

## **Are Kenyan Police Ready for Elections?**

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Force still under-resourced and poorly equipped as March polls approach.

“The police have failed in their duty to protect residents and Kisumu has seen an alarming upsurge in insecurity,” said Audi Ogada, a civil activist in the town in western Kenya.

In November, Kisumu was the scene of the murder of Shem Kwegu, a member of parliament from the coalition government’s Orange Democratic Movement. Ogada told IWPR he feared that the police would be unable to cope with a rising tide of violence ahead of elections this March for a president, parliament and local governors.

“Insecurity has taken centre stage in Kenya,” he said. “We want calm before elections.”

In recent months, Kenya has experienced an upsurge in violence in various parts of the country.

In August last year, skirmishes between members of the Orma and Pokomo ethnic groups in the Tana Delta in the east of Kenya left over 100 people dead. Further violence erupted in the same area earlier this January.

In November, more than 40 police officers were killed while pursuing cattle rustlers in Baragoi in the Rift Valley.

Ogada believes that much of the current violence is orchestrated.

Memories of election-related violence are fresh in Kenya, where a disputed presidential vote in December 2007 led to clashes along ethnic lines that left over 1,100 people dead. The International Criminal Court, ICC, launched an investigation which led to four senior figures being charged with crimes against humanity. They will go on trial in The Hague in April.

The Kenyan police were implicated in the bloodshed. The government set up a commission of inquiry into the violence, which found that the police killed 405 of the total of 1,133 people who died, and injured 557 others.

ICC judges decided not to confirm charges brought against another suspect, former police commissioner, Mohammed Hussein Ali. They found no grounds to believe that any of the accused was responsible for police violence in Kisumu or in the Kibera slum district on the outskirts of Nairobi. Nor did they find substantial evidence for the prosecution’s allegation that police participated in attacks in and around the towns of Nakuru and Naivasha.

### **POLICE REFORMS IN PROGRESS**

As a result of the bloodshed, the government launched a programme of reforms to turn the police into a more accountable and professional force. Although the appointment of an inspector-general in December is seen as an important step forward, experts warn that the force still lacks the skills and equipment to contain outbreaks of violence around the April elections.

“Kenyans should not expect much difference in terms of capacity and professionalism from the police because they have not acquired much [since 2008],” Simiyu Werunga, a security consultant who heads the African Centre for Security and Strategic Studies, told IWPR.

In a speech to parliament in early December, Internal Security Minister Katoo Ole Metito acknowledged that Kenya’s security agencies were “ill-equipped to secure the nation during this electioneering period”.

Werunga argues that equipping police with bulletproof jackets and issuing them with rubber bullets would greatly reduce the risk of casualties.

He provides training to members of the Kenyan Police Reserve, which supplements the regular police in the countryside, and the Administration Police, a separate force, and says neither is “well equipped to counter riots”.

“Out of 37 police stations in Nairobi, approximately ten officers across three police stations have protective jackets and rubber bullets,” he added.

When things get out of hand, police themselves are vulnerable to attack, and are liable to respond with live fire if they have not been issued with non-lethal munitions.

“Civilians are therefore at risk of being shot dead... amidst the riots, unless the government equips the entire police force with rubber bullets and bulletproof jackets,” Werunga said.

Others agree that practical steps like these are needed.

Bishop Joshua Koyo, the Nyanza regional chairman of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, says the government should increase the police budget in order to raise salaries and buy much-needed equipment and vehicles.

“More needs to be done to improve the whole police force; especially the way they think, operate at work and the speed at which they respond to crisis situations, as well as the welfare of the police officers themselves,” Bishop Koyo said. “Consider elections without enough policemen on the ground who are well paid and equipped. This automatically leads to a careless attitude towards the job of securing the nation.”

### **NUMBERS INCREASE, BUT INEXPERIENCE A PROBLEM**

The new inspector general, David Kimaiyo, acknowledges that the resources provided for improvements to policing have been limited, but he says 90,000 more officers will be trained in time to be deployed around the country to provide security before and after the elections.

“The police service shall deal firmly with any person who will attempt to sabotage the holding of peaceful elections,” Kimaiyo said. “We shall not tolerate any acts of violence during this important period.”

So far, only 7,000 officers have been trained, and there are questions about how they will perform in action.

Werunga says new recruits lack both experience and confidence.

“Faced with [their] first time at work, with no protective gear and armed with live bullets, confusion might take over them, resulting in a lot of gunfire and violent acts,” he said.

Werunga said the police lacked the capacity to gather intelligence on potential sources of violence or planned attacks, making it hard to identify threats and intervene rapidly to prevent things escalating.

“Out of 456 police stations countrywide, none has enough intelligence to counter crime effectively,” Werunga said.

Government and police officials insist that there is no cause for alarm and that the police will be ready to act by the time people go to the polls on March 4.

Internal Security Minister Ole Metito pointed to the number of officers who had already been trained and deployed, and said they had been given training in human rights.

Police spokesman Charles Owino, too, said people should not worry. He noted that police in Kisumu had arrested and charged suspects with Kwega’s murder.

“In the case of [the] Kisumu riots, I believe that the level of insecurity is going down because of the quick response by police,” he added.

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