

politics

How anxiety over hunger protest triggered FG's emergency policies

Given how the hunger protest has played out in different locations across the country, **IMOLEAYO OYEDEYI** examines the Federal Government's failed attempt to stop the mass demonstration through a series of emergency policies

NIGERIANS are angry, and their apparent fury was demonstrated across the country on Thursday when they hit different cities to protest against the prevailing economic hardship plaguing them under the current Renewed Hope administration of President Bola Tinubu.

Despite frantic efforts, threats, and a series of court orders from the Nigerian Police, the military, and the Federal Government to force them into confined demonstrations, the angry protesters thronged major streets in key states of the federation to register their displeasure, displaying placards with various inscriptions such as #EndBadGovernance, #TinubuMustGo, etc.

They demanded an end to bad governance in the country and the reversal of some of the defining policies of Tinubu's government, which include the removal of the fuel subsidy and the floating of the naira.

In an apparent displeasure with the socio-economic state of the country, the protesters chanted various solidarity songs, defying spirited efforts from the police to silence them through the firing of teargas canisters.

The protests had begun peacefully but later took a violent turn in some cities as confrontations intensified between the police and the irate throng.

Amid the ensuing violence, no fewer than 17 persons reportedly lost their lives in Kano, Niger, Borno, Kaduna, Jigawa states, and Abuja during the #EndBadGovernance mass demonstrations.

One person was shot dead in Abuja and Kano, two were killed in Jigawa, six others were reportedly gunned down by security forces in Niger, while four died in Borno and three in Kaduna.

The protests paralysed economic activities in most states of the country as businesses, banks, shopping plazas, and some markets were shut on Thursday over the fear of mass looting and carnage, which later enveloped the demonstrations, especially in some northern states.

According to observers, flashes of growing mass discontent had hit the country days before the protest, sending jitters down the spines of the Federal Government. Amid the development, the state governors and ministers held various emergency meetings to prevent the August 1 showdown, but all to no avail.

Like the 2012 #OccupyNigeria protests and the 2020 #EndSARS demonstration, during which the pushback against government insensitivity and profligacy resounded breath-takingly across the country and even among Nigerians in the Diaspora, many observers believe that the August 1 protest was another avenue for the Nigerian youths to peacefully and collectively register their anger and displeasure with the misery enveloping the country under the present administration.

As initially predicted, the protest



Even though the United Nations Department of Safety and Security had expressed worries that the planned protests could be hijacked by groups with ulterior motives and turned into a violent adventure, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar threw his weight behind the mass action, declaring it constitutional.

President Tinubu, however, issued a mass appeal, assuring that his administration was already working to address the grievances of the seething masses. And truly, the President carried out some emergency measures to appease the displeased youths.

Less than 48 hours to the planned mass action, Tinubu created centres across the country where Nigerians can purchase a 50kg bag of rice for N40,000.

He also directed the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited to sell crude to the Dangote Refinery and other upcoming refineries in naira.

Although the President had earlier announced that he might stop the importation of import duties on food and essential commodities, he later suspended import duties to cushion the effect of the inflationary trend in Nigeria. However, on Monday, he removed the duties on food importation.

The Federal Government also unveiled the Youth Internship Scheme initiated by the NNDC for 10,000 youths of the Niger Delta region and approved N50,000 monthly stipends for them.

This was just as the Nigerian Communications Commission directed telecommunications operators to immediately restore all blocked phone lines due to the non-linkage of National Identification Numbers to SIM cards.

President Tinubu also on Monday signed the new Minimum Wage Act into law. However, the catalogue of emergency directives failed to deter the protesters.

But despite the moves from the Federal Government, the question on the lips of some observers is whether most of those in the corridors of power in the current administration have the moral standing to caution the masses against an anti-government demonstration, despite being the driving forces that triggered the 2012 #OccupyNigeria protests against the Goodluck Jonathan administration for removing the fuel subsidy.

This was just as some other political watchers felt the protest was ill-timed because it is still early to start crucifying the present administration for the current state of the country, which they largely blamed on the brazen and clueless economic mismanagement exhibited by its predecessor.

Speaking with *Sunday PUNCH*, a constitutional lawyer, Dr Tunji Abayomi,

said even though the youths had the right to protest, the demonstration must be done with caution, so as not to violate the conditions that underpin their legal freedom to protest.

"They (the government) have a right to say people should not protest. But a protest is evidence of discomfort. But that doesn't stop the people from protesting. So, what I am saying is: the government has a right as a matter of self-preservation to ask people not to protest."

"It is like the husband asking the wife not to fight. Even if the husband has done something wrong, it is normal and that's why he can ask the wife not to fight. Likewise, the government can ask the citizens not to protest. It is within the nexus of self-preservation."

"But if the people have a case, they can protest. However, I think what the government should do is to guide the protest in a way that is not turned into an abuse. This is because freedom to protest is a conditional right. It is not absolute. So, it is important for the youths not to violate the conditions," Abayomi stated.

He noted, "Every government will obviously be worried because of the energy of the youths and their limited tendencies for reflection, control, and soberness. We all saw what happened in Kenya. But having said that, the solution to Nigeria's problems is not protest."

"When a protest occurs, especially when it becomes uncontrolled, it worsens the situation of any country. Come to think of it, what will be the essence of the protest? It is that we are unhappy, discontented, and dissatisfied. But these are all well-known facts."

"Even the President has said that he knows the pains of the people. So, what will then be the essence of the protest? Will it be to repeat the obvious? And then, those youths with genuine agitation also need to be careful, lest it is perceived as recklessness. I say this because we currently have a situation where political figures in the opposition are backing the protests."

However, a public interest lawyer, Inibehe Effiong, said the protest was long overdue because the government had been depleting scarce public resources on irrelevant and extravagant expenditures.

"The protest is long overdue. Nigerians are experiencing excruciating economic hardship. At the same time, the government is depleting scarce public resources to fund the extravagant lifestyle of the President and other people in government. The prices of basic commodities have gone up exponentially."

"We have not seen any major efforts towards institutional reforms. Corruption is still rife. Nepotism is also now fully entrenched. So, there are 1,001 reasons Nigerians should protest, but to say that there have to be clearly defined demands before people can protest is just misguided," Effiong stated.

In a similar vein, another lawyer, Festus Ogun, told *Sunday PUNCH* that the protest was very consequential and symptomatic of the bad governance and insensitivity of the current administration to the people's plights.

"Protest is a constitutional right that is guaranteed under Sections 39, 40, and 41 of the constitution. You cannot beat a child and expect that the child will not cry. The people of Nigeria have been cheated and oppressed for too long. So, the protest is only a consequence of bad governance and leadership that we experience on a daily basis. It is simply consequential. For every action, there must be consequences," the lawyer said.

As Abayomi stated, the government will likely not back down on its resolve to see an end to the protest. Amid the rising calls from the government quarters, only time will tell whether the organisers of the protest will bow to the rising pressure anytime soon.