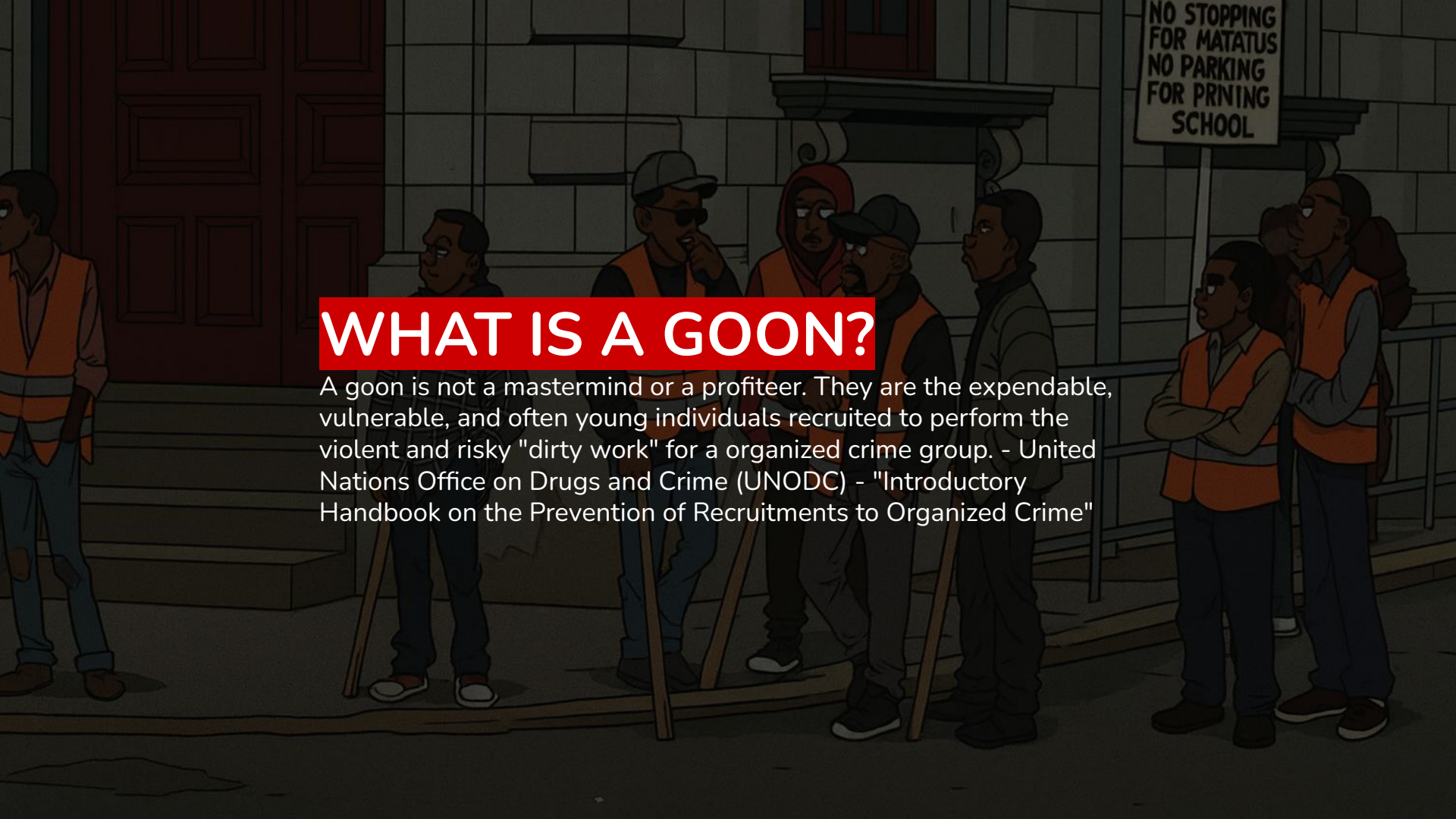


The background image shows a chaotic scene of a protest or riot. Thick black smoke billows from the background, partially obscuring the sky. In the foreground and middle ground, a group of young men are walking or standing on a paved street. Some are wearing casual clothing like hoodies and jeans, while others are wearing more traditional or religious headwear. One man in the center is wearing a bright orange beanie. Several individuals are holding long wooden poles or sticks. In the lower-left foreground, there is a fire burning in a metal drum or container. The overall atmosphere is one of civil unrest.

GOONLAND

LOOKING BEYOND THE MONEY AND VIOLENCE IN
THE POLITICAL **EXPLOITATION OF YOUNG MEN**

An illustration showing a group of men, some wearing orange safety vests and caps, standing in front of a building with a large wooden door. A sign on the right reads "NO STOPPING FOR MATATUS NO PARKING FOR PRIVING SCHOOL". The scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn. The men are engaged in conversation, with some looking towards the camera and others looking away. One man in the center is wearing a red hoodie and a cap, while another is wearing a grey jacket and a cap. The overall tone is serious and gritty.

WHAT IS A GOON?

A goon is not a mastermind or a profiteer. They are the expendable, vulnerable, and often young individuals recruited to perform the violent and risky "dirty work" for a organized crime group. - United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) - "Introductory Handbook on the Prevention of Recruitments to Organized Crime"

TLDR: The core insights

MONEY IS IMPORTANT, BUT IT'S NOT THE WHOLE STORY OF GOONSHIP

For majority, goonship is about the money, but for those at the top of the hierarchy, it also gives them a sense of purpose, visibility, and belonging in a hierarchy. Goonship isn't a job one can just leave. They are trapped by economic uncertainty, identity and sometimes loyalty.

WHILE A LOT OF FOCUS TENDS TO BE ON GOONS AND POLITICIANS, THERE'S A MIDDLE LAYER THAT MAKES GOONSHIP POSSIBLE.

In-between goons and politicians is a robust layer of additional people whose job is to transfer cash, orders and weapons while enabling plausible deniability and beating surveillance. These people are the key influencers of this industry and are the ones that sustain supply and demand dynamics.

RISING THROUGH THE GOONSHIP RANKS IS A VALID AMBITION AMONG YOUNG MEN.

Younger men to visualize a possible trajectory of moving from the lowest hierarchy (foot soldier) to a the highest hierarchy (client). Young men see the power and wealth this activity allows people to make. Some of the people they admire have experienced goon-to-politician pipelines which shapes their aspirations.

WHAT WE SET TO FIND OUT

Key question: what lies beyond the money and violence when it comes to goonship?

THE HUMAN COST OF GOONSHIP: LOOKING INSIDE THE MIND OF A GOON

- To what extent is goonship about more than just the money? How does admiration and loyalty play a role in their actions?
- What are possible exit ramps from this behavior? What keeps them from getting out? Does giving a goon a job keep them from becoming a goon?

THE OPERATIONS OF GOONSHIP: HOW THEY ORGANIZE AND HOW THEY GET PAID.

- How are goon groups structured and what is the infrastructure that enables their operations?
- How goons are distributed across the country? And do their functions change by region? How does that in turn affect the rates that they get paid?



WHY DO THIS STUDY NOW?

Kenya is entering a volatile political cycle where youth unemployment and elite impunity are colliding in dangerous new ways. Kenyan politicians have long turned to networks of idle young men to manufacture chaos. However since the Gen Z agitation of 2024 there has been increasing concern about how frequent goons have become a fixture in political activities.

As 2027 approaches, Kenya risks institutionalising a market for violence that could outlast any election. Social media has created a new recruitment pipeline and violence can be organised with the speed of a group chat. Yet little empirical work has mapped this economy of coercion (i.e. its prices, brokers, and motivations) or tested what might pull these young men toward safer livelihoods.

METHODOLOGY

We used a mixed methods approach to get answers to our research questions:

Method:	Element
Qualitative: We carried out interviews with: • 40 rank and file goons • 5 recruiters • 5 security personnel	Dates: September -October 2025 Locations: Nairobi, Mombasa, Kiambu, Demographics: Male 18-30yrs Interview Methods: Narrative and Life History interviews, grievances mapping, Entity extraction
Media Review	Dates: June 2024-August 2025 Type of media: • Legacy media reports(Nation, Standard) about presence of goons in business and political contexts (Newspaper and TV reports). • New Media reports about goon presence (Podcast appearances).
Social Media Review: Image and video verification and Object identification	Dates: June 2024-August 2025 Platforms: Facebook, Twitter(X), Tiktok

Our research focussed on key political flashpoints where goons were confirmed to have been involved and had multi-county incidents since 2024.



Gen Zs Protests

Goons infiltrate Gen Z protests that happened in 35 of the 47 counties. Scores injured.



Albert Ojwang & June 25 anniversary Protests

Clashes in several counties as goons attack Gen Zs during the commemorate one year anniversary of the Gen Z revolution.

AUGUST 2024

JULY 2025

JUNE 2024

JUNE 2025

Nane Nane Protests

Goons clash with Gen Z protesters as they commemorate Nane Nane get-together



Saba Saba Protests

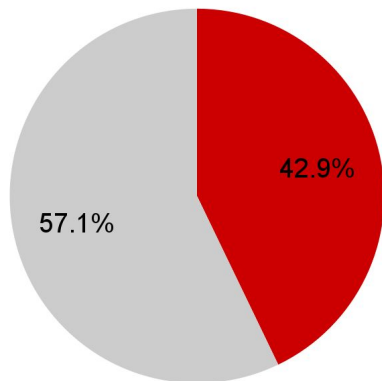
Suspected goons attack civilians and vandalize businesses across several counties ahead of the annual celebration of the Saba saba.



COUNTING GOON INCIDENTS AHEAD OF NOVEMBER'S BY ELECTIONS

Based on a count of media reports Close to half of the counties that will have by-elections in November 2025 have already experienced violence where goons were involved.

- Pre by-election goon violence experienced
- Pre by-election goon violence not yet experienced



TOTAL NUMBER OF COUNTIES IN THE BY-ELECTIONS

21

Baringo, Garissa, Homa Bay, Tana River, Busia, Embu, Siaya, Samburu County, Nandi County, Nairobi City County, Kakamega County, Elgeyo Marakwet County, Machakos County, Narok County, Kajiado County, Uasin Gishu County, Nyamira County, Bungoma County, Turkana County

NUMBER OF COUNTIES UNDERGOING BY-ELECTIONS THAT EXPERIENCED GOON ACTIVITY

9

Baringo, Garissa, Homa Bay, Kakamega, Busia, Embu, Siaya, Nairobi City, Bungoma.

HOW GOONS ARE ORGANIZED

Methodology

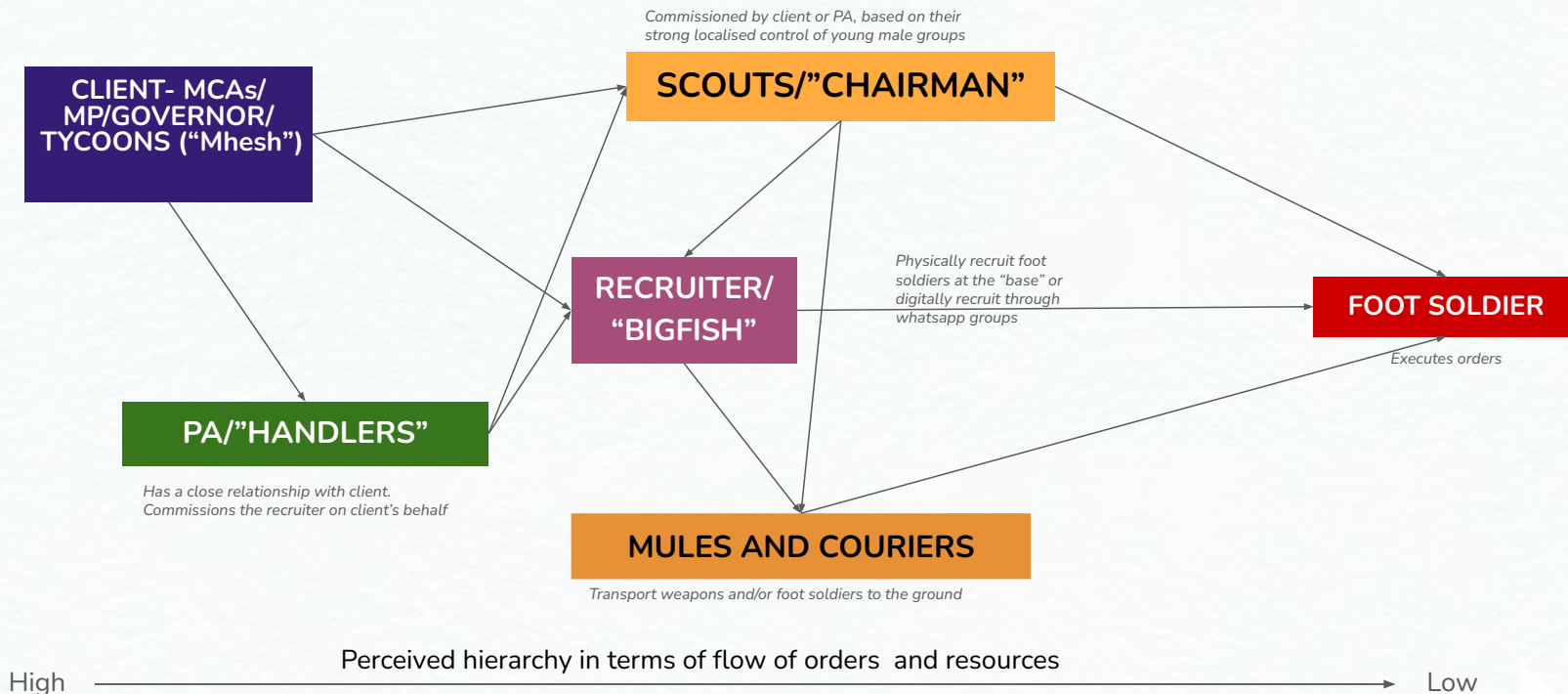
To understand how goons are organized, we used a primary qualitative approach grounded in semi-structured interviews to map the organisational structure of goon networks. Respondents were guided through an interview protocol designed to surface roles, relationships and chains of command, using core questions such as: *Have you ever been hired by a politician or business actor? What kind of work were you hired for? Who hired you? How were you recruited? How did you first hear about the job? Who gives orders and how are they executed? How much were you paid?*

Interview transcripts were then systematically processed through entity extraction to identify all actors mentioned, followed by attribute coding to capture each actor's role, status and function, and edge coding to document reported relationships, flows of orders, recruitment pathways and operational linkages. These coded elements are combined to construct a preliminary organogram, which is iteratively refined through cross-case comparison and triangulation across multiple interviews.



HOW GOONS ARE ORGANIZED:

Behind political militia is an entire ecosystem of intermediaries that ensures client anonymity and enables the smooth flow of resources (weapons or cash) and orders.



Entities extracted based on the following questions: Have you ever been hired by a politician, or business community? What kind of work? Who hired you? How were you recruited? How did you know about this job? Who gives orders and how are they executed?*

RATE CARDS:

We see it as violence, they see it as a job with immediate perks

	THE JOB	MCA	MEMBER OF NATIONAL ASSEMBLY	GOVERNOR	BUSINESS COMMUNITY
RALLIES	-Heckle and disrupt opponent rallies -Give a visual illusion of support for their favorite candidates	500	1000	1500	-
TERRITORIAL FIGHTS	Enforcing cartel plans to reduce business competition Extortion gangs-Bill every truck/taxi /pick-ups delivering construction materials plus, or ferry items into the hood.	500	1000	1500	2000
ANTI-PROTESTS	Disrupt peaceful protests or infiltrate and create impression of chaos, or prevent looting.	500	1500	2000	2500
LAND DISPUTES	Grabbing land or protecting land that is about to be grabbed.	1500	1500	2000	2000

Payments are made via hard cash just before the project is executed to avoid traceability. Usually at petrol stations just before the 'gig'. Any money is acceptable to young men with no predictable income or future

HOW THE GOONS ARE ORGANIZED: BUYER & SELLER :

All players' primary motivation is monetary, while loyalty & perceived power become more evident towards the top of the hierarchy



CLIENT- MCAs/
MP/GOVERNOR/
TYCOONS ("Mhesh")

Almost always a politician or their business associates, who hires goons as a tool to achieve political and personal objectives.

Core function: Their core function is to orchestrate disruption and violence indirectly.

Motivation: The primary motivation is the acquisition and maintenance of power and resources through gaining political advantage, creating plausible deniability: using intermediaries (kingpins) and foot soldiers (goons).

Key traits: They are delegatory and secretive, very exploitative, often tribalistic, resourceful, yet utterly detached:



FOOT SOLDIER

The goon functions as a foot soldier for hire, providing physical and disruptive services to clients, primarily politicians.

Core Function: Their core activities include: disrupting rivals, instigating violence, intimidation and protection, defending or raiding assets, and logistical support.

Motivation: The primary and overwhelming motivation is financial desperation. Poverty and unemployment, basic needs, idleness, and lack of alternatives:

Key Traits: Economically vulnerable, expendable, offer coerced loyalty, have hierarchical awareness, and highly disillusioned.

HOW THE GOONS ARE ORGANIZED: INTERMEDIARIES: All players' primary motivation is monetary, while loyalty & perceived power become more evident towards the top of the hierarchy



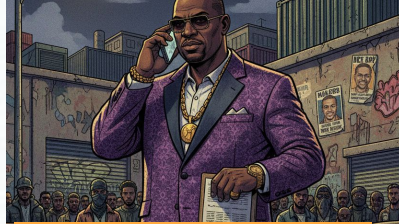
THE PA "HANDLER":

This role is the direct, trusted aide to the high-level client (MCAs, Governor, MP, Tycoon).

Core Function: To translate the client's needs into an actionable plan. They decide the scale, logistics, and budget for the job and task the Recruiter/Bigfish with making it happen.

Motivation: Loyalty to their principal, job security, and likely a share of the operational funds. They are the "clean" face that manages the "dirty" work.

Key Trait: Client's proxy, strategic planner, manages logistics and payments, ensures deniability



THE SCOUT "CHAIRMAN":

The interviews revealed that they are often low-level politicians or their trusted associates who have deep, localized knowledge.

Core Function: To act as the initial point of contact for the client and to identify the need for goons. They provide the "intel" and initial connection.

Motivation: Political patronage, career advancement, and financial kickbacks. They use this system to prove their usefulness to their political masters.

Key Trait: Ward-level operatives, triggers the chain, lowest paymaster



THE RECRUITER "BIG FISH":

They are not a foot soldier but a manager and entrepreneur of violence.

Core Function: To mobilize, organize, and deliver a ready group of goons for a specific job as primary contractors.

Motivation: Profit, power, and status. They earn a larger share of the pay than the foot soldiers and are motivated to build their own criminal enterprise and influence.

Key Trait: Directs, Doesn't Fight, Trusted with Money, Meets the Clients, Seen as Leaders, Operates from the "Base":



THE MULE (often women):

According to the interviews this role is defined by stealth and avoiding detection. It is one of the few roles where women are specifically recruited and valued.

Core Function: To secretly transport and hide weapons before and during a job, leveraging their lower suspicion rate to bypass police and security checks.

Motivation: Primarily monetary, driven by the same economic desperation as the male foot soldiers.

Key Traits - Weapon Logistics, bypassing surveillance, Operates from the Shadows, Organized in Networks.

WEAPONS PROFILE & INFANTRY

WEAPON PROFILE:

The weapons are low value, high impact, everyday tools.

MOBILITY

Photo: Daily Nation



Source:
REUTERS/Monicah
Mwangi

Motorbike crews mostly stick to transport and rarely participate in the actual running battles.

ATTACK

Photo: Reuters



Rungus, slashers, machetes, flammables, knives, stones, pangas

For planned jobs, recruiters or chairmen will source weapons while in rapid assignments the foot soldiers have to grab whatever tool is at their disposal.

DEFENSE

Photo Citizen Digital



Reflector jackets sometimes worn as a uniform, and **masks** to conceal identity.

How goon weapons are sourced and dumped:

The informal sourcing reflects how political violence is low-cost, decentralized, and deniable



Sourcing of The Weapons:

1. Regular hardwares.(client makes BULK orders)
2. Their (goons) own domestic tools.
3. Vandalism of roadside infrastructure

Decommissioning The Weapon:

1. They carry them home to use as everyday tools in other gigs e.g pangas
2. Left in the custody of 'city goons'
3. Abandon them in thickets or public restrooms
4. They dispose them off by the roadside

Photo | Reuters
Source: Field Interviews

Patterns may vary depending on county, this reflects urban centered goon networks.

GOON

PSYCHOGRAPHIC

S

Being a goon is about the money, but that's not the whole story. Political militia are driven by a range of incentives that reveal the true nature of their behavior.

Methodology:

To understand why young men become “goons,” we started by collecting stories. Using narrative and life-history interviews, we asked men to walk us through the arc of their lives: the first time they felt powerless, the moment someone noticed them, the job that made them feel seen. These conversations revealed the incentives, humiliations, and tiny victories that put them down the path of goonship. We then used symbolic mapping (asking participants to draw the worlds they move through, the people they fear, the loyalties they cling to, and the futures they imagine) which turns abstract motivations into concrete patterns.

Why Young Men Become Goons: The Four Incentives Hiding in Plain Sight

Persona	Incentive	Description	Illustration
The Soldier	Fast and instant Cash	Goonship as response to broken ladder of opportunity (status, income, recognition). Show up, do job, get paid.	<i>"..you'll do whatever you can to get the money as long as you do what is required no matter how bad it is."</i>
The Enforcer	To have money, status and protection.	Goonship as alternative value system emphasizing toughness, loyalty, defiance. See goonship as a career path.	<i>"You need to be ruthless. You need to be a goon. You need to be a man. So, if they ask you to go there, you go there. You don't look back..."</i>
The Bully	Exerting control in a life where he otherwise has little, and establishing dominance in his neighborhood	Risk-taking and impulsivity framed as rational within scarcity.	<i>"To be a big fish, you have to be a kingpin... I want to be a big fish one day."</i>
The Ideologue	A sense of belonging and loyalty to a political identity.	Commit to goonship for the "cause"	<i>" "Maybe the politician has to give a speech. Maybe he is a party official. Maybe it's his rival giving us the job... So, the job is to distract him. So, if he talks, we are like NO..."</i>

The vicious cycle of goonship:

Goon activity exerts a major mental toll of the young men which they then replicate in their everyday lives.

1. Life pressures & blocked paths

"Nilikuwa nimechoka kukaa idle... halafu nikaambiwa kuna kazi"

2. Goon Violence as immediate payoff

"Utafanya chenye unahitaji bora upate doh."

3. Psychological dislocation: anxiety, paranoia, hypervigilance

"Ni watu wa mastress.. Wanalala wakiwa macho"
Kariobangi North informant

4. Coping mechanisms: substance abuse, group bonding and emotional numbing

"Lazima uwe mavitu ndio ufanye hii job" - Abdi, informant

"...not all of us came back and most of us were badly injured during June 25th." Dennis, informant

5. Re-inforced violence: coping increases risk tolerance, identity becomes consistency, recruiters call again.

"Ukishaingia hii kazi kurudi nyuma ni ngumu sana"

Identity activation also plays a key role:

These young men adopt stories about themselves that makes goonship a rational choice. Self story changes before their behavior does. This is where masculinity shows up sharpest.

“I’m a man”

“I’m feared”

“I’m a provider”

“I’m useful”

“I’m loyal”

THE ADMIRATION ARC

Money plays a factor but it's not the whole story

WHO DO GOONS ADMIRE? FOLLOW THE POWER NOT THE VIRTUE.

When admiration is priced in cash, protection and clout, moral character barely shows up..

Ironically the most admired people are those who earn the most from violence while facing the least of the risk

FRAMES OF ADMIRATION	POLITICIANS	KINGPINS
WHO ARE THEIR HEROES	Governors, MPs, and MCAs: They are considered the apex of power and prestige. They are proof that the system can be beaten.	The "Big Fish" / Kingpins / Reps: and local reps who sit between politicians and the street; they're the ones whose phones actually ring, "wasangwenya" or group leaders within their own communities.
POWER	These figures are seen as "untouchable", powerful and above the law.	They can orchestrate events, provide weapons, and seemingly operate above the law. They command respect and fear within the community. Maurice (REC019) states plainly, "Without them, we can't operate."
Money	They provide lots of resources utilized for community mobilization and development.	They are the source of the 500-2000 KSH payments that the goons depend on for survival.
Risk-Reward ratio	You cannot implicate the politician, and the client [because they] will not help you.	The goons specifically admire the intermediaries because they get a larger share of the money without having to do the dangerous frontline work.....As Sharif (REC016) says, the representative "doesn't go to the jobs we do yet he gets a big share of the money...

EXIT RAMP: HOW DO YOUNG MEN ESCAPE GOONSHIP?

QUITTING THE GOON CULTURE:

A Difficult, Dangerous, And Complex Process:

The Risks:

You can't just leave the goon sphere. Consider proximity and influence. The traitor factor, and the interdependence. The risk of social isolation. They run a tight ship.

"The guy who gives you the goon gig is the same one giving you the mjengo gig, carwash gig..."

"...the guys might come to your house and force you to go for the jobs."

"...it's a big challenge, because once people know that you want to leave the industry... People are going to kill, they're going to do bad things to you, you know?"

Motivation to Shift:

What makes you want to leave this life, is driven by both monetary incentive and desire for a more 'normal' life. Factors such as age, education, parenthood are key motivators on if one stays or leave.

"...one of use was captured by the protesters and was badly beaten and he later died."

".. "...if you look at my head is just marks..." and "...if you at me I lost my teeth while in that job."

"This job is a little risky... If you get hurt, you will still get hurt. Don't expect that you will get hurt and the politician will cater for you."

"...even my wife left me coz the only job I can get is that one."

What are the Immediate exits:

The availability of the alternative jobs and what's the likelihood of getting them.

"...the option is if you get something else to do it will be easier to stop..."

"The easiest way is getting employment coz once you are employed no one will start telling you to go to these jobs that we do you will also not be idle, so no one will tell you that he will give you 500 or a 1000 to do a job coz you will already have been employed. Coz you will not even chill with the gang."

"...unless I get something that can satisfy all my needs."

QUITTING GOON CULTURE:

Does giving a goon a job make them want to quit. Here is why and here is why not?

YES. WHY

Safer jobs With Better Pay

The temporary nature of the job and the associated risks highlight the lack of a real future in this line of work, reinforcing the desire for a legitimate way out.

"..if we had something else to we could not do such kind of jobs coz they mess you up like if you look at my head is just marks."

"they say a job is a job and you have to go but they are not happy about it, it's not their wish coz they would want it to end its just coz of the money."

"...even my wife left me coz the only job I can get is that one."

NO. WHY NOT

Allure of immediate cash -

Financial desperation is a driver. The immediate payment, however small, addresses acute needs like hunger and family support.

"As long as there is money, that's our main priority."

"I just need the money That's the challenge I don't want to leave."

"The guy who gives you the goon gig is the same one giving you the mjengo gig, carwash gig..."

Fear, Loyalty and Familiarity -

"Leaving is not as simple as just deciding to stop. The culture is binding, and attempting to leave is seen as a betrayal that can lead to violence and intimidation from former associates."

"...once people know that you want to leave the industry, that's when they start to sense that the betrayal has begun..."

"...you will also have to change your location coz the guys might come to your house and force you to go for the jobs."

"Coz you will not even chill with the gang....after you quit"

Giving a goon a job creates a strong but not always sufficient desire to quit the lifestyle as aspects of it are reinforced by desire to belong admiration of goon leaders, and the access to immediate cash



ODIPODEV