



Campus or Fortress? How Terrorism-inspired Security Checks Killed Public Discourse at Universities

By Silas Nyanchwani



A few years ago, I was in a matatu along Riverside Drive trying to get to town, but the evening traffic was unrelenting. I decided to get off the matatu and walk through the University of Nairobi's Chiromo Campus, thinking that this might be a quicker way of making it to town in time for my evening beer.

At the gate, the security guard asked for my ID, which I promptly produced.

"A student ID, I meant," he told me impatiently.

"I'm a former student, student leader no less. I just want to walk through to avoid this traffic," I told him politely.

"It is past 5 p.m. Non-students are not allowed in the university compound."

It was final. Unbelievable that a year earlier, anyone would walk through any public university without security guards demanding their ID and wanting to know which part of the university they were going to. I humbly boarded another matatu with a bad FM radio station on and endured the

traffic.

Garissa massacre: The watershed moment

Sometime in 2012, when random terror attacks became the norm, buildings in the central business district, government facilities, shopping malls and other places likely to be targeted by Al Shabaab installed walk-through metal detectors. Those that could not afford the expensive apparatus bought cheap metal detectors and hired young men and women to man their buildings. Nobody knows how the detectors are supposed to stop marauding, gun-wielding murderers. (Having witnessed the Westgate mall attack in 2013 and the Dusit attack in 2019, we now know that they cannot stop terrorists.)

Around that time, there were messages that used to circulate on social media allegedly from Al Shabaab, outlining their targets, predictably the United Nations complex, government buildings, embassies of Western nations, shopping malls favoured by expatriates and the University of Nairobi.

Given the frequency of the attacks and their randomness, even the tough-headed University of Nairobi students grudgingly accepted the intrusive searches in the spirit of forestalling terror attacks. And any students who felt violated by the limitation of their liberties, the Garissa university attacks removed any doubt about the invulnerability of universities.

At dawn on Thursday, April 2, 2015, gunmen descended on Garissa University College and killed 148 students and injured another 79. It was the second deadliest terror attack since the 1998 Al Qaeda bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi that killed more than 200 people. The attack sent chills down our spines for its severity and cruelty.

After the Garissa massacre, universities became like military installations. Private security firms were deployed to man the gates and the buildings within universities. At the universities' main gates, security guards began searching cars and frisking students. Non-students must produce national IDs and explain what they are going to do at the university. They don't necessarily keep these details, so you can cook up any excuse if you have ulterior motives. But the presence of the guards has definitely limited the foot traffic of the general public at universities.

Buildings that host the most important people within the university are now fortified, and senior university officials have security details that rival those of the President. I recently saw the Vice Chancellor of a top local university walking around the university. He had more than five bodyguards. The building where his office is located has no-nonsense security guards who ensure that they have taken your every detail before giving you the wrong directions to the office you need to go to. The apparatus and the many security guards who replicate their roles can give one a false sense of security.

In a way, the many security guards have made university less fun. Just a decade ago, when I was a student, the university was a free place for both students and the general public. If tired in town, you could walk to the university and rest on the seats or any of beautiful manicured lawns.

At the hostels, those from less fortunate backgrounds would host their relatives in their tiny rooms as they worked or went to college somewhere in Nairobi. Public universities had a comradely camaraderie regardless of the students' backgrounds; there was an egalitarianism, a sense of belonging. Public universities had a tinge of elitism, but they were equally accessible to the sons and daughters of peasants and of wealthy folk.

Also, the university was a place of ideas. Several public forums used to be held at universities. Thinkers, writers, foreign dignitaries, and local celebrities came and freely interacted with us. There

was no payment or the signing of some Google-doc for you to attend an event.

I remember a time when the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kweyi Armah visited the University of Nairobi in the mid-2000s. Barack Obama also came to the university when he was a Senator for Illinois. So did Hillary Clinton when she was US Secretary of State. Joe Biden visited when he was the Vice President of the United States. I remember when Chimamanda Adichie was brought by Kwani? in its hey days in 2008, when her magnum opus, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, had just been re-published by Kwani? Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo also delivered public lectures at the university. These forums and the resultant public discourses made the university experience all the more exciting.

I remember a time when there were no restrictions to anyone who wanted to attend. But in the last few years, there have been fewer notable public forums at the university. There have hardly been any new or controversial ideas on language, literature, politics, economics or philosophy that have been debated here in recent times. Universities have not provided an environment where we can contextualise what is going on in the country, the continent and the world.

There is no shortage of thinkers, philosophers and scholars whose works students should be exposed to, from Mahmood Mamdani to Achille Mbembe, Wandia Njoya, Stella Nyanzi, Kwame Antony Appiah, Evan Mwangi, Sylvia Tamale and Mshai Mwangola, among others. But you are more likely to encounter their minds in a civil society setting or other forums than at a university. Ironically, private universities that were citadels of the bourgeoisie have fared better in hosting these thinkers, who sometimes can be a thorn in the flesh of the ruling class and the bourgeoisie.

Symbols of segregation

Security guards act as physical gatekeepers of free intercourse of ideas that should take place in universities. Security guards are a symbol of segregation. There is a reason a public university is protected and a public market like Muthurwa is not. And the nature of security searches is so subjective. There are places you can go in if you are driving a big car or wearing a suit. A young man with dreadlocks will have a lot of difficulties going into the same place.

Al Shabaab, like their counterparts Boko Haram, have contempt for Western education, which is why they target educational institutions. However, when these terror attacks began, universities had become commercial enterprises. Since university education became commercialised through self-sponsored programmes, universities began swimming in billions. It was, therefore, in their interest to ensure that Al Shabaab did not disrupt the business side of things. Remember, most self-sponsored students come from middle class or wealthy families. Hence their lives matter more. A visit to the hostels where regular students stay can reveal the amount of neglect and class divide in our institutions of higher learning. The influx of self-sponsored students meant that the already limited resources in universities were stretched beyond the limit.

Politics and corruption also had an impact on public forums that took place at universities. It is hard to host an anti-corruption activist with progressive ideas at a university that is embroiled in mega corruption scandals. It makes the management very uncomfortable. Since the time of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, opposition politicians and human rights activists have always been uninvited to universities, as university managements have tended to align themselves with the government. It is not uncommon to see a university Vice Chancellor groveling with a team of tribal leaders at State House. Their presumed intellectual autonomy is at the mercy of the powers that be. Funding can be cut because of any perceived misdeed. This is not fiction; most universities have had their budgets cut because of some misunderstanding with the Ministry of Education. You can't blame the management at times, since self-preservation is natural. Why host a talk on human rights of young men succumbing daily to extrajudicial killings and risk budget cuts when you can award a political

bigwig with a dubious honorary degree to attract funding?

The upshot of this unwillingness on the part of universities to open their spaces for public discourses is that civil society organisations and the embassies of leading Western powers have taken over this role. The Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française and the British Council are doing what universities should be doing. This is not a bad thing in itself, as we need as many of these public forums as possible. However, with universities rarely hosting notable public events - save for entrepreneur forums where phony businessmen are allowed to sell their half-baked ideas anchored on neoliberalism - institutions of higher learning are losing much of their clout.

A local university erected a huge tower recently and the only events sanctioned to take place there are events that can bring money or improve the image of the university to the outside world. Its beautiful theatres cannot host the university's student travelling theatre group because literature is considered a lesser discipline than commerce (possibly the most useless discipline ever invented by universities, but the most lucrative).

Universities have robbed themselves the agency of owning ideas, and Kenyans now have to rely on Western institutional spaces (embassies or spaces funded by NGOs) to provide forums for the many needed discussions. Young minds in much need of intellectual nourishment beyond what is served in class are poorer for this.

Foreign institutions, for all their accessibility, are viewed by many as elite institutions, and some of us neither feel at home there nor free to express our opinions as we would in a village *baraza*. You must adjust to certain dialectical expectations of the hosts.

The life of a security guard

Security guards are the best symbol of inequality in Kenya. Kenya is one of the most unequal societies in the world. According to data from Oxfam (often debated upon), 8,300 (less than 0.1%) of the population own more wealth than the bottom 99.9%. The richest 10% earn on average 23 times more than the poorest 10%.

Security guards who work with security companies are among the poorest Kenyans. A casual conversation with them reveals that they mostly walk to work. (Some live in nearby slums that are always near the richer estates and communities.) A simple chat with them will show you how meaningless their job is. They survive on a meal day (usually dinner). The reason they try to strike a conversation and become familiar with the people they frisk daily is so they can get a tip that they can use to buy a packet of milk and a KDF (a pastry favoured by the poor). Most have to moonlight, washing cars parked in spaces they man or running some petty errands for an extra coin to augment their meagre earnings that defy common sense.

What's worse, the security companies fleece them - not only are they badly paid, the companies even deduct the cost of their own uniforms from their salaries. There is no transport allowance or transport provided by the company; most security guards walk for hours to get to work. Not even Francis Atwoli, the flamboyant Secretary General of the Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU), has stood up for their rights.

When you scrutinise their work, you will find that they are a symptom of a badly diseased nation. At universities they symbolise the breakdown of the flow of ideas from the university to the public sphere. Public lectures were called so because the public could attend, but presently the public is not invited to universities. There are other gatekeeping methods, such as email bookings and notices that only students can access. Security guards best represent the barrier that has been erected. And

at universities, they exist to remind us whose interests universities now serve. They are there in the pretext of terrorism, but everyone knows they are badly underprepared should a gunman strike.

It is the naiveté of the Kenyan elite that baffles me. We are all like the passengers on the Titanic. Privileged ones think they can escape the inefficiency of a government that has failed to provide basic services to the poor, from education to healthcare and security, by securing the services of private firms.

But if there is one thing that the Westgate, Dusit, Mpeketoni, Mandera and Garissa attacks have taught us, it is that a society only functions properly when the poorest and richest share the same privileges when it comes to basic services and public goods. Private schools and private hospitals will not fill the gaps in education and healthcare. Neither will private security companies fill the gaps in policing.

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