



Will Digital Media Change the Narratives About Northern Kenya?

By Osman Osman



In early September 2021, Dr Abdiwahab Sheikh Abdisamad, a Horn of Africa security expert, was abducted by unidentified men in Nairobi's Central Business District. The academic was forced into a vehicle that took him to an undisclosed location where he was held hostage for close to two weeks. His abduction was [allegedly triggered](#) by his critical comments online on regional politics. Immediately after the incident, Kenyans took to social media to report his disappearance. [#FreeAbdiwahab](#) and other hashtags were created, and a week-long discursive discourse erupted online, consistently calling for his immediate release.

While Kenyans from different communities joined this discourse, Somalis from northern Kenya, where Abdiwahab hails from, dominated this wave of digital protests. The Tweets were explicit that the communities from north-eastern Kenya are victims of abductions that are normalized and justified under the guise of countering terrorism. The Tweets also pointed fingers at the Kenyan government's reluctance or failure to investigate, and its covert involvement in some of the kidnappings.

Going through my social media timelines, I realized how the online discourse not only resulted from the absence of critical coverage by the Kenyan media regarding the lack of investigations of these kidnappings but also how digital media is employed by this marginalized community to highlight the

unique challenges they face.

In short, the reaction following Abdiwahab's abduction reflected how the absence of accountability institutions cemented the normalization of kidnappings that often end in extrajudicial killings. Moreover, the critical online discourse that followed this incident serves as an ideal case study of how Twitter and other digital media platforms enable marginalized communities to set the agenda for the media and the public.

Twitter as a public sphere

Counter-narratives constructed on *Twitter* by citizens from northern Kenya allow them to not only claim power but to also [“broadcast these ideas to a wide audience to court support for these ideas, and to form networks with like-minded individuals.”](#)

There has been a rise in abductions and subsequent extrajudicial killings targeting the Muslim community following the al-Shabaab attacks of the last decade. In counties along the coast and in northern Kenya, [national security agencies have been accused](#) of being behind the deaths of young Muslim men suspected of having ties with the terror group in Somalia.

The abduction of Abdiwahab in broad daylight was not the first and, judging by the government's tight-lipped response, it will not be the last. Following the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) 2011 invasion of Somalia to “fight al-Shabaab”, numerous terror attacks have been carried out across the country, prompting a response from the political and security elites to counter the violence perpetrated by the Somali-based terror group. The group has taken advantage of unemployed and traditionally marginalized youths in counties like Mombasa, Isiolo, Garissa, and even Kiambu, by brainwashing them and promising them economic and religious benefits if they join the militants.

The normalization of these illegal counter-terror tactics has been brought about by the precedents set by Western countries led by the US in their efforts to curb terror attacks in cities like New York, Paris, and London. Since 9/11, Western military elites have justified the illegal capture and killings of Muslim men from the Middle East suspected of working with groups like the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and Islamic State.

For instance, the existence of [Guantanamo Bay](#), a detention camp that holds hundreds of terrorism suspects from countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, serves as a reminder of how governments operate in a lawless universe when dealing with “terror suspects”. These Western tactics have informed how terror-afflicted countries like Kenya deal with citizens accused of being terrorist sympathizers.

In 2012, the controversial cleric Abud Rogo [was shot dead](#) in Mombasa County. Rogo was accused of spearheading the recruitment of youth from the coast to join the terror group in Somalia. Rogo was not the only Muslim cleric gunned down by the Kenyan security agencies. Between 2012 and 2014, Haki Africa, a Mombasa-based human rights group, [documented the killing of 21 Islamic clerics](#) across coastal Kenya. The Kenyan government has continuously denied any involvement in the kidnappings and killings. The lack of investigations and the covert support for these acts explains why fingers have been pointed at the government.

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The global advocacy group, Human Rights Watch (HRW), [revealed](#) that between 2013 and 2015 “at least 34 people, including two women, were taken into custody by security forces during counterterrorism operations in north-eastern Kenya . . . whose whereabouts remain unknown.”

These are just the numbers documented by rights groups. Because of fear and the sensitivity surrounding the issue of terrorism and al-Shabaab, numerous cases go unreported. The few known ones remain unresolved since, as HRW puts it, “police have not meaningfully investigated these deaths.” Nonetheless, it is important to point out that while such cases have skyrocketed since 2011 when terror events surged in Kenya, communities in north-eastern Kenya have faced these challenges since Kenya’s independence in 1963.

In 1980, thousands of residents in Garissa County were rounded up and many died in what came to be known as the [Bula Karatasi Massacre](#). The Kenyan security agencies were responding to an incident where civil servants were gunned down in a bar in the Bula Karatasi neighborhood. Farah Maalim, a prominent Kenyan politician, notes that “Many people were killed,” because of the Kenyan government’s response to this incident. “Soldiers shot anything in sight.”

In Wajir County, it is [believed that over 5,000 men](#) were killed in 1984 by the Kenyan army when it went in to disarm Somalis in the county following ethnic conflicts. These are just a few examples that demonstrate how Kenyan elites have been dealing with generations of Somalis from north-eastern counties.

The role of the media

The Kenyan mass media’s systematic lack of critical coverage of these acts means that the government has not been held to account. As I have [argued](#) before, Kenyan journalists based in Nairobi have cemented the culture of portraying northern Kenya as a region engulfed by conflict, with the result that no substantive or thematic coverage is undertaken.

With few journalists from this region working for the mainstream news media, and in the absence of correspondents on the ground to cover these acts of violence, the community has been left out of the national conversation. There were no avenues that could have been used to create awareness about the unique challenges faced by Kenyan citizens in the north. This explains why the Somali community in the region is embracing social media platforms to not only push back against misrepresentations of their issues but also to prominently place their narratives in the national agenda.

The Digital Media

The historical and contemporary injustices faced by communities in north-eastern Kenya have led them to embrace digital media. But it is also essential to note that a majority of Kenyans are unable to own smartphones or access the internet in order to be active participants in on-going debates on platforms like Twitter.

Only [17 per cent of Kenyans use social media](#) and as a result of this digital divide, most Kenyans access news through traditional media like radios and newspapers. These traditional, mainstream mediums have failed to adequately advocate for the critical coverage of issues like the systematic abductions and killings of citizens in northern Kenya.

There is a growing body of literature on how marginalized communities like [African Americans in the US](#) and [Muslims in Europe](#) use digital media to counter the predominant narratives constructed by the mainstream media. These studies show that digital platforms like Twitter “[offer citizens most](#)

[invisible](#) in mainstream politics radical new potentials for identity negotiation, visibility, and influence.”

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A classic example of the power arising from the intersection of marginalized publics and digital media is the [#BlackLivesMatter](#) (BLM) movement. This group, which was created and organized by youthful online activists highlighting racial injustice in the US, remains impactful and has been successful in setting the agenda in the US and elsewhere. The killing of George Floyd in Minnesota in 2020 that ignited an explosion of protests [from Minneapolis to Accra](#), demonstrates how digital media has the power to set the agenda for national and global discourses.

In Nigeria, the lack of critical coverage of campaigns such as the [#EndSARS](#) movement prompted protesters and community leaders to take to social media platforms. Protesters in the West African country called for the abolition of the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) that has terrorized Nigerians for years. South Africa's [#FeesMustFall](#) was also successful in fighting plans to increase fees in higher education, advocating instead for increased funding to universities. These examples are testaments to the importance of social media for excluded citizens such as Kenyan Somalis.

Human rights lawyer Abdinassir Adan was among the Twitter users who tirelessly advocated for the release of Abdiwahab. He affirms that social media remains an important tool “because it is an easy way to get attention from the state [and] it is a quick way of making it trend. Our main aim is to create awareness and stand up against enforced disappearances and injustice [that are] contrary to the rule of law.”

Adan shares the frustrations of many, pointing out that the limited and uncritical coverage of these abductions by the Kenyan mass media forces them to raise this awareness online. “It is very unfortunate that the mainstream media over the years has been ignoring challenges faced by the Somali community in Kenya. Social media has rendered the hollow and the gibberish media useless. In a nutshell, we felt that digital media is more effective, and it easily helped us to achieve our goals.”

Are social media platforms the solution?

Judging by the reaction to the abduction of Abdiwahab, it is evident that marginalized communities in northern Kenya are systematically using social media to change the culture of news media production in Kenya. The result is that, as a primary agenda-setter, the Kenyan press has been forced to adopt the social media agenda created by the public and make it part of the national agenda.

While this is a good opportunity for minority communities across Kenya, it is important to address the question of whether this is good in the long run. Most of the citizens in these northern counties still receive their news through traditional media, particularly community radios. While young people like Adan, who mostly reside in urban areas, can afford smartphones and have internet access to push back against government discrimination and media bias, a large proportion of the population of these counties is left out.

Moreover, by their very nature, these platforms have helped advance free speech, prompting some African governments to try to curb the freedom of expression among citizens by introducing [high](#)

[taxes on digital activity and passing restrictive legislation.](#)

Further, online platforms have also been infiltrated by users who spread propaganda on behalf of the state. Social media influencers are paid [as little as US\\$15 to spread disinformation](#), creating negative perceptions for institutions like the judiciary. This can have a negative impact on marginalized communities that depend on these platforms to share their challenges.

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The mainstream media should not remain passive, waiting for social media to highlight cases of human rights abuses against the people of northern Kenya. The demonstrated systematic pattern of targeting this group by government security agencies is enough to warrant a comprehensive, critical coverage of this important issue.

The Twitter conversations are also a reminder to Kenyan security agencies that, unlike the past, neglected citizens like those from north-eastern Kenya are now armed with digital platforms to counter-narratives constructed by the political and media elites.

In an age where information is shared within seconds, it is time the Kenyan government drops its abusive counter-terrorism tactics and systematically investigates cases like that of Abdiwahab. The Kenyan government and mass media need to treat Kenyans equally and to apply the law equally to citizens accused of any crimes. When communities in northern Kenya are accorded the same treatment as others across the country, then perhaps people like Adan will not be forced to use Western-owned digital media tools to highlight the challenges faced by Kenyans like him.

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