



# Policy Brief

Balancing Law Enforcement,  
Public Trust & Human Rights in  
Protest Policing Management



**CLEAN**  
FOUNDATION  
*Justice Sector Reform*



**TETRA TECH**  
International Development

**D**emocratic policing is at the coalface of human rights and the legal system. That is to say, in democratic society policing is the first and central actors in mediating between social conditions and legal stricture, determining in large measure what is legal, fair, and just. At the same time, policing in democracies demands attention to human rights and constitutional protections. Local policing is on the front stage of the legal system and invested with considerable discretion in determining Policing through Human Rights, social facts and then applying legal remedies to the facts so interpreted. At the same time, policing is organized to protect the interests of the minority and the weaker segments of society. Democracies have considerable responsibility to balance order with liberty.

The right to peaceful protest is a fundamental human right enshrined in international and Nigerian laws. The policing of civil protests in Nigeria has remained a contentious issue, often characterized by excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and a disregard for human rights. This has led to a breakdown of trust between citizens and law enforcement agencies, fueling further tensions and violence. Findings from the August 2024 nationwide protests by CLEEN Foundation indicate a pattern of heavy-handed enforcement by law enforcement agencies (LEAs), leading to casualties, unlawful detentions, and heightened tensions between security personnel and the public.

Nigeria has a long history of public protests driven by grievances over governance, economic conditions, and human rights concerns. The #EndBadGovernance protests of August 2024 highlighted systemic failures in protest management, including: Deployment of excessive force, including the use of live ammunition, Arbitrary arrests and detentions without accountability, Attacks on journalists covering protests, The presence of juveniles in protests and Ineffective engagement between law enforcement and community stakeholders. These issues underscore the need for a comprehensive reform of protest policing in Nigeria to align with international human rights standards and best practices.

This policy brief outlines the key challenges in policing civil protests in Nigeria and provides key reforms to enhance accountability, ensure law enforcement adherence to human rights standards, and foster trust between the police and the citizens.

## **Key Issues/challenges Identified**

- 1. Use of Excessive Force:** Reports indicate that law enforcement personnel used live ammunition, tear gas, and water cannons against largely peaceful protesters, leading to multiple fatalities and injuries.
- 2. Lack of Accountability:** There is no comprehensive record of arrested protesters, raising concerns about extrajudicial detentions and abuses.
- 3. Human Rights Violations:** Arbitrary arrests, suppression of media coverage, and restrictions on movement violated fundamental rights enshrined in Nigeria's constitution and international conventions.
- 4. Inadequate Crowd Control Training:** Many officers lack proper training in non-violent crowd management, leading to preventable escalations.
- 5. Presence of Armed Groups and Unregulated Small Arms:** The involvement of armed thugs and the seizure of weapons from protest sites reflect the security risks associated with poor regulation of civilian arms possession.
- 6. Imposition of curfew and Court Orders:** State and local government authorities imposed arbitrary restrictions, curfews and some using court orders to restrict the civil protest to specific location in the state while misinformation fueled tensions between protesters and law enforcement.
- 7. Lack of Clear Guidelines/Standard Operating Procedure on Policing civil protest:** There is an absence of well-defined, consistently enforced policies on how police should handle peaceful demonstrations.
- 8. Arbitrary arrests and detention:** Protesters are frequently arrested and detained without due process, often based on flimsy charges or without any evidence of wrongdoing.
- 9. Poor training and equipment:** Law enforcement personnel often lack adequate training in crowd management and human rights, and are not equipped with non-lethal crowd control tools.
- 10. Lack of trust:** The heavy-handed approach to policing protests has eroded trust between citizens and law enforcement agencies, making it difficult to de-escalate tensions and prevent violence.

## Policy Recommendations

### For the Executive:

1. **Provision of Modern Policing equipment:** Provide law enforcement personnel with modern policing equipment and regular training on the use of the equipment to respond to crowd control. Equip them with the necessary equipment to manage protests peacefully and effectively.
2. **Restrict Military Involvement in Civil Protest Policing:** The Nigerian military should not be deployed for civilian protest control, except in extreme cases of national security threats.

### For the Legislature:

3. **Strengthen Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms:** The Police Service Commission and the National Human Rights Commission should establish independent review panels to investigate cases of police misconduct during protests in Nigeria.

### For the Judiciary:

4. **Safeguard Journalistic Freedom:** The Nigerian government must uphold press freedom and protect journalists covering protests from harassment and violence.

### For the Security Agencies:

5. **Adopt a Rights-Based Approach to Protest Policing:** Law enforcement agencies must adhere to international human rights standards, ensuring protests are managed without violating civil liberties. Develop and Enforce a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Protest Policing, Adopt a clear, publicly accessible SOP aligned with international standards, such as the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms. Ensure police interventions prioritize de-escalation and dialogue over coercion. Prohibit the use of live ammunition and unnecessary force against peaceful protesters.
6. **Enhance Law Enforcement Training:** The Nigerian Police Force and other security agencies should undergo continuous training in crowd management, human rights, de-escalation techniques, and the lawful use of force. Training curriculum on policing civil protest to be developed and mainstreamed in the training

institutions of law enforcement agencies.

**7. Mandate the Use of Body Cameras and Non-Lethal Weapons:** All law enforcement personnel deployed to protest sites should be equipped with body cameras, rubber bullets, and water cannons to enhance accountability and reduce unnecessary violence.

#### **For the Civil Society:**

**8. Improve Police-Community Engagement:** Law enforcement should collaborate with civil society organizations, media, and community leaders to create a framework for peaceful protest policing. Law enforcement agencies should prioritize non-violent crowd control methods, such as dialogue, negotiation, and de-escalation techniques. The use of force should be a last resort and proportionate to the threat posed.

**9. Regulate the Use of Juveniles in Protests:** Awareness campaigns should educate communities on the dangers of involving minors in protests, and legal measures should be enforced to prevent child exploitation.

## Conclusion

The August 2024 protests underscored the urgent need for reforms in civil protest policing in Nigeria. Improving the policing of civil protests in Nigeria is crucial for protecting human rights, promoting peaceful expression, and fostering a healthy relationship between citizens and law enforcement agencies. By adopting a rights-based, accountable, and professional approach, Nigeria can foster a safer and more conducive environment for democratic expression.



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