



# Why #EndSARS Matters in an Era of Increasing Militarisation and Repression

By Awino Okech



The [death of George Floyd](#) in the United in May 2020 mobilised a global response around racialised police brutality. The manifestation of racism in policing in the US struck a chord across the world because it recuperated conversations on structural racism across Europe in particular. Europe had opportunistically argued that the nature of racism in the US was unique because of slavery. In this process, European countries set aside their colonial histories to elide responsibility for vestiges of structural racism left in former colonies, embedded in contemporary global economic and political systems and existing within their territories today. The rise of [neo-nationalist](#) and [fascist political parties](#) across Europe offers the starkest reminder of the folly of racism denialism.

At the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, I was asked why “Africans are not protesting in solidarity”. There was an implicit assertion in these comments that because Africans were not on the streets en masse at a time when COVID-19 restrictions had just been instituted, conversations on policing and security are not a well-developed site of activism, policy influencing and scholarly work in Africa. The comments also reflected ignorance of the fact that a [critical security analysis](#) would show how colonial pasts have shaped policing and militarisation of the continent today.

The ongoing [#EndSARS](#) protests in Nigeria foreground the similarities in the architecture that shaped the Black Lives Matter movement and the [#SayHerName](#) campaign, which raises awareness

about the often invisible names and stories of black women and girls who have been victims of racist police violence. The similarities here lie in the regimes of carcerality that shape how black people are policed globally. [Carcerality](#) refers to the collision of ideological, economic and legislative initiatives that develop punitive frameworks to inform how governments understand, use, respond to, and create “crime”. Massive financial investments in law enforcement, surveillance technology and a commitment to aggressive punishment regimes form part of this framework. Carceral regimes are always racialised, gendered and classed, and driven by a logic that large sections of the population need to be violently managed through the regularisation of securitisation regimes, ostensibly to protect the privileged.

As we hold space for Nigerians agitating for better ways to govern their security and safety, I turn to Kenya to draw similarities to these carceral regimes. The central argument here is that we cannot delink the conversations to [defund the police](#) in the US and #EndSARS in Nigeria from broader debates around increasing militarisation across African countries as part of a claim to dealing with insurgent groups. The convergence between increased security expenditure, surveillance and domestic policing occurs in contexts (as I have argued [elsewhere](#)), where the socio-economic conditions that impoverish the majority remain ignored by the political class while security expenditure is ramped up. The contradiction between increasing resources to criminalise and incarcerate people impoverished by government policies rather than curb the conditions that create a lack of freedom, safety and security is stark.

### **Securitisation and militarisation of Kenya**

In chronicling the legislative amendments and tracing the accompanying increases in security expenditure in Kenya, I offer a window into how governments develop and sustain paramilitary and/or policing units that operate extrajudicially. Parliaments, as primary sites within which these laws are passed, and the politicisation of security generate the power for units such as Nigeria’s Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) to act outside the law.

Kenya’s military expenditure rose to Sh121.82 billion in 2019, up from Sh116.19 billion in 2018. This is a rise from the 2018/19 spending of Sh109 billion to Sh121 billion. In 2017, the Kenya government received, Sh1 billion worth of drone equipment to help with anti-terrorism surveillance. This increased expenditure occurs against the backdrop of legal amendments in 2015 that increased the role of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) in domestic security and that removed the role of Parliament in providing parliamentary oversight on the budget and functions of KDF and the requirement for the Defence Cabinet Secretary to report to Parliament. The amendments also gave the chief of the defence forces the authority to deploy KDF in civilian operations and established an auxiliary reserve force comprising forest guards and the National Youth Service to be deployed alongside KDF in situations of emergency, unrest and disorder.

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This increase in military expenditure and legislative cushioning is extended to the militarisation of the police through the modernisation programme. In 2017, the government unveiled 500 police vehicles, including 25 mine resistant personnel carriers and 30 armoured personnel carriers, which were to be deployed to various “hot spot areas”. During the 2017 general elections, paramilitary units, such as the General Service Unit (GSU), the administration police and the Kenya Wildlife Service, used excessive lethal force to [disperse protests mainly in opposition areas](#), which led to loss

of life.

The range of security amendment laws in Kenya undermine accountability measures embedded in the 2010 constitution that were aimed at rectifying a history of police brutality under a broader climate of repression. For example, the 2014 omnibus of Security Laws (Amendment) Act, which included the Prevention of Terrorism Act, was passed with limited public participation. The Act imposes exorbitant fines and prison sentences that impact the freedom of the press and independence by making it harder to expose and criticise human rights violations by security forces and by prohibiting the public broadcasting without police permission information “that is likely to undermine security operations”. The Act also places restrictions on freedom of assembly and association in a context characterised by government hostility to non-government organisations. Within these amendments, the National Intelligence Service (NIS) Act expanded the powers of the NIS to arrest and detain suspects, to carry out covert operations, to search and seize private property, and to monitor communications in any act that poses a threat to national security without a court warrant. These are provisions that closely mirror UK and US counterterrorism laws.

These amendments have also watered down the oversight responsibilities of the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA), which was established in 2011 to provide independent oversight of the police by conducting investigations, audits and monitoring. The 2015 Statute Law (Miscellaneous Amendments Bill) amends section 14 of the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) Act by limiting access to information and evidence against rogue officers. It effectively reduces IPOA’s power to check police excesses and places its investigative capabilities in the hands of the police command. Further power was handed to the President to remove the chairperson or members of IPOA by sidestepping the need for a recommendation from a tribunal, thereby concentrating power in the Executive and the presidency.

As calls to hold the Nigerian government accountable get louder, we should equally pay attention to the commonalities in the policing architecture across Africa and the [logics that underpin them](#). We should also track the international financial and training resources that go towards security sector reform and [modernisation](#) projects across Africa. It is in a broader conversation about transnational security regimes - which criminalise, securitise and police through “othering” - that effective transnational solidarity and collective action can emerge.

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