



**ORGANIZATION FOR
PRISONERS' RIGHTS**

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SILENCE:
how Somalia's government detains, coerces,
and releases leaving no trace

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SILENCE: HOW SOMALIA'S GOVERNMENT DETAINS, COERCES, AND RELEASES — LEAVING NO TRACE

Prologue: Eight Minutes

On the afternoon of April 16, 2024, journalist Hussein Abdulle Mohamed received a summons. The director of Somalia's National Intelligence and Security Agency — NISA — wanted to meet him. Hussein ran SYL TV, a Facebook-based channel, and had recently published investigative reports on the agency's internal operations, including one revealing an abandoned borehole on the outskirts of Mogadishu allegedly used by security forces to dispose of bodies.

He went to the meeting. It lasted eight minutes.

What followed those eight minutes is a story that has become, in its essential structure, entirely unremarkable in Somalia. Hussein was transferred from NISA's Habar Khadijo building to Godka Jilacow — the agency's underground detention and interrogation facility — where he was held overnight without charge, without access to a lawyer, and without his family being informed of his whereabouts. The following day, he was released.

"Thank God," he wrote on Facebook when he was free. "I got my freedom after 24 hours of kidnapping."

No charges were ever filed. No court was ever involved. There is no official record that the detention happened at all.

This is not an exceptional case. It is a template.

Part I: What the Data Shows

The numbers, gathered from the Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS), the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and the Coalition of Somali Human Rights Defenders (CSHRDS), tell a story of dramatic and deliberate escalation.

In 2023, SJS documented 25 arbitrary detentions of journalists. In 2024, that figure rose to 31. By the end of 2025, it had reached 148 — nearly a sixfold increase in two years. Mogadishu alone accounted for 118 violations in 2025, with NISA and the police identified as the primary perpetrators. The escalation is not random. It tracks precisely with the consolidation of political power under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and the intensification of the government's Al-Shabaab military

campaign — a campaign that has generated both genuine security pressures and an enormous appetite for information control.

But the most revealing statistic is not the total number of detentions. It is what happens afterward. According to SJS's 2025 annual report, nearly 90 percent of journalists arrested or arbitrarily detained were never brought to court and were released without charge, typically after one or several days. Let that figure sit for a moment. Nine in ten detentions produce no legal outcome. No charge. No conviction. No acquittal. Just disappearance, then reappearance.

This is not a justice system struggling to function. It is a system deliberately avoiding function.

Part II: The Infrastructure of Informal Detention

At the center of this system is a facility whose name has become synonymous with fear in Mogadishu's media and civil society community: Godka Jilacow — the NISA underground detention and interrogation center in the capital.

The most detailed testimony about conditions inside Godka Jilacow comes from Abdalle Ahmed Mumin, co-founder and Secretary-General of the Somali Journalists Syndicate. Between October 2022 and April 2023, Mumin was arrested three separate times by NISA. His account, documented by Free Press Unlimited and submitted to the UN Human Rights Committee, offers a rare window into what informal detention actually looks like from the inside.

"Armed agents from NISA raided the SJS office and my home in Mogadishu," Mumin recalled. Detained at Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport while attempting to board a flight to Nairobi, he was first taken to Godka Jilacow. "After two days of repeated threats, mental torture and interrogation, I was transferred to another police detention where I was held for 11 more days." His offense: refusing to retract a press statement expressing concern about a government directive restricting media coverage.

In February 2023, NISA came for him a third time. "Officers threatened to kill me if I resisted. I was detained and tortured — beaten with guns, deprived of food and water." This time, he was held for 33 days in an overcrowded prison cell. During his detention, he witnessed what he later described as systematic abuse: "women and men detainees who had been subjected to sexual abuse, use of severe torture in interrogation of detainees, demands of bribes. The majority of the detainees I met and interviewed were from minority communities."

When he was finally released, NISA was not finished. Mumin was barred from leaving the country at the airport by immigration officials who said they were "receiving orders from the director of NISA." He has since been forced into exile, where he continues to deal with what RFK Human Rights described as "the significant physical and mental health impacts of his repeated detention and ill-treatment."

His case did not happen under a different government. It happened under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud — the same administration in power today.

In January 2025, freelance journalist Sharif Abdi was tracked by NISA officers who first raided his home in Waberi district and then hunted him to a second location. His family was denied access and left, in SJS's words, "unaware of his safety and well-being." In March 2025, nineteen journalists covering an Al-Shabaab attack on the President's convoy were arrested, taken to a police station, had their equipment confiscated, their footage and photographs forcibly deleted — and were then released. No charges.

The geography of this system spans Somalia's entire federal architecture — Mogadishu, Somaliland, Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabeelle, Jubaland, Southwest State, and SSC-Khaatumo. This is not a single administration's policy. It is a shared political culture.

Part III: The Digital Extension — Disappearing Content Without Disappearing People

The pattern does not end with physical detention. It has evolved into a parallel digital suppression system that is, in many ways, even harder to document and challenge.

Authorities have developed at least three distinct methods of online censorship:

Direct physical deletion. When journalists are detained, their phones and recording equipment are routinely confiscated and their content deleted on the spot before release. This was documented explicitly in the March 2025 mass detention of journalists covering the presidential convoy attack.

Coerced takedowns. Media outlets have been pressured, while a journalist is in custody, to remove published content as a condition of that journalist's release. In May 2024, Somaliland police held journalist Ahmed Boqorre until his TV station

agreed to delete a report on a hospital death. He was released. The report was gone. No charges were filed.

Platform weaponization. Perhaps the most sophisticated method: coordinated mass-reporting of critical journalists' Facebook pages to trigger removal under Meta's Community Standards policies. SJS documented that journalists and outlets critical of the Hassan Sheikh government and NISA faced systematic reporting campaigns, with content removed under the guise of "dangerous organizations and individuals" provisions. At least seven journalists and outlets were affected in 2025 alone. This outsources censorship to a private American corporation while maintaining plausible deniability. When Meta removes a page, the government did not do it.

The Ministry of Information has engaged directly as well. In July 2024, under orders from Deputy Minister Abdirahman Yusuf Al-Adaala, senior state media journalist Abdulkadir Isse Ali had his access to Somali National Television's Facebook page revoked — preventing him from publishing his own report on a military court hearing into the killing of a 14-year-old schoolboy by security forces.

Part IV: Beyond Journalists — The Targeting of Civil Society

The strategy is not limited to the press. Human rights defenders, social activists, political critics, and ordinary citizens with social media followings have been subjected to the same pattern.

In October 2024, NISA officers arrived at journalist Abduqadir Mohamed Nur's home in Mogadishu's Boondheere district at 3:00 AM. A family member watched two officers enter the house, handcuff him, and lead him out while several others waited outside in a Toyota 4WD equipped with a machine gun. His phone and personal laptop were confiscated. No warrant. No charge.

Women activists face a particularly acute version of this repression. The Coalition of Somali Human Rights Defenders documented that in 2025, the majority of targeted human rights defenders were women, subjected not only to arbitrary detention but to smear campaigns portraying them as "anti-cultural" or "foreign agents."

In July 2025, journalist Shukri Caabi Abdi was on her way to her newsroom when armed NISA-affiliated men stopped her tuktuk, questioned her about whether she had registered as a voter in the government's disputed electoral exercise, and

forcibly registered her when she refused. She had been reporting on forced voter registration of vulnerable civilians at markets and on the streets of Mogadishu.

Most recently, in April 2026 — weeks before this article was written — Sadia Moalim Ali, a tuktuk driver and social activist, was arrested by NISA officers in connection with her Facebook posts and participation in peaceful demonstrations. She is not a journalist. She is not a political opposition figure. She is a citizen who posted critical content online. Her detention is a marker of how far the logic of informal repression has extended.

Part V: What the Government Says — and What the Evidence Shows

The Somali government has never publicly defended the practice of detention without charge. It does not need to, because it never formally acknowledges that these detentions occur in the way that they do. Instead, it has deployed a consistent set of framings that deserve direct scrutiny.

The national security argument. Since President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud declared "total war" on Al-Shabaab following his 2022 election, security justifications have been the government's primary tool for framing media restrictions. Information Minister Daud Aweis Jama announced in March 2025 a formal ban on publishing "statements or news" that could threaten national security. This framing positions any crackdown on journalists as a defensive measure against extremist propaganda.

The evidence does not support it. The cases documented in this article — NISA's detention of a journalist for reporting on internal agency dismissals, the midnight arrest of a journalist for covering voter registration irregularities, the detention of the SJS Secretary-General for issuing a press statement about media policy — have nothing to do with Al-Shabaab. The security justification is a cover for suppressing accountability journalism.

The "not about journalism" argument. When Abdalle Mumin was arrested in October 2022, the Ministry of Information issued a public statement asserting that he "has no charges related to his work as a journalist." He was being held, the Ministry said, on "security-related charges." This formulation — separating the journalist from their journalism — is a standard maneuver. It allows the government to deny targeting the press while targeting the press.

The silence of denial. In most documented cases, the government simply says nothing. There is no comment from NISA. There is no statement from the

presidency. The family cannot find their relative. The lawyer is turned away. The institution responsible for the detention does not acknowledge the detention exists. This is not a failure of government communications. It is government communications.

What the government cannot explain is the pattern itself. It cannot explain why 90 percent of detained journalists are released without charge. It cannot explain why detentions consistently follow critical reporting. It cannot explain why journalists emerge from Godka Jilacow having been told to delete their work or not publish again. Individual denials cannot account for a system-wide pattern documented by the U.S. State Department, the UN Human Rights Committee, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, RSF, CPJ, and every Somali press freedom organization operating in the country.

Part VI: The Strategy — An Analytical Assessment

Why does the Somali government choose this particular method? Why not simply ignore critics, or alternatively, prosecute them through the courts?

The Strategy of Legal Invisibility. Formal prosecution requires evidence, a visible charge, a public record, and a legal process that can be challenged, appealed, and cited. A journalist charged with "false reporting" becomes a cause. Informal detention produces none of this. There is no defendant. There is no charge to challenge. There is no hearing to observe. The absence of a legal record is not a failure of the system. It is the system's primary output.

The Strategy of Selective Terror. Informal detention is unbounded. The journalist held for 24 hours does not know, next time, whether it will be 24 hours or 24 days. The ambiguity is the instrument. NUSOJ reported that approximately 17 percent of documented attacks on journalists in 2023 involved torture. Torture in informal detention serves a specific communicative function: it transmits, through the journalist's body, a message that no official statement could deliver as efficiently.

The Al-Shabaab Justification as Operational Cover. The security framing provides a legitimate-sounding rationale for international audiences and domestic legal cover for an escalating crackdown whose real targets are accountability journalists, not extremist propagandists.

The Federalism Shield. Somalia's federal structure diffuses responsibility across six governments, each with its own security apparatus. International pressure on

Mogadishu produces no leverage over Puntland or Jubaland. The decentralization of repression is, functionally, a protection against accountability.

The Signed Document as Surveillance Infrastructure. Forcing detainees to sign undertakings — pledging not to publish, or confirming deleted content will not be restored — is not merely a condition of release. It produces a written record held by the security agency. It shifts moral responsibility for silence onto the journalist. And it marks them, within NISA's files, as a managed asset — someone who has capitulated once and can be expected to respond to future pressure.

The Economy of Scale — Producing Mass Self-Censorship. The actual detentions are advertisements. Their purpose is not primarily to silence the individual detained — it is to communicate to every journalist who was not detained what the cost of critical reporting may be. Both the U.S. State Department and SJS describe "rigorous self-censorship" as a pervasive condition of Somali journalism. The government need not detain ten thousand people. It needs only to detain enough, visibly enough, that the rest do the work of censorship themselves.

Part VII: The Legal Vacuum That Makes This Possible

On March 8, 2026, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud officially signed Somalia's new permanent constitution into law — ending over a decade of provisional governance and presenting the country with what his administration described as a historic foundation for the rule of law.

The constitution's provisions on freedom of expression and press freedom are, in their essential content, identical to those of the provisional text they replaced.

This is the most precise summary of Somalia's relationship with its own legal framework: the government reviewed what it had been doing to journalists for four years, reviewed the constitutional provisions it had been violating throughout that period, and chose to make them permanent. Unchanged. The crackdown did not interrupt the constitutional process. The constitutional process did not interrupt the crackdown.

Somalia's media law compounds the problem further, containing vaguely worded provisions criminalizing the dissemination of "false information," reports conflicting with the "national interest," and incitement to clan divisions — language elastic enough to justify detaining any journalist covering almost any sensitive story. These provisions have never been repealed or amended, despite consistent international calls to do so.

More critically, the habeas corpus protections that would require the state to produce a detainee before a court and state a legal basis for detention are not enforced. NISA operates Godka Jilacow with essentially no judicial oversight. The Special Prosecution Unit established in 2020 to investigate crimes against journalists has produced no meaningful accountability. Judges are frequently political appointees, structurally unable to exercise independence against the executive.

The permanent constitution now joins the provisional one in this arrangement. Somalia has not one but two constitutions guaranteeing press freedom — and a security apparatus that has never once been constrained by either.

Constitutional rights that carry no enforcement mechanism are not rights. They are performances of rights, staged for an international audience that has, so far, continued watching without intervening.

Part VIII: What Must Happen — A Call for Accountability

The documentation is now overwhelming. What remains is accountability. OPR calls on the following specific actions:

The Federal Government of Somalia must:

- Immediately and unconditionally close Godka Jilacow and all other extrajudicial detention facilities operating outside judicial oversight.
- Issue a binding directive prohibiting NISA, federal police, and all affiliated security forces from detaining any individual without a court-issued warrant, regardless of claimed security justification.
- Publicly acknowledge and investigate all documented cases of detention without charge of journalists and human rights defenders since 2022, with findings made public.
- Amend the media law to remove vague provisions on "false information" and "national interest" that are routinely weaponized against critical journalism.
- Activate and adequately resource the Special Prosecution Unit to investigate crimes against journalists, including by senior officials.

The African Union and IGAD must:

- Formally raise Somalia's pattern of arbitrary detention with the Federal Government as a condition of continued institutional support, particularly given AU involvement in Somalia's security architecture.
- Request a dedicated UN Special Rapporteur review of Somalia's compliance with its obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights regarding freedom of expression and arbitrary detention.

International partners and donor governments must:

- Make press freedom and the rule of law explicit benchmarks in any security sector assistance, budget support, or diplomatic engagement with Mogadishu.
- Support Somali civil society organizations — including OPR, SJS, NUSOJ, and CSHRDS — with sustained, multi-year funding for documentation, legal aid to detained journalists and defenders, and strategic litigation before regional and international human rights bodies.

Meta/Facebook must:

- Establish a dedicated, Somali-context-aware review process for content removal requests and page restrictions affecting Somali journalists and media organizations, with transparency reporting on government-linked reporting campaigns.

These are not aspirational demands. They are the minimum conditions required to begin reversing a documented, systematic, and accelerating pattern of repression. Every week that passes without them produces more detentions, more deleted reports, more journalists in exile, and more citizens who have learned — from watching their peers — that the price of speaking is too high.

Conclusion: What This Tells Us About the Somali State

The pattern documented in this article is not the behavior of a state that has failed to build institutions. It is the behavior of a state that has built the institutions it needs — institutions designed not to adjudicate rights but to manage information, suppress accountability, and reproduce the conditions of its own unquestioned authority.

If the problem were institutional weakness, the solution would be capacity building — more judges, better-trained police, stronger laws. But the evidence points toward something more deliberate: a governance strategy in which the

formal legal system is maintained as a performance of legitimacy for international audiences, while informal detention, coerced silence, and digital suppression serve as the actual operating mechanisms of information control.

The signed document, the deleted video, the journalist released at midnight with no record of their arrest — these are not failures of justice. They are the system working as intended.

That is precisely why documentation — the work of organizations like OPR, SJS, NUSOJ, CSHRDS, and their international partners — is not merely important. It is the only mechanism that currently exists to impose any cost at all on a system designed to leave no trace.

Every case recorded is a refusal to let the erasure succeed.

