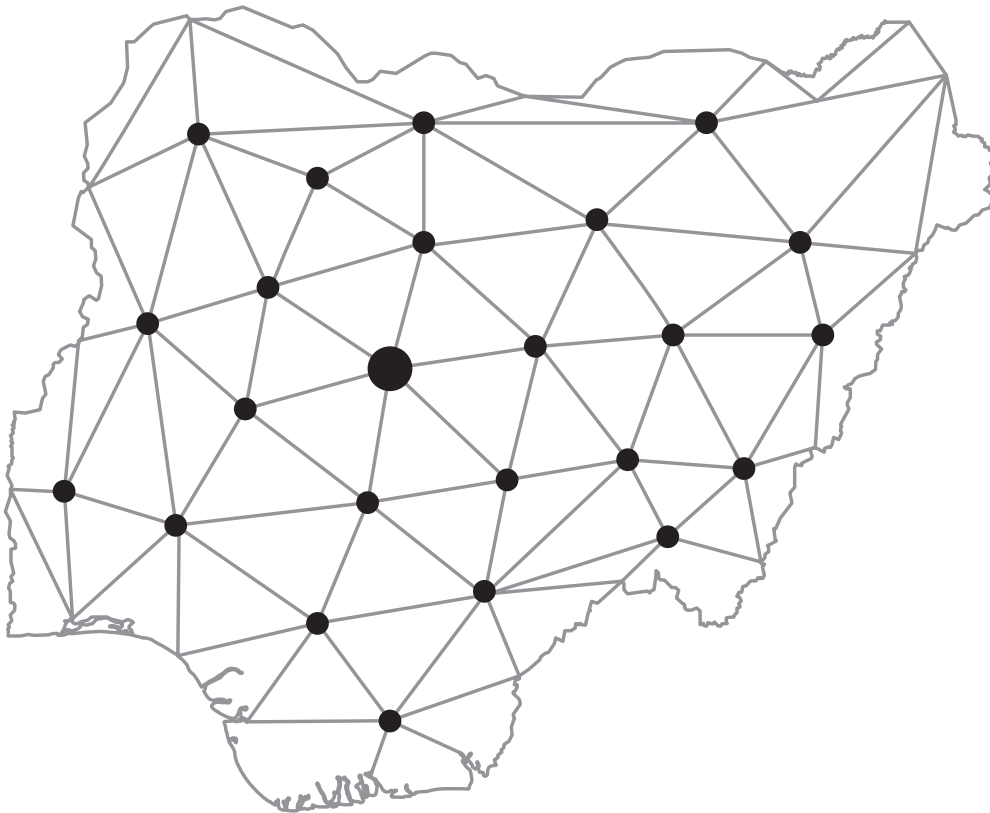


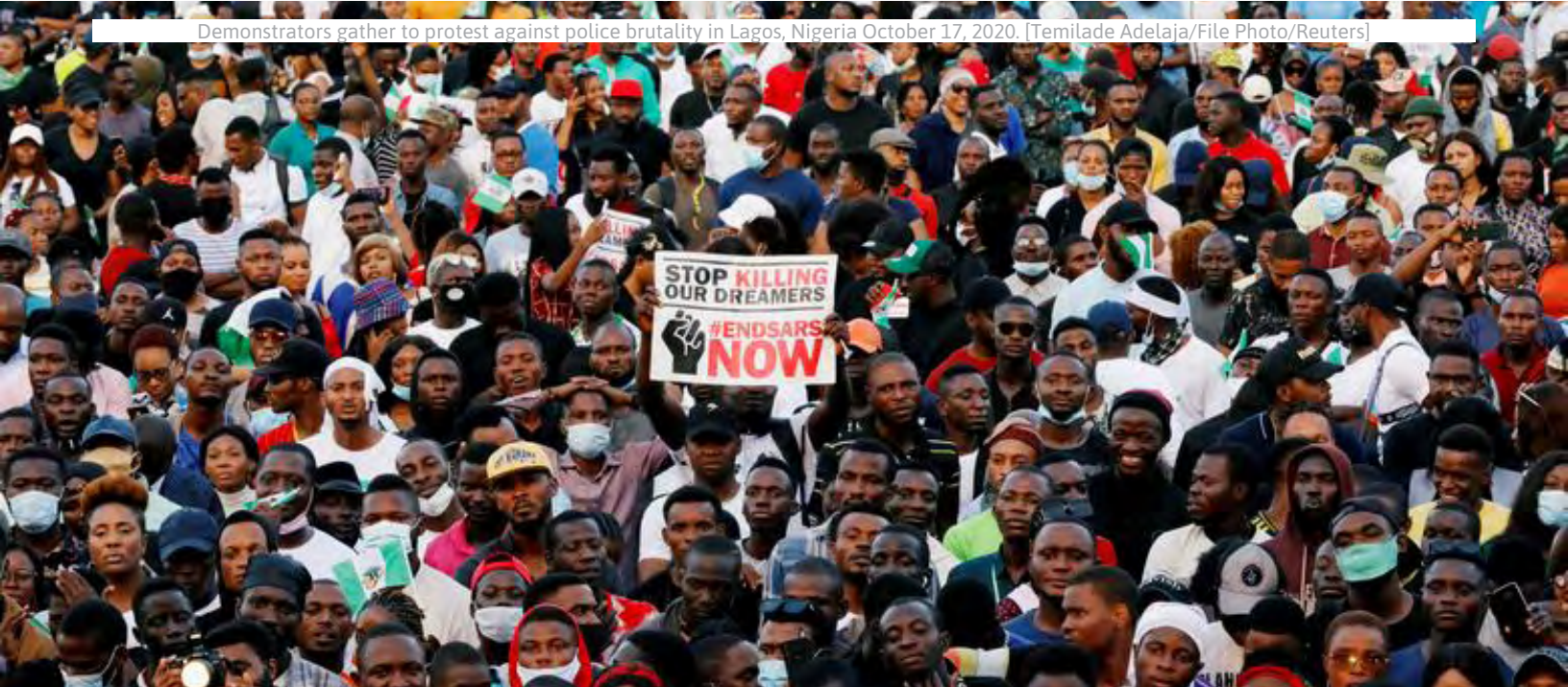
FEATURED INSIGHT

# NIGERIA: Ethnicity, Religion, Region



In this **“Featured Insight”** series we continue to examine the question, “Are race and ethnicity universal issues that employers should be addressing with a common approach?” Our first piece compared the unique situations in the United Kingdom, Brazil, and Malaysia/Singapore; the second, follow-up article examined the same question with a focus on **India**. Although race and ethnicity are social constructs whose definitions change with the historical context, human perceptions of these constructs are nonetheless powerful and consequential.<sup>1</sup>

Demonstrators gather to protest against police brutality in Lagos, Nigeria October 17, 2020. [Temilade Adelaja/File Photo/Reuters]



For part three of this ongoing series, we return to the Global South, highlighting the country of Nigeria. This country, Africa’s largest national economy, is an economic powerhouse with a complex history and a fractured present. People with similar skin color share control of the government and yet are separated by a host of different factors, including ethnicity, religion, and political interests. Many of the country’s residents pride themselves on their entrepreneurial ingenuity, their skills as problem-solvers, and their freedom of speech and expression.<sup>2</sup> Nigeria’s cultural vibrancy, including its large “Nollywood” film industry, renowned musicians, and a diaspora of 15 million citizens living abroad (major destinations include the U.S. and the U.K.), give the country a soft power that extends well beyond its economic influence. Understanding the tensions and the opportunities that exist within Nigeria today is one key to grasping the human potential across a massive continent that is larger than China, the United States, and Brazil combined.

This in-depth resource explores the question of what diversity in Nigeria means and analyzes current issues regarding equity and inclusion. Multinational organizations—corporations, educational institutions, or NGOs—must be able to respond to these issues to realize their objectives.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Ta-Nehisi Coates, “What we mean when we say ‘Race is a social Construct,’” *The Atlantic*, May 13, 2015; <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/05/what-we-mean-when-we-say-race-is-a-social-construct/275872/> “Our notion of what constitutes ‘white’ and what constitutes ‘black’ is a product of social context.”

<sup>2</sup> “The Best Thing about Nigeria is...” *BBC News*, March 27, 2015; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32036328>

# SARS Protests

Nigeria has been in the global spotlight for large public demonstrations against the country’s Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). This branch of the national police force has been accused of abuse of power, police brutality, unfair profiling of law-abiding citizens, and other charges that will sound familiar to those who have followed the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States and elsewhere. Nigerian demonstrators have made explicit references to Black Lives Matter themselves while appealing to global celebrities for support and have even succeeded in persuading [Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter](#), to endorse their cause, putting him in an alliance with the rap musician Kanye West.

However, those accustomed to seeing the issues cataloged by anti-SARS protestors through the black vs. white racial lens that is so much an integral part of U.S. history would likely find Nigeria puzzling. There are few whites in the country, citizenship is reserved primarily for people with indigenous ancestry, and influential positions in national, state, and local governments are held almost exclusively by blacks.

# Historical Context

Many Nigerians are quick to cite their country’s colonial history as one source of its current challenges. In the early 1900s, Great Britain brought together different administrative regions and tribal groups to form the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, which finally gained its independence in 1960. Nigeria today combines more than 300 ethnic groups and 500 languages—the four largest ethnic groups are the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (or Ibo), and Ijaw. The country’s major political fault lines are religious as well as ethnic. The Hausa or Hausa-

Fulani groups in the north are primarily Muslim, and were formerly part of the Sokoto Caliphate conquered by the British in the early 1900s. The Yoruba, Igbo, and Ijaw in the south are predominantly Christian.

British government and commercial interests encouraged the export of natural resources and agricultural cash crops. This policy shaped Nigeria’s developing economy, which



now relies on oil exports as a primary source of government income, and must import manufactured goods and food supplies due to its own lack of economic diversification. Nigeria's oil industry was nationalized in 1971, but relationships with multinational enterprises continue through joint ventures; approximately half of the country's crude oil production comes from a controversial joint venture with the Anglo-Dutch enterprise Royal Dutch Shell.

## Ethno-Religious Conflict

More than a century after colonial Nigeria was assembled, the country now faces internal conflicts, with its citizens separated by a host of different factors, including politics, culture, and religion. Unlike other nations with a clear majority/minority split in terms of religious affiliation, the numbers of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria are roughly equal. The Muslim-dominated north holds a slight edge in terms of population and has generally been Nigeria's preeminent political force, although government control rotates by informal agreement between leaders from the Muslim north and the Christian south. The country's regional differences have come to be reflected within its major cities as well through internal migration:



*Cities remain largely segregated along ethno-religious lines, and confrontation between ethnic groups is common. Often, ethnic clashes in one part of the country can set off a chain of reprisal riots and attacks in other parts of the country. All major ethnic groups have formed militias to protect their own interests and perpetrate violence on other groups. While illegal, these vigilante groups continue to act with impunity for lack of stringent law enforcement.<sup>3</sup>*

In this environment, conflicts that might otherwise be seen as primarily political or economic—e.g., disputes regarding government appointments or conflicts over land or cattle—are viewed through a religious lens, with Muslims and Christians taking sides against each other. Thousands of Nigerians have died in riots and through other forms of violence at their fellow citizens' hands, with accompanying destruction of property and forced internal migration of displaced communities. While Nigeria's leaders have been democratically elected since 1999, a prior series of coups and attempted coups, decades of military rule and regular charges of election fraud mean that the country's democratic institutions are tenuous.

<sup>3</sup> "Ethnicity in Nigeria," PBS News Hour, April 5, 2007; [https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/africa-jan-june07-ethnic\\_04-05](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/africa-jan-june07-ethnic_04-05)

## Regional Differences

There are clear distinctions between Nigeria's regions in terms of economic development and access to education. The north, with fewer natural resources and less industry, also has some of the world's highest rates of illiteracy. "Nigeria has 13 million out-of-school children, the highest in the world, according to UNICEF, and more than 69% of them are in the north. As a result, the region has Nigeria's lowest literacy rates, with some states recording just 8%."<sup>4</sup>

Many political leaders in the north have resisted what they see as the negative social impacts of Westernization, countering these suspect influences through actions such as the imposition of Sharia, or Islamic Law in areas under their control. Boko Haram, the extremist Muslim group based in Nigeria's northeast, attacked a girls' school and kidnapped hundreds of students, many of whom are still missing, citing religious justification for opposing the education of girls. Other attacks on schools have continued.

## Ethnic Elites

Rather than having a single established majority population that controls the lion's share of the economy, in Nigeria a relatively small number of elite members of each major ethnic group have monopolized and exploited the nation's resources at the expense of other citizens.



Nigeria is the largest

oil and gas producer in Africa, and vast wealth has been generated from its rich oil reserves centered in the Niger Delta. However, predictions that the country's economy would undergo a sustained boom thanks to these resources have not been realized, as kleptocratic elites have siphoned off the nation's wealth for their personal benefit while struggling with each other for control. Endemic corruption is abetted by Nigeria's lack of an effective social safety net and a tradition of mutual support among family members, which means that individuals who attain positions of power are likely to receive constant appeals for support from members of their extended family.

<sup>3</sup>"Nigeria turns 60: Can Africa's most populous nation remain united?", BBC News, October 1, 2020; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54357810>

Meanwhile, national and state governments run by corrupt elites have often failed to provide even basic services such as quality education, medical care, access to clean drinking water, or a steady supply of electricity to the wider population. Chronic inflation, especially in the price of basic food staples, has created food insecurity for much of the population<sup>5</sup> — the unemployment rate is currently over 25%, and 40% of Nigerians, or almost 83 million people, live below the country's poverty line of \$382 (U.S. dollars) in annual income.<sup>6</sup> Such shortcomings often lead to mutual finger-pointing that exacerbates ethnic and religious tensions:



*Mismanagement of national resources and misrule by multi-ethnic and multi-religious coalitions of successive rulers since independence have impoverished and denied opportunities to the majority of Nigerians. As a result, religious rhetoric blaming members of other religious communities and proposals for religious reform as a solution to society's ills have found purchase among the masses.”<sup>7</sup>*

Governance issues in many parts of Nigeria are also affected by the “federal character” principle, originally designed to ensure the balanced representation of diverse ethnic groups within public service institutions. In practice, this has become a quota system based on states of origin. Unfortunately, the wide gap in educational levels across the country has meant that some appointees are unqualified to carry out their roles, focusing instead on personal gain for themselves and their allies. Likewise, admissions to top government-run secondary schools are regulated to ensure broad representation in a way that has produced major gaps in qualifications:



*Almost every year, livid social media posts, newspaper columns and parliamentary debates follow the publication of cut-off marks for the exams... Students from some states in northern Nigeria sometimes require scores as low as two out of 200 to be admitted, compared to students from states in the south who need scores of at least 139.<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Olurounbi, “Nigerians hungrier now, thanks to Buhari’s policy on food imports,” The Africa Report, October 18, 2020; “Nigerians spend nearly 60% of their earnings on food purchases, the highest in the world”; <https://www.theafricareport.com/48706/nigeria-if-you-thought-2020-was-bad-brace-yourself-for-2021/>

See also, Ruth Olurounbi, “Nigeria: If you thought 2020 was bad, brace yourself for 2021,” theafricareport, November 6, 2020; <https://www.theafricareport.com/48706/nigeria-if-you-thought-2020-was-bad-brace-yourself-for-2021/>

<sup>6</sup> “Nigeria releases new report on poverty and inequality in country,” The World Bank, May 28, 2020; <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/lsm/brief/nigeria-releases-new-report-on-poverty-and-inequality-in-country>

<sup>7</sup> Moses Ochon, “The Roots of Nigeria’s Religious and Ethnic Conflict,” Public Radio International, The World, March 10, 2014; <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-03-10/roots-nigerias-religious-and-ethnic-conflict>

<sup>8</sup> “Nigeria turns 60: Can Africa’s most populous nation remain united?,” BBC News, October 1, 2020; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54357810>

## Marginalized Groups

Although the most striking demarcation lines in Nigerian society are between north and south, Muslims and Christians, the country's daunting complexity is reflected in its total of 63 different political parties, representing a wide array of interests. There are many smaller ethnic groups, such as the Kanuri or the Nupe, and each region contains minority groups of its own. These minorities include Muslim residents in the south, Christians in the north, minority Shia Muslims, Protestants and Catholics, farmers and herders—each with their own priorities and grievances. Among the country's various marginalized groups, two that deserve particular mention are victims of slavery and human trafficking, as well as the urban “Yahoo Boys.”

### *Slavery & Human Trafficking*

Slavery as an institution in Nigeria reportedly both pre-dated the transatlantic slave trade and survived long after it was abolished. The Sokoto Caliphate in the north had an estimated 1 to 2.5 million enslaved non-Muslims, primarily used as plantation workers, as late as 1900. Most were acquired through a rapid series of conquests in the early 1800s.<sup>9</sup>

Among the Igbo tribe in the country's southeast, for example, there were forms of slavery originally tied to indigenous customs and religious beliefs. These practices expanded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as European colonies were established in the Caribbean and North and South America. Later, when the British abolished their own slave trade in the nineteenth century, an unintended result was a glut of enslaved people in Igbo markets. Slavery persisted in Nigeria until it was officially abolished in the early twentieth century, continuing in some places until the 1940s.

The vestiges of this form of human bondage persist, as the descendants of slaves face various forms of discrimination in Nigeria today. Estimates of the number affected range up to 10% of the country's 42 million Igbo, or several million people. Contemporary forms of discrimination include prohibitions against intermarriage with partners from other caste backgrounds, restrictions on attaining certain social positions or titles, and even limitations on free speech.

**While the negative impacts of slavery in Nigeria may sound familiar, it is also different from slavery elsewhere in that it is based on factors...**

While the negative impacts of slavery in Nigeria may sound familiar, it is also different from slavery elsewhere in that it is based on factors such as ancestry, point of origin, and personal conduct — one major group was either taken as captives from faraway communities or enslaved to compensate for debts or crimes.

<sup>9</sup> John McCay and Bennett Hill, *A History of World Societies, Volume 2: Since 1450, Volume 2*, p. 755, Macmillan, 2011; [https://books.google.com/books?id=NF-mWCNY\\_boC&q=%22islamic+revival%22+slavery&pg=PA755#v=snippet&q=%22islamic%20revival%22%20slavery&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=NF-mWCNY_boC&q=%22islamic+revival%22+slavery&pg=PA755#v=snippet&q=%22islamic%20revival%22%20slavery&f=false)

Mohammad Bashir Salau, *Plantation Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate: A Historical and Comparative Study*, University of Rochester Press, 2018.

Sources indicate that Sokoto Caliphate slavery conditions may have been different than forms of slavery elsewhere, with accumulation of property and greater upward mobility possible for some enslaved individuals.



*Westerners trying to understand the Igbo system often reach for its similarities with the oppression of black Americans. This analogy is helpful but imperfect. Igbo discrimination is not based on race, and there are no visual markers to differentiate slave descendants from freeborn. Instead, it trades on cultural beliefs about lineage and spirituality.<sup>10</sup>*

Another type of slavery that continues to flourish throughout much of Nigeria is human trafficking. The scale of such human trafficking is staggering—estimates indicate that Nigeria has almost 1.4 million citizens who are currently enslaved in this way, with an average age of fifteen.<sup>11</sup> Desperately poor parents, particularly those with large families to support, sometimes make the wrenching decision to sell or give away their own children in order to make ends meet. These children may be taken in by their new owners ostensibly as domestic servants, but then frequently become subject to economic exploitation and physical abuse while being denied access to education.

A still more heinous practice is luring young women or girls into prostitution; criminal groups make false promises of paid housekeeping and other jobs, domestically or abroad, and then coerce women into forced servitude. A smaller number of these people are exported to North Africa and even to Europe for prostitution and other forms of exploitation; Nigerian victims have been identified in 34 different countries and four world regions. Meanwhile, human traffickers also import enslaved persons from nearby countries into Nigeria.<sup>12</sup>

### **Yahoo Boys**

The protests against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad that have attracted global attention encapsulate another set of tensions in Nigeria, with traditional establishment forces receiving pushback from primarily youthful protesters. The SARS police branch initially established to combat violent crime is accused of becoming



<sup>10</sup> Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, "The Descendants of Slaves in Nigeria Fight for Equality," *The New Yorker*, July 11, 2019; <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-descendants-of-slaves-in-nigeria-fight-for-equality>

<sup>11</sup> "Global Slavery Index," Minderoo Foundation, 2018; <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/data/country-data/nigeria/>

<sup>12</sup> "Nigeria: Human Trafficking Factsheet," Pathfinders Justice Initiative, September 10, 2020;

<https://pathfindersji.org/nigeria-human-trafficking-factsheet/#:-:text=Per%20the%20latest%20Global%20Slavery,to%20a%20Tier%20%20Watch>



a rogue criminal organization itself, extorting blameless civilians for the gain of its own members.

Amnesty International has reportedly documented “at least 82 cases of torture, ill-treatment and extra-judicial execution by SARS” over the last three years.<sup>13</sup> Among the most serious charges leveled against members of SARS are that they have stopped individuals driving attractive vehicles for unfounded reasons and either extorted money from the owners or left them dead on the side of the road while taking possession of the vehicle themselves.

SARS members seem to target younger Nigerians who are profiled as being prosperous and/or non-traditional due to their career, lifestyle, or appearance. A nice car, tattoos, dreadlocks, dyed hair, or even just possessing a laptop can become grounds for police to stop and arrest them without reasonable cause. The targeting of this particular set of people is tied to a negative social stereotype of so-called “Yahoo Boys,” a pejorative term for internet scammers, whether or not those detained by the police have anything to do with such activities.

**As Nigeria marks the 60th anniversary of its independence, protesters against SARS have called for a fairer justice system and greater social equity and are expressing their general frustration with poor governance and corruption.**

Nosy traditionalist citizens have aided such discriminatory profiling by reporting to the police young neighbors who happen to be working from home, an uncommon practice in urban Nigeria until quite recently.

As Nigeria marks the 60th anniversary of its independence, protesters against SARS have called for a fairer justice system and greater social equity and are expressing their general frustration with poor governance and corruption.



*The majority of them are between 18 and 24 years old, have never experienced steady electricity in their lifetime, did not enjoy free education in the country and had their years at university punctuated and elongated by lecturers going on strike. The frustration with the police is a reflection of the frustration with the state in general.<sup>14</sup>*

Although the anti-SARS protests have encountered a violent police response and only half-hearted promises of reform, youthful demonstrators have garnered visibility and assistance through their own internet-savvy forms of media outreach. Nigerian IT and fintech firms,

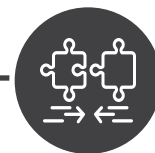
<sup>13</sup> Suyin Haynes, “‘We Are Able to Get Things Done.’ Women Are at the Forefront of Nigeria’s Police Brutality Protests.” Time, October 21, 2020; <https://time.com/5902123/nigeria-women-endsars-protest-movement/>

<sup>14</sup> Nduka Orjinmo, “End Sars protests: The young Nigerians who forced the president to back down,” BBC News, October 12, 2020; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54508781>

<sup>15</sup> Sarah McGregor, ed., “Startups with an Unusual Fight,” Business Week, November 8, 2020.



high-profile entertainers, sports figures, and international celebrities have all expressed their support.<sup>15</sup> The organizing abilities and passionate exercise of free speech on the part of protestors were reinforced by a popular groundswell of support that took government authorities by surprise. This movement leveraged not only technical skills but also artistic flair, playing songs such as “**This is Nigeria**” (a counterpoint to Childish Gambino’s song “This is America”), “**Black on Black**,” and the classic protest song “**Jaga Jaga**” (meaning chaos or disarray). As one commentator notes, “these songs convey protesters’ swirl of anger, frustration, melancholy and hope while buoying up their fight against police brutality, bad governance and call for accountability.”<sup>16</sup> In spite of subsequent threats against protest leaders, the appeal for a better future from this energetic segment of Nigeria’s population is a hopeful sign in a country with a turbulent past and uncertain prospects as an emerging global giant.<sup>17</sup>



## Practical Implications

Ethnic traditions and social obligations surface in the workplace as paternalistic politics or cronyism. Local managers who reach a position of power sometimes use that power to surround themselves with team members from their own ethnic group or sub-group. They tend to use their authority to promote or favor employees from their own community while excluding others. Acts of favoritism are seen as a source of security for both leaders and their allies—shoring up loyal factions of mutual protection.

Such actions can have further consequences. If a person is promoted based on merit, others may complain that the promotion occurred due to an ethnic or regional affiliation with the boss. Conversely, a well-qualified candidate may not be promoted for fear of the appearance of nepotism.

Multinational companies committed to merit-based talent development need to understand local social dynamics fueled by ethnic loyalties while putting measures in place to ensure greater objectivity such as blind hiring and promotion practices, diverse talent review and succession planning teams, and job rotation to broaden employee perspectives and discourage factionalism. They must also engage in careful due diligence of supply chains and government relations to avoid risky ties with political corruption or organized crime.

<sup>16</sup> Tochi Louis, “The Nigerian songs relevant to protesters during #EndSARS movement,” Pan-African Music, November 2020; <https://pan-african-music.com/en/endsars-protesters-songs/>

<sup>17</sup> Rick Gladstone and Megan Specia, “Nigeria’s Police Brutality Crisis: What’s Happening Now,” New York Times, November 14, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/article/sars-nigeria-police.html>

“How the End SARS protests have changed Nigeria forever,” BBC News, October 24, 2020; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54662986>



## Example

Google Nigeria is rated as one of the country's top employers, based on criteria that include "transparent performance management," or systems designed to favor merit and counter cronyism.<sup>18</sup> It has also introduced a number of products designed to serve local consumers in an ethnically diverse country where many people have limited resources.<sup>19</sup>

A dedicated motorcycle travel mode in Google Maps assists riders of Nigeria's 10 million motorcycles in finding their way through crowded streets; a product named Google Go enables internet access even on low-RAM smartphones or with unstable network connections; an application of machine learning helps farmers to detect and prevent crop diseases, thereby boosting their harvests; a version of Google Lens allows users to point their camera at a sign and hear the words translated, with support for the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo languages.<sup>20</sup>

## Implications for Global Initiatives

Worldwide social unrest has presented a compelling opportunity for organizations to reassess their policies related to race, ethnicity, and social justice. Global companies are being challenged to recognize and respond to the unique circumstances of their employees, markets, and customers.

**There are insider/outsider dynamics, the use and abuse of power and privilege, popular stereotypes and biases against "others" exacerbated by social media, and the resulting marginalization of large segments of the population.**

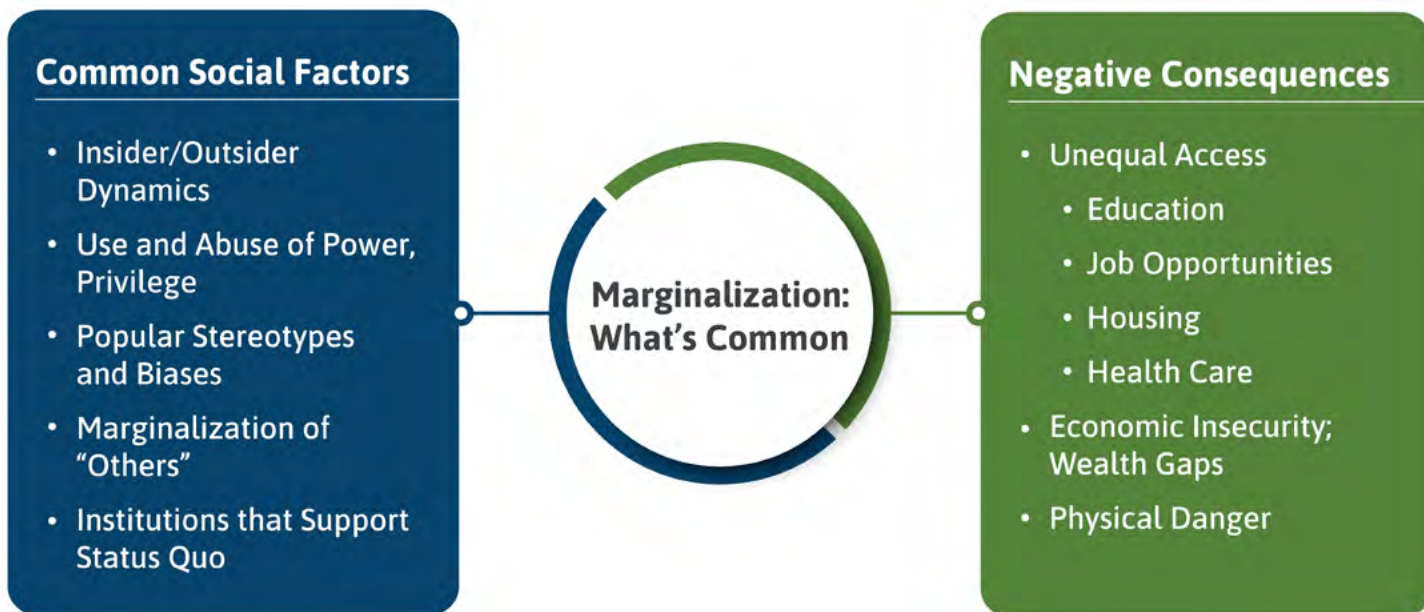
Supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., with its focus on racial equity, are likely to find familiar themes as well as unexpected variations in Nigeria. There are insider/outsider dynamics, the use and abuse of power and privilege, popular stereotypes and biases against "others" exacerbated by social media, and the resulting marginalization of large segments of the population. These social dynamics contribute to unequal access to education, job opportunities, housing, and health care, along

with a lack of economic and sometimes even physical security. Institutional systems, grounded in the country's history, fortify an inequitable status quo that must be addressed to bring about meaningful change.

<sup>18</sup> "Top 10 companies to work for in Nigeria," Dada Benjamin, November 25, 2019; <https://www.benjamindada.com/best-tech-companies-to-work-for-in-nigeria/>

<sup>19</sup> "How Google is helping to solve local problems in Nigeria," CNN Videos, Innovate Africa; <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2019/11/19/innovate-africa-google-nigeria.cnn>

<sup>20</sup> "Google for Nigeria: making our products more helpful to more people," Google in Africa, Jul 24, 2019 <https://blog.google/around-the-globe/google-africa/google-nigeria>



Multinational organizations seeking to globalize their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts can thus find validation and common cause in the presence of such shared inclusion challenges. On the other hand, in Nigeria, ethnicity and religion rather than race are the most important factors in the distribution of political and economic power, and any meaningful inclusion initiative will need to take these factors into account. Champions of inclusion and social justice on a global scale are most likely to succeed when they ground their efforts in local knowledge, although their approach can uphold common values and be part of an integrated talent and business strategy.

**In Nigeria, ethnicity and religion rather than race are the most important factors in the distribution of political and economic power**



*Aperian Global knows how to support leaders and teams that are trying to make progress with inclusive actions and organizational change in the current global environment. Our consultants and executive coaches deliver solutions for organizations in many different countries and languages.*

*See also our recent book, **[Inclusive Leadership: From Awareness to Action](#)** (2019), for additional reflection on this topic. This publication includes a chapter on "Regional Inclusion Challenges" that features examples from Ghana, Germany, and the United States.*

**[Contact us](#)** for more information.

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