

Kenyan ruling class whips up nationalism over Somalis accused of desecrating national flag

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Viral clips from a CAF Champions League match at Nairobi's Nyayo Stadium, the continent's top club competition organised by the Confederation of African Football, have been seized on by the Kenyan ruling class to whip up nationalist hysteria.

In footage circulated on social media, a small group of Mogadishu City Club supporters, who had travelled from Somalia to back their team, are seen mishandling a Kenyan flag. Two of them, minors aged just 14 and 17, stomp on it, kick it in the air, and rub it against their crotch.

A petty act by a couple of teenagers has been inflated into a national scandal. For more than a week, *The Standard*, *The Star*, and *The Daily Nation* have splashed the story across their pages, with sensational headlines and endless commentary while the main television and radio channels have echoed the same drumbeat.

The unpopular government of William Ruto seized an opportunity to promote "national unity". On Wednesday, Interior Cabinet Secretary Kipchumba Murkomen ordered immediate arrests and prosecutions, threatening deportations.

Addressing reporters in Kenya's Mandera county, inhabited mostly by Kenyan Somalis, Murkomen announced the Directorate of Criminal Investigations was pursuing the youths, declaring: "We must establish who those individuals were, why they acted that way, and what action should follow ... Their conduct must face the law, since we already have clear legislation like the National Flags and Emblems Act, which spells out how the national flag should be treated and the penalties for misuse. The law will take its full course."

Inspector General of Police Douglas Kanja followed suit: "the flag was fought for here, until we gained our independence... they are mocking us with it, and we can

never allow that."

Wiper Party leader and millionaire politician Kalonzo Musyoka rushed to Citizen TV to denounce the teenagers' actions as "despicable," praising the "passion" with which Kanja defended the flag and insisting that "Kenyans want action."

On Thursday, the DCI head announced on X the arrest of a 17-year-old, adding "Efforts to apprehend the other suspect, who is believed to be within the country, are ongoing". Hours later, the DCI confirmed the arrest of a 14-year-old. Both were denied release to relatives, detained at the Children's Protection Unit, and now face charges ranging from illegal entry to "damaging a national symbol."

The prosecution is demanding the minors be sent to the notorious Kamiti Maximum Prison, where Kenya's most hardened criminals are detained behind high concrete walls.

The hypocrisy of such manufactured outrage could not be starker. The very same ruling class and state machine, represented by Murkomen, Kanja and Sing'oei, are drenched in blood from their savage repression of anti-austerity and Gen Z protests over the past two years. Peaceful demonstrators against IMF-dictated austerity measures were gunned down in the streets, abducted by plainclothes agents, maimed with live bullets and suffocated with tear gas. At least 160 were killed by police and military units, hundreds more were left permanently disabled, thousands arrested, and more than 300 dragged before the courts under draconian anti-terrorism laws. Dozens have been abducted and "disappeared," their families left without answers.

Opposition leader Musyoka served for decades under Daniel arap Moi's Western backed dictatorship, including as foreign minister during the regime's most brutal years.

His regime was infamous for extrajudicial killings, systematic torture, and repression targeting left-wing movements and striking workers and peasants.

That the ruling class can deploy the full weight of the police, the DCI, the immigration department and the courts against teenagers over such a matter reveals the real function of nationalism as an ideological weapon to confuse and divide the working class. It serves to obscure the obscene levels of inequality and mass opposition which exist against the Ruto regime and the bourgeois opposition.

The real concerns of the masses are not the petty mischiefs of two teenagers but inequality, the soaring cost of living, mass unemployment, and the collapse of public services. According to Oxfam, Kenya is among the most unequal countries in the world, with less than 0.1 percent of the population—about 8,300 people—owning more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent, more than 44 million people. Around 40 percent of Kenyans live in poverty and 32 percent in food poverty, unable to meet even basic needs. Three quarters of young people under 35 are locked out of secure jobs and pushed into low paid informal work.

Rising food prices, recurring droughts, and environmental disasters leave nearly a quarter of the population chronically hungry. Schools are overcrowded, health care is collapsing after the dismantling of the National Health Insurance Fund and its replacement with the Social Health Authority, and millions in slums like Kibera and Mathare survive without clean water or sanitation. Meanwhile billions vanish every year in corruption scandals, from COVID-19 funds to the Housing Levy.

The scapegoating of Somalis has long been a weapon of the Kenyan ruling class. After Somalia's independence in 1960, Somali nationalists demanded the Northern Frontier District be allowed to join Somalia. Britain rejected this, and upon granting independence to Kenya in 1963, Jomo Kenyatta's government, backed by London, waged the bloody Shifta War (1963–1967) to crush Somali secessionists and whip up national unity behind the new Kenyan bourgeoisie.

The government killed more than 10,000 people through scorched earth tactics, mass detentions, forced relocations, livestock seizures, and concentration camp style resettlements. Survivors recounted horrific ordeals: men forced to lie in the sun without food or water, brutal beatings, sexual violence, and torture aimed at extracting the addresses of "rebels." These were the same methods

Britain used less than a decade earlier to suppress the Mau Mau uprising, when hundreds of thousands of peasants were herded into detention camps under conditions of starvation, torture, and forced labour.

Under Daniel arap Moi (1978–2002), state repression continued leading to the 1984 Wajir massacre, when 5,000 Somali men were herded onto the Wagalla airstrip, denied food and water for days, subjected to torture and beatings, and executed, with at least 1,000 killed.

In the 2000s, the US-led "war on terror" provided a fresh pretext for persecution. In 2011, Kenya invaded Somalia under "Operation Linda Nchi," with direct backing from Washington. Al Shabaab, a product of the 2006 US-sponsored Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, responded with a series of atrocities, including the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi and the 2015 Garissa University massacre, which together claimed hundreds of civilian lives.

Al Shabaab cynically presented these crimes as retribution for Kenya's occupation of Somalia, but they were immediately exploited by the political establishment to brand Somali communities inside Kenya as breeding grounds of terrorism. The result was mass arrests, disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and sweeping police raids across the Somali-populated Eastleigh district of Nairobi and the wider North Eastern region, deepening fear and hostility between communities on both sides of the border.

Workers and youth in Kenya and Somalia must reject every appeal to nationalism and patriotism, whether it comes from the Ruto government, the capitalist opposition, or Islamist militias or the Somali government. The way forward lies in internationalism and socialism, linking the fight of Kenyan and Somali workers with their class brothers and sisters across Africa and the world against capitalism and imperialism.



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