

JUNGLE JUSTICE IN NIGERIA: A THREAT TO RULE OF LAW AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Jungle justice, also known as mob justice, refers to the extrajudicial punishment of individuals suspected of crimes, often through public lynching or killings without lawful trial. In Nigeria, this practice has become a persistent plague within the justice system, reflecting both the failure of law enforcement agencies and the erosion of public trust in formal legal institutions. It violates fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, including the rights to life, fair hearing, and the dignity of the human person. Jungle justice also poses a significant threat to the rule of law. This article examines the root causes and implications of jungle justice and argues that it directly undermines the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights in Nigeria. It concludes with practical recommendations for institutional reform, enhanced public education, and strengthened mechanisms for upholding fundamental rights.

Keywords: Jungle Justice; Mob Justice; Extrajudicial Punishment; Rule of Law; Fundamental Rights; Public Trust; Law Enforcement Failure; Vigilantism; Criminal Justice System; Human Rights Protection; Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In a society that upholds the ideals of the Constitution and the rule of law, every citizen is presumed innocent until proven guilty through due process. Yet, in Nigeria, jungle justice seems to permeate and tear through the very fabric of justice, exposing deep-rooted societal frustrations and institutional decay.

Many Nigerians are disillusioned with a justice system where criminals are handed over to the police for punishment only to be released shortly after, often due to bribery or influence from powerful connections.

As a result, citizens resort to taking laws in their hands so that others will learn. This extra-judicial response commonly manifests in brutal acts such as beating the criminal to death or setting the suspected criminal ablaze.

This practice disregards the constitutional guarantee of fair hearing, dignity of the human person, and the right to life, enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Beyond violating individual rights, it poses a direct threat to the rule of law and the legitimacy of state institutions. This article, therefore, explores the legal, social, and institutional dimensions of jungle justice in Nigeria and proposes actionable reforms to restore faith in the justice system and safeguard fundamental rights.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a doctrinal research methodology. It relies on primary and secondary sources of law to examine the implications of jungle justice on the rule of law and fundamental rights in Nigeria's legal system.

JUNGLE JUSTICE IN NIGERIA

Jungle justice refers to a situation whereby an enraged mob or private individuals take the law into their own hands by publicly humiliating or assaulting persons suspected of committing crimes.¹ It is an extra-judicial act often resulting in grievous bodily harm or death.²

In recent years, the prevalence of jungle justice in Nigeria has increased, driven by widespread distrust in law enforcement agencies, worsening economic conditions, and the rapid dissemination of misinformation.³ For instance, in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, several cases of jungle justice were reported between 2018 and 2025, with little or no intervention from law enforcement authorities.⁴ This reflects institutional failure and shows the urgent need for reform, awareness, and accountability.

From a legal standpoint, jungle justice is unconstitutional and stands in direct contradiction to the tenets of Nigeria's legal system. Under Section 36(5) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,

¹ C.S.Ndukwe, "Jungle Justice: Its place in the Nigerian Criminal Justice System", SSRN, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4317682> accessed 12 September 15, 2025.

² Ibid

³ Josephine Malachi, "How Nigeria can stop rising jungle justice" (14 April, 2025), DW, <https://www.dw.com>

⁴ AKSU Annals of Sustainable Development, Volume 3 Number 1, June, 2025

1999, an individual accused of a crime is presumed innocent until proven guilty. The section states: "Every person who is charged with a criminal offence shall be presumed to be innocent until he is proved guilty."

Similarly, Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that "everyone charged with a crime has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty in a fair and public trial with all the needed guarantee for defence."

Furthermore, applying A. V. Dicey's doctrine of rule of law, jungle justice is a clear violation. Dicey emphasized three key principles: the supremacy of the law, equality before the law, and the predominance of legal spirit. Jungle justice undermines these principles by allowing individuals to act above the law and deny others access to legal redress.

Sections 33, 34, and 36 of the Nigerian Constitution guarantee fundamental rights to life, dignity, and fair hearing respectively, rights that are routinely violated in jungle justice incidents.

There are instances where jungle justice has played out in Nigeria and received judicial pronouncements by the courts. In *Olabode v. State*,⁵ the accused, a mechanic, came into his workshop and noticed that the deceased, an apprentice, had siphoned petrol from a vehicle parked in front of the workshop. In retaliation, the accused poured petrol on the deceased and set him ablaze. After committing the act, he fled the scene. The deceased, though rushed to the hospital, died 14 days later from dehydration due to the severe burns. The trial judge, in a reserved judgment, found the accused guilty of murder, a verdict that was subsequently upheld by the appellate courts.

Apart from the Nigerian Constitution, the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA), 2015 reinforces the protection of suspects' rights in the justice system. The law provides that a suspect shall be accorded humane treatment, with full regard to their right to the dignity of the human person, and shall not be subjected to any form of torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Therefore, even where an individual is alleged to have committed a crime, he or she remains entitled to the constitutional right to dignity and due process. Being a suspect does not strip a person of their fundamental rights as a citizen of Nigeria. Acts of jungle justice which involve brutal punishment or execution without trial, not only violate the Constitution but also breach statutory safeguards under the ACJA.

CAUSES OF JUNGLE JUSTICE

1. **Lack of Trust in Law Enforcement Agencies:** One of the major reasons of jungle justice in Nigeria is the deep-rooted distrust citizens have in the police and other security agencies. People often believe that handing over suspected criminals to the authorities is pointless, as these individuals are likely to be released without punishment either due to bribery, connections, or systemic inefficiencies. As a result, some citizens prefer to take matters into their own hands, thinking it's the only way to serve justice and prevent repeat offenses.
2. **Ignorance of the Law:** Many people who engage in jungle justice do so out of ignorance. They believe they are doing society a favor by punishing alleged offenders on the spot, not realizing that such actions are illegal and constitute a serious crime themselves. There's a general lack of

⁵ (1996) 6 NWLR (pt. 250) 690

awareness about constitutional rights and the legal implications of mob actions. This ignorance fuels the normalization of jungle justice, especially in rural and undereducated communities in Nigeria.

3. **Religion:** Religion is also one of the major causes of jungle justice in Nigeria. The country is home to diverse religious beliefs- Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. When a person is perceived to have committed blasphemy or acted in a manner deemed offensive to a particular religion or deity, such acts are sometimes met with violent responses. This is especially common in religious communities where emotions often override the rule of law. An example is the tragic case of Deborah Samuel, a student who was brutally murdered by her colleagues on May 12, 2022, over alleged blasphemy. Her death is a proof of how religious extremism can lead to mob violence under the guise of defending faith. However, it's important to clarify that Nigerian courts strongly oppose the use of religion to justify jungle justice, as seen in *Kaza v. State*,⁶ the court clearly stated that "Islamic religion is not a primitive religion that allows its adherents to take the law into their hands and to commit jungle justice. Instead, there is a judicial system in Islam which hears and determines cases including the trial of criminal offences and anybody accused of committing an offence against the religion or against a fellow Muslim brother should be taken to the court (either a Sharia or a secular [common law] court) for adjudication."
4. **Slow and Inefficient Justice System:** The Nigerian judicial system is plagued with delays. Cases can drag on for years without resolution, making citizens lose faith in the courts. When people feel that justice is not only delayed but may never be served, they become more inclined to deliver "justice" themselves even if it means breaking the law. This frustration with the system makes jungle justice seem like a faster alternative.
5. **Economic Hardship and Unemployment:** Poverty and lack of opportunities also contribute to jungle justice. In communities where people are struggling to survive, petty crimes like theft are seen as direct threats to their already fragile means of livelihood. As a result, suspects are treated harshly, not just out of a desire for justice, but from deep anger and resentment borne out of hardship.
6. **Vigilante Abuse:** In areas where government presence is minimal, local vigilante groups sometimes step in. While meant to help with security, these groups often overstep their boundaries. Without proper training or regulation, some of them become the very source of jungle justice, acting as judge, jury, and executioner without any legal backing. For example, a female corp member was stripped naked and beaten to death by a vigilante group in Anambra State, Nigeria, because she was suspected of being involved in cybercrime.⁷

IMPACT OF JUNGLE JUSTICE ON THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Jungle justice has significant impacts on Nigerian society, threatening the very fabric of law, order, and

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⁷ Punch Newspaper, "How eight masked vigilantes stormed Anambra Corpers lodge, stripped lady naked" (23rd August, 2025), <<https://punchng.com> accessed 15 September, 2025

human dignity. One of its consequences is the erosion of the rule of law. By bypassing formal legal processes, jungle justice undermines the authority and credibility of the judicial system, encouraging citizens to take laws into their own hands rather than rely on institutions established for justice delivery. This lawlessness feeds into a culture of impunity, where suspicion alone becomes a death sentence.

Moreover, jungle justice constitutes a grave violation of human rights. It disregards the constitutionally guaranteed rights to life, fair hearing, and dignity of the human person, enshrined in both the Nigerian Constitution and international human rights instruments.

Victims, many of whom are later found to be innocent, are often subjected to brutal punishments without evidence or trial, further deepening the injustice.

Also, the spread of jungle justice has economic implications. Jungle justice involves violence, as such, public property can be damaged in the "process". Persistent insecurity and violent incidents can deter investors, disrupt local businesses, and limit socio- economic development.

In summary, jungle justice poses a serious threat to Nigeria's legal, social, and economic structures, and calls for urgent and collective efforts to restore faith in the justice system.

ACTIONABLE REFORMS

- **Public Awareness and Legal Education Campaigns**

The foundation of reform lies in educating the public. Many acts of jungle justice are fueled by ignorance, misinformation, and emotional reaction. Nationwide campaigns using radio, television, social media, religious platforms, and community town halls should emphasize the illegality and dangers of mob action, educate citizens on the proper channels for reporting crime and reinforce that ignorance of the law is no excuse under Nigerian law - *ignorantia non excusat*.

- **Strengthening Law Enforcement and Rebuilding Public Trust**

The Nigerian Police Force, as the frontline law enforcement agency, must be properly trained on human rights, crowd control, and rapid response to mob incidents. They should be equipped with tools to de-escalate violent situations. In addition, they should be involved in consistent community engagement to rebuild public trust.

- **Community Policing**

Although, community policing is not allowed in Nigeria, implementing it will go a long way in combating jungle justice. In jurisdictions like United States of America, community policing is allowed. Nigeria can follow suit to reduce the incident of jungle justice.

CONCLUSION

Jungle justice reflects a breakdown of the legal and institutional frameworks that are meant to uphold justice and protect fundamental human rights in Nigeria. It undermines the rule of law and violates constitutional rights. While citizens may act out of frustration or distrust in the justice system, resorting to mob action is not a solution, it is a dangerous alternative that leads to more injustice. The "suspect" that loses his life due to mob justice is a human being with rights also.

To address this menace, a multi-faceted approach is needed: public education to dispel ignorance,

institutional reforms to rebuild public trust, and strict enforcement of laws against extrajudicial actions. As an African proverb rightly says, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” It is only through collective effort from citizens, law enforcement agencies, private organisations, government, and civil society, that Nigeria can truly uphold the rule of law and secure justice for all.

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