

# Mungiki Civil Militia Activities: A Threat to Kenyan National Security

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**Abstract:** *Mungiki is a Kenya African traditional religious movement that originated in the late 1980s amongst the Gikuyu or Kikuyu the Kenyan largest tribe, with the intention of returning Kenyan's back to traditional religion as opposed to Christianity which they consider as a foreign religion that was brought by a white man and which cause a lots of Gikuyu to embrace the foreign way of worship and abandoned their traditional god called 'Ngai' who reside on Mount Kenya to whom they worship and pray for, The consequences of abandoning African culture and religion, which, according to the group, has been the current cause of Kenyan calamities, which has to do with corruption and bad governance that is common practice within the Kenyan Government elite which go against the African ethics. The movement later deviated from their African traditional religious revival, into civil militia activities, Mungiki are best known for organized armed criminal activities, Mungiki operates primarily in the Nairobi slums, in the Central Province and in the Rift Valley. Extortion and violence tend to constitute their mode of operations, and gross human rights violations perpetrated against civilians. The aim of this paper is to interrogate how Mungiki civil militia activities constitute a threat to Kenyan national security.*

**Keywords:** Mungiki, Civil Militia, Activities, Threat, Kenya, National Security.

## 1. Introduction

Mungiki is a Gikuyu or Kikuyu word. It is a term that is taking from the word muingi-ki, meaning 'we are the public' Muingi is a term derived from the word nguki which means irindi (crowds) and reflects a belief that destiny entitles people to particular place of their own. Mungiki refers to religio-political movement comprises mainly of large masses of Gikuyu tribe by origin, and non- Gikuyu tribes like pokots, luos, Maasais, in Kenya, the group are mainly youths age 18-40, however they are exceptional 40-60 age, and according to their coordinator the group has about one and half a million members, including 400,000 women and some are in Kenya public universities for examples university of Kenyatta, Nairobi, and University of Egerton (Wamue, 2001).

Waruinge Ndura is a 1992 secondary school leaver from Nakuru District of Kenya. He is a grandson of ex- Mau Mau General waruinge. He claims to have Co- founded the Mungiki with six others young people in 1987 when he was only 15 years old in form one at Molo secondary school. They claim to have consulted ex- Mau Mau generals in laikipia and Nyandarwa district of Kenya that approved of their plan, the elders that were consulted were ex- Mau Mau fighters who rejected Christianity but wanted to transfer the teaching of Gikuyu traditions to younger Kenyans generation orally (Wamue, 2001) Wamue (2001) Described Mungiki as heir to a long tradition of religio-political revivalism that dates back to the early stages of anti-colonial resistance, which in turn was characterized by a total rejection of modernity. The mandate of Mungiki, then, was to call people to return to Gikuyu's indigenous beliefs and practices, and condemn the white man's culture. It rejects and criticizes Christianity and advocates a return to African traditions, beliefs and practices.

Generally, what began a decade ago as a benign traditional religious grouping has evolved into a frightening, multi-faceted, urban terror? The Mungiki has become Kenya's worst nightmare. It has unleashed terror, pain, and suffering on innocent people-beheading, killing, and maiming those in its path (Sunday Standard Correspondent, 2007). Crime experts now liken the Mungiki gang to an urban guerrilla force (Ombati, 2007). Anderson (2002) has argued that when the movement stepped outside its rural base and ventured into the milieu of Kenya's urban estates, shanties, and slums, it absorbed some criminal elements and was transformed into a large violent gang that was gradually co-opted by sections of the ruling elite to serve its patrimonial interests.

In the early 1990s, during the land and ethnic clashes of the Rift Valley Province, the movement, mainly composed of the youth aged between 15 and 30 that fought for the land rights of the Gikuyu. This saw the first metamorphosis of the 'religious sect' into a militaristic group. According to Waruinge, the co-founder of the sect, Mungiki therefore operated as a defense force against the predominantly ethnically Kalenjin militias that attacked Gikuyu settlements (Kilonzo, 2012). In the late 1990s, the group metamorphosed from a rural religious sect with political overtones into an urban militia. They began to dominate the Matatu public transport industry in Nairobi. Using the Matatu industry as a spring-board, the group moved into other areas of commerce, such as garbage collection, construction, and even protection racketeering. They did not, however, shed their first image of religiosity: this continues to be used as a tool to recruit members to the sect (Kilonzo, 2012).

## Conceptual Clarification of Terms:

### The Concept of Civil Militia

A “Civil Militia” can be defined as a citizen army made up of free men between the age of sixteen and sixty who performed occasional mandatory military service to protect their country, colony or state. Over time the conceptual scope has broadened to include militarized group operating in the private domain, or a citizen self-help force to provide security and defend, and to be called up in case of emergencies (David, 2005).

### **The Concept of Threat**

Threat according to Imobighe (1990) represents anything that can undermine the security of a nation, or anything that constitutes a danger to its survival as corporate entity, as well as undermining the prospects of the harmonious relationship of the various communities that makes up a nation, or the peaceful co-existence of its people. Any acts intention that has the potential of undermining peace, stability and progress of a nation could be regarded as threat (Cited in Ekoko and vogt 1990:224). Thus, anything that can undermine the progress and stability of a nation socially, politically and economically is termed as a threat (Imobighe, 1992). Also sees threat as a declaration of intent to injure, harm or punish an opponent usually with a view to restraining his freedom of action or changing his future behavior along desired direction.

### **The Concept of National Security**

According to Takaya (1989), the Concept of national security is used in its widest sense to include not only the measures relating to the preservation of a country’s physical entity, but also the preservation of its political stability, its economic and national interest as well as general protection of the safety and well-being of its citizens. While for Oberg and Wilberg (1984), they view national security. Must be directed towards immaterial objects like life-style, culture, freedom, identity and the protection of nature there must be individual satisfaction of the basic needs like food, clothing, housing, health, education and work. No matter how much weaponry an individual may have at his disposal, they posit that an individual lacking in basic rights to speak, travel, meet and communicate is also not a secured human being.

### **Mungiki Link with the Politicians**

The Mungiki Militia, gained notoriety for their involvement in the election violence. By then, it was a vast criminal and political entity built on extortion in the Matatu transport industry, with tens of thousands of members. The authorities did not take it lightly to its existence and, in the year 2000; President Moi ordered a violent crackdown on the movement, with police violently breaking up its meetings. But this changed in the year 2002 when a Mungiki sect leader then Mr, Maina Njenga, officially endorsed Moi’s preferred candidate for the 2002 election, Uhuru Kenyatta. And they became more formidable criminal force, a development that triggered a huge public uproar about rates of criminality in Nairobi. In 2005, Interior Minister Michuki launched a campaign to contain them, including a shoot-to-kill instruction. This did not stop politicians approaching the Mungiki for support, in 2007 election, in which they played a vital role which led to killings, displacement, sexual and gender-based violence that characterized that election (Simone, *et al.* 2020).

The role of the Mungiki in this election was a central feature of the International criminal court (ICC) case against Kenyatta. And then Education Minister Ruto, now the current president of Kenya, and four others were also charged with crimes against humanity. The prosecutor in the ICC case alleged that Kenyatta commanded the Mungiki to carry out the attacks in Nakuru and Naivasha towns in the Rift Valley, and that he financed the gang and helped them to raise funds to buy weapons. Kenyatta denied these allegations and the ICC eventually dropped the charges against him and the other accused due to a lack of evidence (Simone, *et al.* 2020).

### **The Brief History of Matatu Transport Industry**

Matatus are vibrantly decorated vans and minibuses that offer cheap public transport for millions of commuters. The industry is central to Kenya’s urban economy and plays a vital role in connecting its towns and cities. The informal nature of the industry makes it difficult to estimate its value, although government reports indicate that it employs hundreds of thousands of people, from drivers and conductors to callers (who entice passengers to board certain vehicles) and operators (matatu owners). Matatus are the main way that Kenya’s urban population travels, and they provide a key source of mobility in cities such as Nairobi that, historically, were not planned with pedestrians in mind (Simeone, *et al.* 2020). Mr, Dickson Mbugua, the chair of Matatu Welfare Association, says the Mungiki first penetrated the terminals in 1996, but the industry fought back. However, in 2002 they received political backing, which strengthened their hand. The industry again took measures to secure terminals against Mungiki, but they returned during the 2007 elections (Simeone, *et al.* 2020).

There are a range of other, informal, beneficiaries who exploit the profits generated by the matatu industry and who extract rents by increasing costs while discouraging fair competition. These include corrupt traffic police and judicial officers, along with criminal gangs who control matatu terminals and routes, as well as criminal and political figures who are embedded in the industry. An investigation by the Daily Nation estimated that the industry loses, on average, Ksh47 billion annually to this kind of extortion (equivalent to about US\$470 million). The matatu industry is now organized around bodies that run terminals as cooperatives. All matatu owners must pay fees for administration of the routes and upkeep of the terminal. These bodies are referred to as Saccos (derived from an acronym of their official designation as Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies). The Saccos are, in turn,

organized into industry-wide associations, such as the Matatu Owners Association and Matatu Welfare Association (Simeone, et al 2020).

Our interviewees claim that extortion fees are consistent. In addition to the fee paid to the Sacco of Ksh100 per vehicle per day, cartels charge matatu operators Ksh200 per vehicle per day, and then a per trip fee of Ksh50–Ksh100 in the city centre. ‘Once cartels have taken their money – between 5am or 10am – you don’t see them for the rest of the day, but if you don’t pay you will be robbed later. You will be punished – the owner, the driver or the conductor,’ says an industry bribe broker. Gangs have also used the profits from terminal extortion to enter other criminal enterprises such as the drug trade (or vice versa), and to buy and run their own matatus (Simeone, et al 2020).

A broker described a highly regulated system of police bribery in the matatu industry with a well-defined niche for himself and others in the same role. He ensured drivers did not go to jail, got cars out of the pound, and made weekly trips to police stations to pay bribes. These were paid to traffic police, other national police, and city-council police officers, known as Askaris. Police enter the matatu industry as owners of matatus, hiring others to drive for them. These corrupt police officers, especially traffic police, recycle money extorted from the matatu businesses back into the industry, either personally or through proxies. A proportion of matatus transport industry in Kenya is owned or partly-owned by police officers, creating a clear conflict of interest. Kenyatta issued a decree in 2019 compelling traffic police to choose between their role as law enforcers and matatu businessmen (Simeone, et al 2020).

The matatu transport industry’s links to political elite go deeper than profit; it also provides campaigning benefits for aspiring politicians. An influential player in the industry commands the respect of youths operating at the margins of respectability but at the center of the economy. The matatu workforce, which includes owners, leaders of touts, drivers, is a significant pool of people who can be called on not only to vote, but also to coerce others to do so. Matatu owners can also provide transport to political meetings and funding for campaigns in return for political favours once a candidate is won election (Simone, *et al* 2020).

#### **Mungiki Civil Militia Activities a Threat to Kenyan National Security: Interrogating**

Mungiki civil militia activities that constitute a threat to Kenyan national securities are taking place in Matatu public transport industries and other parts of Kenya. They collected money from drivers and conductors of public transport. It has been reported that those who have failed to honor Mungiki’s demands have fallen victims of their attack. In May 2007, the Matatu operators raised an outcry complaining that Mungiki extorted most of their profits. They were forced to give (\$2.5) for every trip made. After the outcry, Mungiki embarked on murderous campaign. Members of public would wake up to see human, body parts cut into pieces and thrown into bushes, attack blamed on Mungiki. This drew an armed response from Kenyan security forces, which stormed the Mathare area and killed 100 of its members. These killings did not deter the members of the sect from extorting money from Matatu transport owners. In January 2007, it had been estimated that the sect collected approximately 1.3 million dollars a day nationwide, and this had spark the May-June 2007 battles between Mungiki and Matatu operators (Kilonzo, 2012:236).

Initially, the gang used clubs, machetes, swords, and axes to attack and maim their victims, but they has since assumed a modern face, using AK-47 assault rifles, explosives, and hand grenades to stage indiscriminate attacks on people who defy their orders (Ombati, 2007). It is certain that one of the gang’s roles is to instill utmost fear on the people. And they have accomplished their goal with the constant reports by the media houses describing their grisly murders, with bags of dead bodies collected in bushes and streets, including those of motorists sprayed with bullets (Ombati and Opiyo, 2007).

Meanwhile, villagers and residents buying land where the gang members are concentrated are expected to give certain percentage. Likewise, anyone building a house must pay a certain fee. As one village elder said, “It cost (\$121) for a permanent commercial building in a trading center as protection fees. Timber houses cost less. The amount is determined by size and value.” Failure to pay resulted in your construction materials taken away and sadly you have no one to report to. A cross-section of villagers who talked on condition of anonymity said they have been making these payments to the sect for the last seven years (Kareithi and Gikandi, 2007).

Mungiki not only levies money for provision of security but also takes charge of public toilets, charging fees for their use. Reports from a place called Mathare in Kenya also indicate that the gang has started supplying electricity, compelling residents to switch to illegal installations at a fee, besides forcibly providing illegal water connections at a fee. Meanwhile, they settle rent and family disputes; the gang has formed what they refer to as Kangaroo courts (Kikechi, 2007). Further reports shows that Mungiki “holds ‘trials’ for people, who violate its strict rules of dress or behavior, Detaining, maiming and even killing those who found guilty.” (Landinfo, 2010). Clearly, the gang has paralyzed the basic and normal activities of both rural and urban dwellers. The gang is also known for defending their own that have been arrested or killed by police. In June, 2007, following their leader’s, John Maina Njenga, arrest and sentence to five-year jail term for being found with the possession of a gun and bhang, the members went on a merciless spree of killing at random. They also raid police stations to free their own members who are in police custody (Ombati & Opiyo, 2007).

Their members are also involved in anti-social acts. They harass women, for instance, stripping those wearing miniskirts and trousers in public, additionally, the sect has been accused of raping women, and they forcibly impose female circumcision (Ombati & Opiyo, 2007). A number of sources refer to Mungiki having issued a three-month ultimatum in 2002 to all women between 13 and 65 years in the Kiambu district who had not undergone circumcision to do so. According to East African Standard, the sect members gave women in parts of Kikuyu and Kiambaa divisions until July 7, commonly known as Sabasaba, to undergo

Female Genital Mutilation as according to Kikuyu custom. If they fail to do so, Mungiki would perform it by force. There is, however, no information to what extent this ultimatum was enforced (Landinfo, 2010:11).

In a verbal statement in a court case in the United Kingdom an expert witness, Dr. Knighton from the Royal Anthropological Institute, stated the following: There is evidence that the Mungiki seek to impose Female Genital Mutilation and other forms of violence on women and children other than those who have been initiated into their sect. In particular, such women and children include the wives, partners, children and other female family members of those men who have taken the Mungiki oath (Knighton 2008).

Residents of Central region of Kenya told Human Rights Watch how politicians running for office are using the violent Mungiki to intimidate voters, a farmer in a village called Kagumo explained how it's works in his community:

These gangs get paid by politicians. They move from door to door asking people to support one candidate. We do not argue with them. We just agree with what they say because arguing with them can cost your life or that of your family members (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

In Central Province in Kenya, Potential in-laws have not been spared either. According to the Kikuyu custom, a groom must pay dowry to the bride's parents. In these circumstances, parents and elders have been forced by the gang to pay a tax each time they receive a dowry. The consequences of not paying are serious and could cost one's life (Kareithi & Gikandi, 2007). Following the post-election violence in January 2008, Mungiki organized systematic, brutal killings of women and children so as to expel Luo and Kalenjin tribes from Kikuyu-dominated areas' in the Rift Valley towns of Naivasha and Nakuru (IRIN, 2008). Backed by politicians and prominent business people, Mungiki has re-emerged more brazen and more lethal than before. In Nakuru, there have been complaints by the Nakuru Hawkers Association of the re-emergence of Mungiki in the town, menacingly demanding money from traders and residents. Association chairman Mr. Simon ole Naiseku said Mungiki members have continued to harass traders as far back as 2015. Mungiki is among 18 such groups that were in March 2007 proscribed by the government over their involvement in criminal activities around the country with the support of some politicians (Dominic, 2017).

#### **Responses from the Kenyan Government**

In July 2007, Kenyan police established a special police unit, called kwekwe, to carry out a crackdown on Mungiki members, following several brutal murders attributed to the Mungiki in the Central Province (Nairobi Star 2009). The Police Commissioner, Mr. Hussein Ali, formed the Kwekwe, an elite police squad that will operate on code. (Ombati, 2007). The squad will be under the command of Mr. Francis Njiru, with over a hundred officers under him. The squad will work closely with the National Security Intelligence Service while incorporating Rhino Squad, which was formed two years ago to fight Mungiki. With the formation of Kwekwe, police hope to contain the gangs in Nairobi and Central provinces where they have unleashed terror (Ombati, 2007).

Kwekwe are under the order to "shoot to kill anyone suspected to be a member of the gang who resists arrest." Also Kwekwe officers will be deployed at various Matatu terminuses to contain the menace of Mungiki. Kwekwe officers also intend to persuade tenants and landlords to cooperate with them by showing them those Mungiki who collect the money (Ombati, 2007). Meanwhile, the government has promised to heavily fund the squad enabling it to purchase sophisticated weapons and disguised vehicles to enhance their movement. It is hoped that these resources will help the squad manage intelligence gathering (Ombati, 2007).

. On 3 March 2002, about 300 Mungiki youth, wielding machetes, axes, and other crude weapons, rampaged through an Estate in Nairobi Kenya called Kariobangi Estate, killing between 20 and 23 people and injuring 31 others. Allegedly, their motive was revenge for two of their members, who had been killed by an overwhelming Luo ethnic militia in Kariobangi known as the Taliban (Kagwanja 2003; 45). The violence described above preceded the Kenyan government's decision to banned Mungiki, Taliban and 16 other sects, militias and gangs in Kenya After the 2002 election (IRIN News 2002).

#### **Responses from the Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights**

However human rights activists have taken issue with the government over the manner in which police are conducting the operation against members of the Mungiki sect. Led by the chairman of the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), Mr. Maina Kiai, they called on the government to prosecute Mungiki suspects rather than killing them. Their argument is that it makes no sense to maintain a judicial system if the police have now assumed the power to investigate and execute judicial roles in the society. The activists further feel that if that is the case, the government should dissolve the Judiciary and let the police do everything (Ombati & Ogutu, 2007).

There is ample documentation that the kwekwe unit has functioned as a death squad that carried out mass executions of Mungiki members and suspected adherents. Dead bodies were found in desolate farms scattered all over the country, and the victims were killed with one or two bullets in their back from close range. Many dead bodies were dismembered (ladinfo, 2010:13). The Kenyan National Commission on Human Right says its does not condone any atrocities committed by Mungiki (KNCHR 2008). Human Rights Watch concluded that "the police crackdown matched or even Exceeded that of the Mungiki itself" (HRW 2008).

The Oscar Foundation Free Legal Aid Clinic Kenya (OFFLACK), local human rights NGO, reported that police were linked with the continued disappearance and deaths of suspected members of the Mungiki, the country's largest criminal organization. On October 16, a police officer, who had cooperated with the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights KNCHR to investigate the extrajudicial killings of suspected Mungiki-sect members, was murdered in Nairobi (Bureau of Democracy 2009). The kwekwe unit was reportedly disbanded in February 2009 (Nairobi Star, 2009).

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### **Mungiki Intelligence Network**

Mungiki gang has an intricate intelligence network that enabled its members to outwit the police as they continue to butcher Kenyans. It has spy-network, fashioned like the government's own National Security Intelligence Service that gathers information on impending police raids, suspected informers and deserters. Investigation by The Standard has revealed that the Mungiki intelligence network though is webbed across Nairobi and most parts of Central Province (Oywa, 2007). Meanwhile, the spies, mostly young volunteers, have infiltrated all the major slums in Nairobi and neighboring districts where they disguise themselves as water vendors, and waste collectors. In the Kosovo slum, residents say the informers reported to a man in his late fifties who live within the slum. The man is the leader of the local intelligence network. He gets information from the informers and passes it over to his seniors. It is after this that the killers get into action (Oywa, 2007). More senior members of the sect are deployed at the major bus terminus, where they collect information on vehicle owners refusing to pay illegal levies. They use coded words and short text messages to communicate with their superiors (Oywa, 2007).

### **Attempt to Revive Mungiki**

On 23 December 2023, the deputy president Rigathi Gachagua "ordered security chiefs to crack down on the resurgence of the outlawed Mungiki sect in central Kenya and parts of Nairobi. Gachagua stated that it is unacceptable to have government security officers on the one hand, while on the other hand a section of youth was claiming to be in a position to provide security at a fee. This is a country of rule of law we will not allowed criminal gangs to cling back and destabilize this region. I have ordered the County commanders with clear instructions to protect people's business and to ensure that no business is destabilized by those criminals he said". Gachagua also lashed at leaders who could be behind the revival of the dreaded militia and urged them to keep off the illegal group. You cannot be associated with criminal gangs with records of killings, female circumcision, and defilement, of young children. That cannot be allowed". He warned (Samuel & Wangari 2024).

Police intercepted and arrested nearly 300 suspected members of Kenya outlawed Mungiki sect at Nyiri county. Mount Kenya region on 31 December 2023, they were thought to be heading for a thanksgiving rally organized by Maina Njenga. The former leader of the sect, Njenga now a Pastor and a Politician, before the arrest, the former leader had said, a new Mount Kenya kingpin would be announced at the rally. Police officers mounted roadblocks and searched vehicles at Nyiri town leading to the arrest of the suspects. We shall not allow any security threat or illegal meeting". Benjamin Rotich, Nyiri county Police commander said. Police claimed that some of the suspects were found with Knives, Goats skin and Mungiki flags, items used by the sect to conduct rituals (Victor, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

Mungiki is an African traditional religion group that originated in Kenya in late 1980's amongst the Kikuyu tribes with the hope of returning Kenyan's back to Kikuyu traditional religion, as opposed to western culture and religion, Mungiki drawn most of its support among the poorest Kenyan citizens, Mungiki also create awareness among its members to fought bad Governance, Corruption, Poverty, and injustice as a result of poor leadership that is associates with the Kenyan government. But later Mungiki deviated from their Religious revivalism, into civil militia activities which contradicts their earlier ideology. Mungiki are now involve into so many unwholesome activities like armed robbery, killings, extortions and imposing of Terror and fear in to the mind of general public in Kenya which serve as a threat to Kenyan national security.

### **Recommendations**

These are some of the recommendations that will help in mitigating Mungiki civil militia activities in Kenya are:

- The Kenyan government should organize a truth and peace reconciliation commission that will look in to Mungiki grievances, and also listen to the grievances of the families that lost their love ones as a result of Mungiki attacked. And government should compensate such families with money to reduce their suffering, because some of these people that died as a result of Mungiki attacks are the bread winner of their families, and this will help to heal the past wound among the victims.
- The Kenyan government should make an electoral law that will banned any politician identified to be a member of Mungiki from contesting election, to serve as a deterrence to other politicians that want to join the sect
- The Kenyan government should assist in paying monthly stipends to the Kenyan poorest citizens, because most of the people that identified with the Mungiki ideology are the unemployed Kenyans.
- The Kenyan politicians should also imbibe the culture of good governance and service delivery to their people, because lack of transparency and accountability in governance, breeds violence and terrorism.

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