote-buying, and ballot-box snatching) cannot be relied on to get Nigeria out of the Dismal Tunnel. Calls for a “national conference” and “restructuring” have repeatedly been brushed off by government leaders.

I have suggested concrete steps to finding an exit from the Dismal Tunnel: a national non-partisan government; distilling the values and practices in institutions of legitimate and effective governance; a multi-year campaign—similar to the anti-colonial, anti-apartheid, and anti-racism movements—to mobilize organizations across Nigeria, and its diaspora, to identify ways to transform destructive behaviors; and the deliberate nurturing of institutions of capacity and integrity in state and society.

Nigeria, I suggested a decade ago, is a “toll-gate society”. (This expression refers to the bribery that occurs in everyday transactions and which impede economic growth and development.) These words have now acquired sacral meaning. The number who reportedly died on October 20 appears small compared to those who fell in Sharpeville, Soweto, Tiananmen Square, and Tahrir Square. But the manner in which they perished—in a hail of soldiers’ bullets, under the cover of darkness, while peacefully protesting—should shake this proud nation to its core.

Never to be erased from memory is a police dog straining at the leash to attack a civil rights demonstrator in Birmingham, Alabama; or a Vietnamese girl, clothing stripped, screaming from burns caused by a napalm attack; or a single man standing in front of a line of tanks at Tiananmen Square. Although no pictures of the killing and maiming at the Lekki Toll Gate have surfaced, the horror was globally experienced. The atrocity of October 20, 2020 is a signal to rewind the Nigerian clock and redesign a polity whose agents can wantonly extinguish the lives of innocent citizens.

Learn more about John Campbell's upcoming book, *Nigeria and the Nation-State: Rethinking Diplomacy with the Postcolonial World*, out in early December 2020.

 Creative Commons: Some rights reserved.

Nigeria: Fear of Repression

Blog Post *by* John Campbell

October 23, 2020



Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari sits before giving a televised address in Abuja, Nigeria on October 22, 2020. Nigeria Presidency/Handout via Reuters

Western media is reporting that violence in Lagos—initially connected to protests against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit—is intensifying. Lagos is under a twenty-four-hour curfew, and, for the first time, a state in the oil patch, Delta, has also imposed a curfew. Media also reports that in Lagos the violence has spread to Victoria Island and Ikoyi, upmarket neighborhoods.

President Muhammadu Buhari addressed the nation on October 22, calling for protesters to consider “the various well-thought-out initiatives” his administration has put forth as an alternative to protests “being used by some subversive elements to cause chaos.” He, however, made no mention of those killed thus far—Amnesty International has documented at least twelve deaths in Lagos and fifty-six nationwide, but there really is no definitive number.

On social media, fears are being expressed that the Buhari administration could move to severe repression. Many Lagosians, in particular, recall Buhari's brutality when he was military chief of state in the 1980s.

Africa in Transition

John Campbell and Michelle Gavin track political and security developments across sub-Saharan Africa. *Most weekdays.*



Creative Commons: Some rights reserved.
Email Address
