

# Nigerian government forced to drop treason charges carrying death penalty against 119 cost-of-living protesters

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On November 5, Nigeria's Federal High Court in the capital city Abuja dismissed charges against 119 protesters arrested for participating in mass anti-austerity demonstrations in August. Protesters had been charged with treason, felony and inciting mutiny, and faced possible death penalties if found guilty. Around 30 of the charged protesters were underage, some as young as 14 years old.

According to Nigerian activist groups, the young protesters had been held in detention for around three months since their arrest in August and imprisoned in adult jails. So malnourished and weak were they after months of detention in squalid conditions that, arraigned in court on November 1, at least four of the children collapsed and had to be removed from the courtroom to receive urgent medical attention.

Videos of the children writhing in pain on the courtroom floor went viral across Nigeria, leading to widespread outrage and calls on social media for their immediate release. Nigerian rights organisation Enough is Enough described the imprisonment and treason charges against the minors as “institutional child abuse”, while Amnesty International stated, “Putting minors through these horrifying detentions for participating in protests against hunger and corruption is—so far—one of the deadliest attempts to suppress freedom of assembly.”

Under mounting popular pressure in Nigeria and internationally, President Bola Tinubu was forced into a tactical retreat, ordering the release of the underage protesters on November 4, with the Federal High Court dismissing charges against the remaining 90 adult protesters the following day.

According to Minister of Information Mohammed Idris, Tinubu has called for an investigation into the security operatives involved in the arrest and detention of the children and ordered the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs to help with their rehabilitation. In a cynical effort to quell public anger, Vice President Kashim Shettima also received the 119 released protesters at the presidential villa in Abuja

on Tuesday 5, before handing them to their respective state governors to be returned home.

Despite the release of the protesters, the Nigerian government has made clear that this marks no retreat from its relentless offensive against the working class. At the reception on Tuesday, Shettima stated that the prisoners had only been released “on humanitarian grounds, despite incontrovertible digital video and photographic evidence of the perpetration [of criminal actions].”

Thousands of protesters, many of them young, had taken to the streets across Nigeria during 10 days of demonstrations between August 1 and 10, held under the slogans #NoMoreHunger and #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria. They were met with savage police repression, with over 1,000 arrested, at least 22 killed by security forces and many more assaulted with tear gas.

The fifth major action against Tinubu since he came to power last year, the demonstrations were called to protest the soaring cost of living, high unemployment and rampant government corruption. Tinubu was invested as president in May 2023 after an election marred by violence, fraud and other irregularities, in which voter turnout was 27 percent—the lowest in Nigeria's history.

Tinubu has introduced a raft of pro-market policies, including floating the Nigerian naira, previously pegged to the US dollar, and ending a decades-long fuel subsidy, in return for World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans. This led to a rapid doubling of the price of petrol on which many Nigerians rely to generate electricity for their homes. Since then, the Nigerian currency has lost around 70 percent of its value, pushing inflation up to a 28-year high and sparking a crushing cost-of-living crisis.

Further exacerbating the government's crisis is the far lower than expected oil production than the 1.78 million bpd assumed in the 2024 federal budget. While Nigeria's oil production accounts for just over 5 percent of the country's GDP, it accounts for more than 70 percent of government

revenues, leading to a higher than expected budget deficit of 7 percent. This, combined with Nigeria's high cost of debt servicing—a massive 74 percent of the federal budget for the first half of 2024—lies behind IMF projections that this is unlikely to fall below 70 percent before 2026, and then only temporarily. At the same time, Nigeria is expected to seek further loans.

Inflation on food hit 37.8 percent in September, a slight drop from its high point of 40.87 percent in June. General inflation rates stood at 32.7 percent in September, down from 34 percent in early summer—the highest since 1996. Around 40 percent of Nigeria's population, or an estimated 87 million people, live in extreme poverty, on the equivalent of less than \$2.15 a day.

Nigeria's economy has been buffeted by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and higher global food and fertiliser prices following the NATO-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as domestic shocks such as the devastating floods in October 2022 and September 2024. Ethnic and religious conflicts have disrupted agriculture—particularly in northern Nigeria, where the bulk of food production occurs—interfering with supply chains and leading to food shortages across the country.

All of this has led to extreme food insecurity among Nigeria's 220 million-strong population, with 18 million people estimated to be food insecure by the International Monetary Fund. The United Nations has labelled the country one of a handful of "hotspots of very high concern" for hunger, its second-highest rating. Only Palestine, Sudan, South Sudan, Haiti and Mali are ranked worse, all of which have been wracked by civil war, violent political instability or, in the case of Palestine, subjected to an imperialist-backed genocide. A report this week from the UN's World Food Program found that a staggering 33 million people will suffer acute food insecurity in Nigeria in 2025, with the number facing emergency levels of need projected to almost double.

The cost-of-living protests in August followed a general strike in June to demand an increase in Nigeria's poverty-level minimum wage. Workers began indefinite industrial action on June 3, shutting down airports and the national grid, and severely impacting banks, hospitals and schools.

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) had initially called for a new minimum monthly wage of N615,000 (\$370) in May, stating that "Any figure below this amount becomes a starvation wage and condemns Nigerian workers and their families to perpetual poverty"—before reducing the demand to N494,000 (\$290).

Two days after June's "indefinite strike" began, however, the NLC called it off with the lying claim that the government was considering raising the minimum wage to

N250,000. To pre-empt the demonstrations called for August, the Tinubu regime eventually agreed to increase the minimum wage from N30,000 (\$18) to N70,000 (\$43) a month in July, a tiny fraction of what the union bureaucracy had claimed to be fighting for.

A further round of cost-of-living demonstrations took place on October 1 to coincide with local elections and Nigeria's Independence Day celebrations, marking 64 years since the end of British colonial rule in 1960. Five organisers were arrested in Kano, Nigeria's second-largest city, while police used teargas to disperse crowds in Abuja and Port Harcourt. Protests took place in Lagos, Ibadan and various other towns and cities across Nigeria.

The strikes and protests demonstrate that there is no lack of willingness in the Nigerian working class to fight. In this, Nigeria is not unique. Mass protests and strikes against austerity, police brutality and corruption have taken place in dozens of African countries, including Kenya and Uganda, led predominantly by young people.

But crucial lessons must be drawn. The ruling class is incapable of addressing any of the basic economic and social issues facing the working class and rural poor in Nigeria or across the African continent. This confirms Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which explained that, in the epoch of imperialism, the fight for social and democratic rights for workers and the oppressed masses in the former colonial countries can only be accomplished by the working class in a fight for political power.

Today, this means uniting the working class and rural poor across racial, ethnic and gender lines and across national borders. It requires the building of independent working-class organisations of struggle, imbued with a socialist perspective, and separate from and hostile to the parties of the national bourgeoisie and the trade union bureaucracies. Above all, this means the founding of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Nigeria, across Africa and in every country around the world.



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