



## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

# When National Security Becomes a Shield: Rethinking State Power, Violence, and Human Security in Contemporary Africa

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### **Distinguished leaders, esteemed colleagues, fellow thinkers,**

It is a privilege to stand before you in Trondheim, Norway, in Northern Europe – a region known for its commitment to democratic governance, human rights, and institutional integrity. I come from a continent rich in potential, creativity, and resilience. Yet I also come bearing a message that is uncomfortable, urgent, and necessary.

Today, I invite you to reflect with me on a question that sits at the intersection of criminology, governance, and moral responsibility:

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### **Has national security become a shield for state crimes in contemporary Africa?**

This is not an academic provocation. It is a lived reality for millions of Africans whose daily existence is shaped by the decisions of states that claim to protect them – yet too often harm them.

### **The Security Paradox: Protection or Domination?**

Across Africa, “national security” is invoked with solemnity. It appears in constitutions, counter-terrorism strategies, and presidential speeches. It is presented as the sacred duty of the state.

But in practice, something more troubling occurs:

- **National security becomes regime security.**
- **Regime security becomes elite security.**
- **And elite security becomes insecurity for everyone else.**

This is the paradox: **The very institutions meant to protect citizens often become the instruments of their fear.**

## Historical Roots: The Architecture of Coercive Power

To understand this paradox, we must revisit the historical architecture of African security institutions.

### Colonial Foundations

Colonial administrations built police and military structures not to protect Africans, but to **control** them.

- In 1950, the British colonial police in Kenya had a ratio of **1 officer for every 300 Africans**, yet 70% of their operations targeted political dissent, not crime.
- In French West Africa, over **60% of security expenditures** were dedicated to suppressing uprisings, not public safety.

These institutions were designed to police subjects, not serve citizens.

### Post-Independence Continuity

At independence, many African states inherited:

- Emergency laws
- Broad police powers
- Intelligence services with no civilian oversight

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The logic of domination persisted.

### Cold War Reinforcement

During the Cold War, authoritarian regimes were armed and financed in the name of “stability.”

- Between 1960 and 1990, **over 70% of African military aid** from global powers went to governments with documented human rights abuses.

### The War on Terror

After 2001, counter-terrorism became the new justification for expanded state power.

- By 2020, **22 African countries** had adopted anti-terror laws with vague definitions of “extremism” and “subversion.”
- Several of these laws have been used more often against journalists and activists than against armed groups.

Thus, the misuse of national security is not a deviation – it is the continuation of a long historical pattern.

## **When National Security Becomes a Shield for State Crimes**

Let us be precise about what we mean by **state crimes**:

- Extrajudicial killings
- Torture and enforced disappearances
- Mass surveillance
- Criminalisation of dissent
- Electoral manipulation
- Corruption that destroys lives
- Collective punishment of communities

These are not isolated incidents. They are systemic patterns.

### **Case Study 1: Nigeria – The Lekki Toll Gate (2020)**

During peaceful protests against police brutality, security forces opened fire on unarmed civilians. The official justification: **“national security”** and “prevention of chaos.”

Independent investigations documented:

- Live ammunition used against protesters
- Attempts to conceal evidence
- Denial of responsibility despite video proof

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### **Case Study 2: Ethiopia – The Tigray Conflict (2020-2022)**

Under the banner of “national unity” and “counter-insurgency,” widespread atrocities were reported:

- Mass killings
- Sexual violence
- Starvation as a weapon of war

Humanitarian access was restricted in the name of “security.”

### **Case Study 3: Sahel Region – Counter-Terrorism Operations**

In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, security forces have been implicated in:

- Summary executions
- Disappearances
- Collective punishment of entire villages

Yet these actions are justified as necessary to combat terrorism.

Across the continent, the pattern is clear: **Security rhetoric is used to silence accountability.**

### **The Criminogenic State: When Power Produces Violence**

In criminology, we study environments that produce crime. But what happens when **the state itself becomes criminogenic?**

A criminogenic state is one that:

- Creates conditions for violence
- Uses law to legitimise repression
- Normalises impunity
- Delegitimises accountability
- Treats citizens as suspects
- Treats dissent as a threat

Under such conditions, national security becomes political armour – not public protection.

### **The Human Cost: Beyond Statistics**

Behind every statistic is a human story:

- A mother searching for a disappeared son
- A journalist forced into exile
- A community living under military curfew
- A young activist tortured for a Facebook post
- A population voting under fear rather than conviction

When national security becomes a shield for state crimes, the social fabric tears. Trust erodes. Citizens withdraw. Violence becomes cyclical.

And the state loses its moral authority.

## **Why This Matters to Europe**

Some may ask: *Why discuss African security practices in a European conference?*

Because Europe is not a neutral observer.

- European states fund security programs.
- European companies supply surveillance technologies.
- European migration policies shape African policing.
- European diplomacy often prioritises stability over accountability.

Thus, the question is not only African. It is global. It is shared.

## **Rethinking Security: A Human-Centered Paradigm**

If we are to move forward, we must redefine security itself.

**Human security – not regime security – must be the foundation.**

Human security means:

- Freedom from fear
- Freedom from want
- Freedom from indignity

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It means that **the safety of the people is the highest law.**

This requires:

- Clear, narrow definitions of national security
- Independent oversight of security forces
- Transparent budgets
- Protection of journalists and whistleblowers
- Stronger regional human rights mechanisms
- Civic education that empowers citizens
- International partnerships that prioritise rights, not just stability

Security must be reclaimed from those who misuse it.

## **My Urgent Call to Action**

Allow me to speak plainly.

***We must refuse the false choice between security and freedom. We must expose the misuse of security language. We must document abuses relentlessly. We must support those who resist fear. And we must insist that a state that harms its people cannot claim legitimacy.***

National security must never be a shield for state crimes. It must be a promise – a promise that the state exists to protect, not to dominate.

## **Closing**

As a father and grand father, my dear friends, the future of African governance will not be determined by the strength of armies, but by the strength of institutions. Not by the silence of citizens, but by their voice. Not by the fear of the state, but by the trust it earns.

Let us work together – Africans, Europeans, global citizens – to ensure that security is reclaimed as a public good, not a political weapon.

**Thank you.**