

The State Without Uniforms

Super-Detainees and
Delegations of Power
in African Prisons

Detention



fiacat

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Cover photo: Inmate responsible for opening
the gate to a prison wing (Madagascar, 2025).
The photos presented in this report were taken
by Carole Berrih, Miora Randrianindrina,
and Louissette Ranorovololona in Madagascar
during the June 2025 mission.

This document received financial support from the European
Union through the United Against Torture program¹ and from
the French Development Agency.

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This English version was translated from French
using AI assistance.

Graphic design and layout: Meltii studio



¹: The United Against Torture Consortium (UATC) is a project funded by the European Union that brings together the strengths and expertise of six international anti-torture organisations, in partnership with more than 200 civil society organisations and other partners in over 100 countries, to strengthen and expand torture prevention, protection, rehabilitation, and strategic litigation.

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List of acronyms

ACAT	Action by Christians Against Torture
CB	Building commissioner
CE	Head of institution
CERDAP ²	Center for Studies and Research on Diplomacy, Public Administration, and Politics
FIACAT	International Federation of ACATs
LAM	Africas in the World
MACA	Abidjan Detention and Correctional Facility
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
PPA	Abidjan Prison Complex
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Executive summary

Context and objectives

Conducted for FIACAT in partnership with six national ACATs (Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, DRC, and Chad), this study examines a little-known yet central aspect of daily prison life in Sub-Saharan Africa: the existence of organisations of “*super-detainees*” — inmates entrusted with management, oversight, and disciplinary functions over their fellow prisoners.

The objective of this research, conducted by three consultants—including two researchers and a specialist in gender and poverty alleviation—is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to document the concrete forms of this power and their consequences on prison life; on the other hand, it seeks to examine the responsibility of States in the implementation of these practices. The study aims to foster dialogue with national authorities, national prevention mechanisms, as well as regional and international human rights bodies, regarding this mechanism.

Methodology

The approach was based on close collaboration between the research team and the members and volunteers of national ACATs active in prisons in the countries studied. These actors on the ground played an essential role in gathering information, facilitating contacts, collecting testimonies, and supporting the observation work. The qualitative methodology relied on direct observations and interviews conducted both inside and outside prisons between May and July 2025. When access to prisons was denied, as in Côte d'Ivoire or in certain prisons in Congo, the investigation drew on the accounts of former detainees and the expertise of civil society organisations working in prisons. In total, 247 people were interviewed, including 191 current or former prisoners and 43 government officials. These interviews were supplemented by field observations and, in Madagascar, by photographic documentation. This comparative approach identified similarities across six national contexts while accounting for local specificities, thereby building on previous research conducted in several countries across the continent.

Results

In line with international standards, the prison regulations of the six countries studied expressly prohibit the use of detainees to perform tasks involving disciplinary authority. However, in each of these countries, inmates exercise control and disciplinary authority over their peers. Although the forms vary by country and prison, the underlying logic remains the same: the study revealed the existence of hierarchical structures of super-detainees—both men and women—with a prison elite at the top supported by intermediate leaders whose authority extends all the way down to the cells. While the diversity of contexts is reflected in the titles—such as “president” in Cameroon, “CB” in Côte d'Ivoire, “kings” or “*Coq*” in Congo, “*capita general*” in the DRC, “*andry maso*” in Madagascar, and “brigadiers” in Chad—all point to the existence of genuine internal chains of command.

The status of super-detainee comes with benefits that can be substantial. These individuals enjoy improved sleeping conditions, better access to healthcare, visits, and telephones, additional financial resources, as well as greater freedom of movement and sometimes the ability to leave the prison temporarily. Their proximity to State officials strengthens both their authority and protection. For those at the highest levels of this hierarchy, the gap between their daily lives and those of ordinary inmates is considerable.

The consequences of this system for ordinary detainees are serious. Access to food, water, medical care, or a place to sleep often depends on the rules imposed by the super-detainees. New arrivals must pay fees to enter the detention quarters, or risk being relegated to unsanitary spaces or subjected to mandatory labour. Levies are also imposed on goods and food brought in by the families of detainees. Those unable to pay live in particularly precarious conditions, marked by overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, which facilitate the spread of disease, while, at the same time, access to healthcare is restricted.

The methods by which this power is exercised also rely, in many cases, on various forms of coercive practices, used as tools of control and punishment. In the men's and children's quarters in particular, this violence can be physical—beatings, whippings, forced immersion in sewage—or psychological, through public humiliation or the imposition of degrading tasks such as cleaning

excrement with bare hands. In some cases, the violence is sexual, involving intrusive searches conducted by super-detainees and, more rarely but as documented, rapes inflicted on vulnerable inmates. Restrictions on mobility, punitive postures or disciplinary isolation are also employed. These practices are neither uniform nor systematic: some prison blocks are free of them, and male and female super-detainees may even play a protective role. However, violence committed by super-detainees has been documented in all six countries.

The perceptions gathered from inmates and prison staff differ. For most ordinary inmates, this system is perceived as arbitrary, illegitimate, and a source of abuse. Some accounts nevertheless emphasise that it may represent a lesser evil, preventing what they believe would be more direct brutality by staff. From the perspective of State officials working in prisons, however, these super-detainees—both men and women—appear as indispensable intermediaries, compensating for chronic staff shortages, promoting the empowerment of inmates, or ensuring the supervision of the entire prison population.

The way in which super-detainees are designated illustrates the institutionalised nature of their role. In all the countries studied, their appointment is approved, or even directly organised, by the prison administration. In some facilities, their authority is even recognised by visible distinguishing marks—wearing an armband, a uniform, or a badge—which formalise their status among other detainees. Furthermore, when a super-detainee oversteps their authority, staff have the power to remove them from their position immediately.

In disciplinary matters, super-detainees act under direct subordination to the administration. These men and women participate in the implementation of sanctions ranging, depending on the case, from restrictions on movement to forms of physical or psychological violence, always under the watchful eye or with the approval of prison officers. Far from being autonomous, their actions are part of a chain of command in which the State retains the prerogative to validate, correct, or overturn their decisions.

Conclusion

While international and national laws prohibit any delegation of disciplinary functions to inmates, super-detainees—both men and women—effectively exercise a role recognised and supervised by prison administrations. When super-detainees restrict access to services (such as the infirmary), impose degrading conditions, or exercise coercive control, their actions are part of a system organised by the State. Through its agents, the State selects authorised individuals, supervises their actions, and retains the right to revoke their authority. Consequently, the acts committed by super-detainees cannot be analysed independently of this logic of subordination. This observation thus opens new perspectives for considering the State's responsibility, particularly when the practices of super-detainees amount to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

By documenting this reality, the study does not limit itself to a legalistic approach: it calls for a renewed dialogue with authorities and protection agencies to rethink prison management and develop alternatives that guarantee both the security and dignity of detainees.

Introduction

This study is part of an ongoing effort to examine prison realities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through a comparative analysis conducted in six countries, it aims to shed light on the management practices deployed there, often outside formal frameworks. The introduction presents the context and objectives of the study, as well as the methodology employed.



Context and objectives of the study

With a view to better preventing torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment in prisons, and in anticipation of the regional Conference on prisons scheduled for the first half of 2026, FIACAT, in partnership with several ACATs, has launched a comparative study on the functioning of penitentiary institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa. This initiative aims to shed light on the internal dynamics that shape prison life to engage in a joint reflection with national authorities, regional and international human rights protection mechanisms, national mechanisms for the prevention of torture, and civil society on these realities and their consequences for detainees.

Created in 1987, FIACAT—the International Federation of ACATs (Actions by Christians for the Abolition of Torture)—is an international non-governmental human rights organisation dedicated to ending torture and abolishing the death penalty. It brings together around thirty national associations, known as ACATs, across three continents, sixteen of which are active in Africa. These associations work locally to improve detention conditions and the treatment of people deprived of their liberty through awareness-raising, advocacy, and monitoring efforts, in collaboration with authorities and other civil society actors.

Six ACATs actively participated in this study: ACAT-Cameroon, ACAT-Congo, ACAT-Côte d'Ivoire, ACAT-Madagascar, ACAT-Democratic Republic of Congo, and ACAT-Chad. Building on their work with those “forgotten” by the justice system, these ACATs work, as part of the program to combat abusive pretrial detention, to reduce prison overcrowding by training judicial, prison, and civil society actors; by providing legal support to individuals awaiting trial; by advocating with authorities for the implementation of recommendations issued by regional and international organisations; and by raising public awareness of detainees’ rights. This study was thus conducted as part of the projects, “United Against Torture Action 1” and “Ensuring access to justice for detainees awaiting trial in ten prisons in the Republic of Congo and Madagascar.”

The ACATs that took part in the study were selected based on their involvement in these projects and the commitment of their volunteers to activities carried out in prison settings.

Inspired by contemporary research that no longer merely questions prison “as it should be,” but seeks to understand “prison as it is” (Martin et al. 2014), this study gives a voice to those who experience or observe the prison environment on a daily basis: prison staff, detained women and men, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It analyses the forms of power exercised within prisons by some inmates, the effects of these practices on other detainees, and the ways in which the State intervenes in their organisation or perpetuation.

The overall objective is to analyse these forms of management within the prison system and to propose avenues for reflection aimed at improving prison conditions. More specifically, the study aims to:

- ➔ **Identify and analyse management practices** in several prisons in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the role played by detainees.
- ➔ **Assess the impact of these practices** on prison conditions and the respect for human rights.
- ➔ **Analyse the State’s responsibility** in these practices.
- ➔ **Examine the historical legacy** of prison systems.

This study takes an analytical approach. It is therefore neither intended to recommend the elimination of the mechanisms under examination nor to advocate for their continuation. The objective is to examine the extent of the State’s responsibility in their structuring and reproduction, to initiate a constructive dialogue with the authorities based on the observed situations. From this perspective, the issues raised by the mechanism will be presented in a reasoned and documented manner in the conclusion.

Methodology

The methodology adopted is based on a qualitative, participatory, and comparative approach, in which local stakeholders were closely involved. This section details the methodological principles and data collection methods that were used.

■ Principles and participatory approach

The study, conducted between December 2024 and August 2025, was coordinated by a team comprising two researchers and a senior consultant: Dr. Carole Berrih, a public administration researcher affiliated with CERDAP² (Université Grenoble Alpes / Sciences Po Grenoble); Louissette Ranorovololona, a Malagasy senior consultant specialising in addressing vulnerabilities; and Chloé Ould Aklouche, a PhD candidate in political science at the research laboratory Les Afriques dans le Monde (LAM – Sciences Po Bordeaux).

As part of a participatory approach, this study was conducted in close collaboration with FIACAT and ACATs in six countries—Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Madagascar, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Chad. ACAT staff and volunteers were fully involved in every stage of the process: defining objectives, refining research questions, adapting methodological tools, training in qualitative data collection², and conducting field surveys.

Data were collected between May and July 2025 by ACAT members and volunteers who regularly work in the prisons under study. In Madagascar, the surveys were conducted jointly by consultants and ACAT teams. In Côte d’Ivoire, the FIACAT program officer participated in the fieldwork. The following individuals participated in data collection:

■ **In Cameroon:** Marie Marcelle Ngo Biem II and Blaise Mosomla Bongne.

■ **In Côte d’Ivoire:** Camille Aubinais, Jean Piccard Nyamien and Férima Souh.

■ **In Madagascar,** under the coordination of Miora Randrianindrina, who not only accompanied the consultants in their research but also conducted interviews and coordinated data collection by volunteers: Épiphanie Be Tanya, Esperance Guson, Justin Pierrot Nirindrainy, Fabienne Rabehavana, Laure Rabetokotany, Charline Raharintsoanirina, Nambinintsoa Raheliarimanana, Dina Henintsoa Rakotoarisoa, Joseph Emile Rakotoarisoa, Manoa Rakotomahefa, Hortensia Rakotonoly, Jean Mario Ralaisidy, Vonimbolamena Ralijaona, Kantolalaina Ramahefarisoa, Jules Ramamonjimanana, Mampiona Ranaivoarisoa, Ilonah Ange Ranaivoson, Anthonia Randrimirintsoa, Alexandrah Rasoarimalala, Fetraniana Ratsimarahomanana and Laurent Rijavolatsoa.

■ **In the Republic of Congo:** Cyrille Ngakama, Maryse Prisca Bamoma, Laetitia Batumeni, Gaston Itoua Okona and Dominique Koka.

■ **In the DRC:** Martin Amisa, Faustine Abedi, Trésor Assimbo, Dayana Atia, César Bahito, Dieu-Merci Kalibanda, Jean Kamimbaya, Fabrice Lalua, Yannick Lokima, Gloria Miezi, Tatiana Musulu, Fergany Muyombo, Fiston Mvula and Gloria Yenji.

■ **In Chad:** Sylvain Madjiharebeye, Seilou Dorsouma, Bertin Nadjilem Madjilengar, Gosngar Doumnguinam, Dorlica Rarikingar.

To ensure methodological consistency across different countries while taking local specificities into account, interview guides were developed based on research questions defined in consultation with FIACAT and the partner ACATs³. These tools helped structure data collection in a consistent manner, facilitating a comparative analysis across the contexts studied⁴. Where necessary, the guides were translated by the teams into local languages.

² : In April 2025, two training workshops focused on data collection practices were held for 25 ACAT staff members and volunteers. These trainings covered four main themes: the protection of interviewees, interviews (objectives, preparatory steps, conduct, follow-up), observation (objectives, observation of locations, people, and activities), and the production of the summary report. • ³ : See the research questions, Appendix 2 • ⁴ : See the interview guides, Appendix 3

■ Data collection methods

To understand prison practices beyond official statements or normative texts, the study relied on several qualitative methods: literature review—particularly academic research on the subject⁵—interviews conducted in and outside prisons, and direct observations in certain facilities.

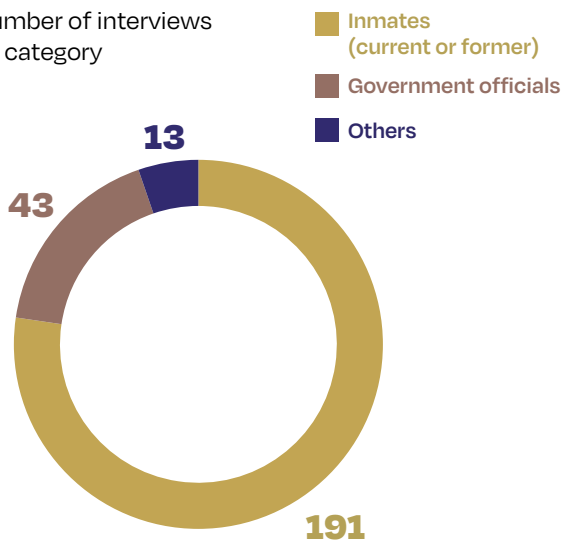
A common methodology was thus designed for all countries involved. However, implementation varied due to different levels of restrictions on access to prisons. In Cameroon, Madagascar, the DRC, and Chad, the teams had official authorisation to access correctional facilities and were thus able to interview detainees and State officials responsible for them. In Côte d’Ivoire and Congo, authorities prohibited volunteers from entering prisons. In these cases, information was gathered through other means, notably interviews with former detainees, supplemented by discussions with members of other NGOs and institutions.

For all interviews, strict ethical principles were applied to ensure compliance with the *Do No Harm* principle. The confidentiality of the information collected, and the protection of respondents’ identities were ensured at every stage. Participants were informed of the study’s objectives, the voluntary, unpaid, and reversible nature of their participation, as well as how the data would be used. Particular attention was paid to preliminary

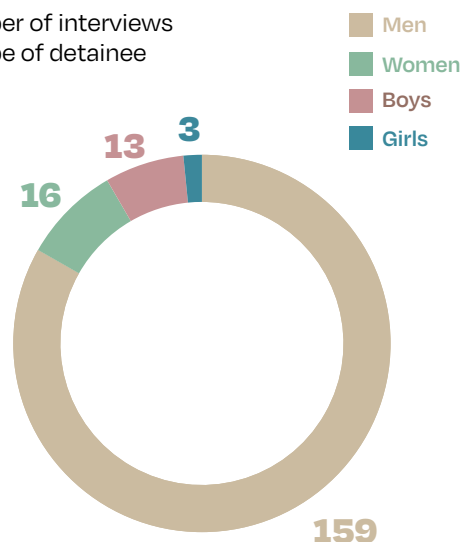
discussions with State authorities (at the central level—the Ministry of Justice—and/or at the local level of correctional facilities), to ensure transparency and prevent potential opposition. Interviews conducted within prisons were only carried out when security and confidentiality conditions allowed for the protection of the respondents.

Where possible, the study included a diverse range of profiles among the detainees interviewed: men, women, and children⁶, as well as detainees holding responsibilities within the prison and those who did not. In Madagascar, this diversity was systematically considered⁷. In other countries, access or scheduling constraints did not allow for equivalent representation of women and children. For the same reasons, it was not possible to survey individuals benefiting from privileged detention conditions due to their economic or social capital, referred to, depending on the country, as *VIPs*, *civil servants*, *elected officials*, *leaders*, or similar. However, a wide range of situations could be documented thanks to the diversity of the profiles encountered, particularly among male detainees and former detainees. In addition, interviews were conducted with several NGOs working specifically with women or children in detention. In total, 247 people were interviewed, including 191 current or former detainees and 43 State officials working in prisons, as presented in the figures and table below.

Number of interviews by category



Number of interviews by type of detainee



5: See the bibliography, Appendix 1 • 6: We have opted to use the term "child," which we consider more appropriate for referring to this category of people. Unlike the term "minor," which primarily refers to a legal status (not having reached the legal age of majority or emancipation), the term "child" places greater emphasis on the human dimension. For the purposes of this study, it refers to any person under the age of 18. • 7: According to prison statistics from March 2025, women and children account for 10% of the prison population in Madagascar (7% for women, 3% for children—boys and girls). These groups also represent 16% of the prisoners interviewed for this study.

Survey framework, by country

Country	Survey locations	Respondents	Methods
Cameroon	Douala Prison	(Former) detainees: 4 men NGO: 1	Interviews
Congo	Sibiti Prison and outside prison (former detainees from Ouessou)	(Former) detainees: 22 men, 1 woman Government staff: 2 NGO: 1	Interviews
Côte d'Ivoire	Outside prison (former detainees from the Abidjan, Daloa, and Bouaké Penitentiary Complex)	(Former) detainees: 5 men Government staff: 2	Interviews
Madagascar	Prisons in Ambatolampy, Antanimora, Antsirabe, Mahajanga, and Soavinandrina ⁸ Central and regional prison administration offices	(Former) detainees: 87 men, 12 women, 13 boys, 2 girls Government staff: 37 NGOs: 9 Donors, others: 2	Interviews, observations
DRC	Kisangani Prison	(Former) detainees: 6 men, 3 women, 1 girl Government staff: 2	Interviews, observations
Chad	Klessoum Prison and outside prison (former Korotoro detainees)	(Former) detainees: 35 men Government staff: 2	Interviews

The research team sincerely thanks all the individuals and institutions that contributed to this study: officials from the Ministry of Justice, prison staff, current and former detainees, as well as members of NGOs and international institutions who agreed to share their experiences. We would also like to thank the Ministry of Justice of Madagascar for authorising the taking of photographs as part of this study. In accordance with the conditions established with the authorities and in respect for the right to anonymity of the detainees, no faces are visible.

All photographs presented in the report were taken in Madagascar to illustrate the points made. This choice does not reflect a particularly critical situation compared to other contexts; rather, it attests to the authorities' cooperative and supportive engagement.

To protect the individuals who participated in the study, the names of the prisons involved are not mentioned in the body

of the report. Only the country has been identified. Detailed information on the sites surveyed is, however, available upon request to national prison authorities and mechanisms for the promotion and protection of human rights⁹.

All interviews presented were conducted between April and July 2025. Given the authorisation granted by the authorities to conduct in-depth work in Madagascar, many of the quotes presented in the report are drawn from this context.

This report is divided into three parts. The first explores the forms of power exercised by groups of detainees, despite their theoretical prohibition (1). The second examines the effects of these practices on their fellow inmates (2). The third analyses the complex relationships between these groups of detainees and State officials (3). In conclusion, a broader reflection is offered on the State's responsibility regarding the practices of these detainees. ■

⁸ : The Mahajanga and Soavinandrina penal camps were visited as part of this study • ⁹ : The names of the interviewees will not be disclosed.

Forms of power exercised by detainees

While national and international standards prohibit the participation of detainees in the exercise of authority in prison, such authority is attested to in all the countries considered, and beyond.

Authority theoretically prohibited for detainees

Prison law of the countries studied is based on a fundamental principle: the State is considered the sole legitimate holder of authority within prisons. This perspective reflects a certain model of the State—the so-called *Weberian* ideal-typical model—characterised by the State’s monopoly on legitimate use of violence.

In matters of security and the maintenance of order, this principle is clearly expressed in the law of the Republic of Congo, which states: “*The maintenance of order and internal security in prison facilities is the responsibility of prison staff under the authority of the director*”¹⁰. Other countries on the continent have similar provisions. In Madagascar, for example, the applicable decree states: “*Internal security within prisons is the responsibility of prison staff*”¹¹. In Cameroon, maintaining order among detainees, searching them, and inspecting their packages are expressly defined as the responsibility of State actors¹². In the DRC, the new law adopted in 2023 is silent on this point¹³, but a 2019 ministerial decree establishing internal regulations states: “*The immediate supervision of detainees is carried out by prison guards*”¹⁴. In Chad, maintaining order, discipline, control of the facility, and the enforcement of sentences fall under the responsibility of the prison directors¹⁵. Similarly, in Côte d’Ivoire, only prison administration officers are mentioned as responsible for security, within a strict regulatory framework governing the use of force and firearms¹⁶.

These provisions have equivalents in many other countries on the continent, in both French-speaking and English-speaking Africa. For example, in Niger: “*The internal security in prison facilities is the responsibility of the prison administration staff*”¹⁷; and in Benin: “*Policing, order, discipline, and security within prison facilities are the responsibility of the supervisory staff under the authority of the prison director*”¹⁸; in Rwanda: “*The supervision of incarcerated persons is carried out by guards in appropriate uniforms bearing their identification numbers and names, and equipped with suitable equipment*”¹⁹; or in Namibia: “*Correctional officers employed in a prison facility are responsible for ensuring: (a) to the greatest extent possible, the security and safe custody of all incarcerated persons in that facility*”²⁰. Without claiming to be exhaustive, these examples show that prison security is considered a prerogative reserved exclusively for prison administration staff.

Conversely, the State’s monopoly implies the exclusion of any involvement of detainees in security or disciplinary duties. This prohibition is thus explicitly stated in numerous legal texts. Focusing on the countries studied, the prison regulations of Côte d’Ivoire, Madagascar, and the DRC prohibit any detainee from holding a position or carrying out a duty involving authority or disciplinary power²¹. Some laws nevertheless allow for non-disciplinary responsibilities to be entrusted to them, provided they are carried out under the strict supervision of prison staff, as illustrated in the following box.

The similarity of the texts—which, as shown in the box, extends to wording that is virtually identical across several countries—should not be seen as a coincidence. Many of these texts are in fact the result of reforms developed within the framework of international programs, notably supported by the European Union—the continent’s leading donor in the prison sector—as well as other international actors, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) or human rights NGOs (Bouagga 2019, Berrih 2025a).

10: Article 31, para. 1, Law No. 10-2022 of April 20, 2022, on the Penitentiary Code (Republic of Congo) (hereinafter Law No. 10-2022 Congo) • 11: Article 30, para. 1, Decree 2006-015 of January 17, 2006, on the General Organisation of the Prison Administration (hereinafter Decree 2006-015 Madagascar) • 12: Articles 12, 37, and 28, Decree 92-052 of March 27, 1992, on the Penitentiary System (Cameroon) (hereinafter Decree 92-052 Cameroon) • 13: Law No. 23/028 of June 15, 2023, establishing the fundamental principles of the prison system (DRC) (hereinafter Law 23/028 DRC) • 14: Article 10, Ministerial Order No. 116/CAB/ME/MIN/J&GS/2019 on the internal regulations of “model” prisons in the DRC (hereinafter Order No. 116/2019 DRC). A reform of these texts is underway, and several of them were under review by the Ministry of Justice at the time of writing • 15: Article 13, Ordinance No. 32/PR/2011 on the Penitentiary System of October 4, 2011 (Chad) (hereinafter Ordinance 32/PR/2011 Chad) • 16: Chapter VII, Decree 2023-239 of April 5, 2023, on the regulation of correctional facilities and establishing the procedures for the detention of persons (Côte d’Ivoire) (hereinafter Decree 2023-239 Côte d’Ivoire) • 17: Article 35, Decree No. 2019-609/PNR/MJ of October 25, 2019 (Niger) (hereinafter Decree 2019-609 Niger) • 18: Article 38, Decree No. 2024-1153 of October 9, 2024, on the organization and internal regulations of correctional facilities (Benin) (hereinafter Decree 2024-1153 Benin). 19: Article 41, paragraph 1, Law No. 38/2006 of September 25, 2006, on the Establishment and Organisation of the National Prison Service (Rwanda) (hereinafter “Law 38/2006 of Rwanda”). This approach is also reflected in disciplinary matters: the laws designate government officials—sometimes in collaboration with representatives of civil society where disciplinary committees have been established—as the only persons authorised to impose disciplinary sanctions, for example: Articles 115 et seq., Decree 2023-239 of Côte d’Ivoire; Article 129, Decree 2006-015, Madagascar; Article 165, Decree 2024-1153, Benin • 20: Section 32, Correctional Service Act 9 of 2012, which entered into force on January 1, 2014 (Namibia) • 21: In Chad, the prison legislation is silent on this point, as the disciplinary regime is theoretically to be governed by a decree (Article 77, Ordinance 32/PR/2011 Chad), but this has never been adopted.

Excerpts from prison regulations of the countries studied²²

“No detainee may perform a duty involving authority or disciplinary power.” (Côte d’Ivoire)

“No detainee may hold a position involving authority or disciplinary power. However, certain responsibilities may be entrusted to detainees in the context of activities within the prison, under the effective supervision of staff.” (Madagascar)

“No prisoner may hold a position involving authority or disciplinary power. However, certain responsibilities may be entrusted to detainees in the context of activities within the prison, under the effective supervision of staff.” (DRC)

These actors use international detention standards—the Nelson Mandela Rules (United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners)²³—as their framework, which are intended to “define ‘good standards and good practices’ in the prison sector” (Quéro 2004, Bouagga 2016)²⁴. However, these international standards place the State at the centre of prison management. Rule 40 prohibits any detainee from exercising any disciplinary authority over other prisoners: “No prisoner shall hold a position in the prison that confers disciplinary authority.” This Rule does, however, allow for a system of “self-governance” by detainees, under supervision, for “activities or responsibilities of a social, educational, or sporting nature.”

Furthermore, more broadly speaking—whether regarding discipline, searches, the organisation of life in detention, or the control of external contacts (visits or correspondence)²⁵—the State administration is the only actor mentioned as responsible for implementation, as if this were self-evident.

Adopting a non-prescriptive approach, this report does not take a position on the legitimacy of the model promoted by these standards, which view detainees as a homogeneous group placed under the exclusive authority of State officers. It should be noted, however, that this model aligns poorly with the realities observed in many African countries—and beyond.

The real authority exercised by groups of detainees

Over the past fifteen years, prison research has examined the “real” functioning of African prisons²⁶. Using a non-normative analytical framework, these studies have highlighted the fundamental role played by certain detainees in the functioning of prisons, far beyond what is prescribed in written regulations. The findings of this research confirm those presented in the literature—particularly in prisons that had never been the subject of such a study.

■ The emergence of research focused on forms of authority in prisons

The recent surge in research on the functioning of African prisons has highlighted forms of power exercised by detainees (Martin et al. 2014, Jefferson & Martin 2014, Morelle & Le Marcis 2019)²⁷. Based on empirical studies conducted in several countries across the continent, both English- and French-language literature has revealed the ways in which certain groups of detainees assume responsibilities within prisons. These women and men, referred to here as “super-detainees” (See the box on terminological clarifications), exercise powers of varying scope depending on the national context: searches, cells assignments, organisation of chores, access to the infirmary, distribution of food, but also—and above all—the exercise of disciplinary power over other detainees, whom we will refer to as “ordinary inmates.”

In these countries, research reveals a spatial division between, on the one hand, State officers on the outside and, on the other, the super-detainees—both women and men—on the inside. While in some countries, such as Côte d’Ivoire, State officers are occasionally present in the prison yard (Le Marcis 2017), in most others they remain stationed outside the housing units. This is the case, for example, in Sierra Leone (Schneider 2020), Cameroon (Morelle 2013), and Niger (Berrih 2023).

These studies have thus documented the existence of these forms of power in many countries, notably:

■ **In South Africa**, the internal organisation is based on *cell chiefs* or *cell leaders* (Faye et al. 2023).

■ **In Cameroon**, super-detainees, also known as “anti-gangs,” play a central role in maintaining order through an organised and hierarchical system, which has been studied in detail at the Yaoundé Central Prison (Ngoni Bounougou 2012, Morelle 2013).

22: Article 88, para. 2. Decree 2023-239, Côte d’Ivoire. Article 26, Decree 2006-015, Madagascar. Article 21, Order 116/2019, DRC • 23: In doing so, these actors contribute to the dissemination of these standards (Bouagga, 2016) • 24: For a critical examination of the standardisation of prison reforms, see Bernard (2022). This inquiry is part of a broader reflection on the standardisation of reforms (Olivier de Sardan 2021) • 25: Rules 12, 52(1), 60, Nelson Mandela Rules • 26: The literature on African institutions notably employs the terminology of “actual governance” (Olivier de Sardan 2008, De Herdt & Olivier de Sardan 2015) or “everyday governance” (Blundo & Le Meur 2009) • 27: In Francophone Africa, see the program “Economics of Punishment and Prisons in Africa” (ECOPPAF), coordinated by Marie Morelle and Frédéric Le Marcis from 2015 to 2019: <https://ecoppaf.hypotheses.org/accueil>.

■ **In Côte d'Ivoire**, the existence of a highly structured “detainee government” has been documented at the Abidjan Detention and Correctional Facility (MACA)—now known as the Abidjan Penitentiary Complex (PPA) (Le Marcis 2017).

■ **In Ghana**, the “black coats” are detainees in charge of security: they wear uniforms and are led by a detainee responsible for coordination at the national level (Akoensi 2014).

■ **In Niger**, groups of detainees organised around a *Sarki* (a Hausa word meaning “chief”) handle cell assignment, chores, searches, and discipline (Berrih 2023, 2025b).

■ **In Nigeria**, detainees are organised into “governments” and are led by a detainee president known as the *Nkorofò* (Faye et al. 2023).

■ **In Uganda**, detainees known as *Katikiros* (a Luganda word meaning “Prime Minister”) hold disciplinary authority (Martin 2021, Martin & Jefferson 2024).

■ **In the DRC**, prison life is overseen by the *Capita General* and his deputies, the *capitas*, who monitor fellow inmates and enforce disciplinary sanctions (Kakule Kinombe 2019, Ayimpam & Bisa Kibul 2020). The “*use of detainees as prison guards*” was discussed during the 2015 National Conference on Justice (Ministry of Justice and Human Rights 2015).

■ **In Senegal**, day-to-day management is handled by the “cell leaders” (Faye et al. 2023).

■ **In Sierra Leone**, the “*red bands*” exercise effective power inside Freetown prison (Schneider 2020).

■ **In Chad**, a group of detainees enforces discipline within cells, handles cleaning, and distributes food at the Amsiné prison (Berrih 2016).

Structured organisations of detainees are not unique to the African continent. They have also been documented in Latin America, notably in Brazil (Darke 2014) and Nicaragua (Weegels 2017), as well as in Asia, for example in India (Bandyopadhyay 2010), the Philippines (Narag & Jones 2017), and Lebanon (Berrih & El Mufti 2021).

■ Forms of authority among male and female super-detainees in the countries studied

The research conducted as part of this study confirms the existence of structured organisations of detainees exercising authority over their fellow inmates in all the countries examined. While the names and the degree of organisation vary considerably from one country to another—and even from one prison to another within the same country—the underlying principle remains the same: the assignment of control, organisational, or disciplinary functions to certain detainees in exchange for material or symbolic benefits, or privileges allowing movement outside the prison.

Terminological Clarifications

Governance or government

We have deliberately avoided using the term *governance* in this report. Although it is used in many studies to describe the exercise of power by super-detainees, this concept refers to a normative ideal associated with transparency, ethics, efficiency, and a form of legitimisation through participation (Pitseys 2010). However, in the African prison context, the participation of prisoners does not necessarily reinforce the legitimacy of decisions but rather resembles a mode of exercising power that is supervised, or even orchestrated, by the State. This is why the term “*government*” will be used here.

Super-detainees

This term, used in Cameroonian prisons, is borrowed from Régine Ngoni Bounoungou (2012). It refers to detainees responsible for discipline and security, in collaboration with prison administration staff. These super-detainees—both women and men—should not be confused with *VIPs*, *civil servants*, *assimilated individuals*, or *officials*²⁸.

These two categories are not always mutually exclusive. Furthermore, not every detainee placed under the authority of super-detainees is necessarily a super-detainee themselves. For example, those assigned to perform chores under their supervision exercise no disciplinary authority. Additionally, other detainees may also play a particular role within prisons.

This is the case, for example, with literate detainees who are asked to draft applications for provisional release or parole—sometimes referred to as “prosecutors”²⁹—or to provide literacy classes to other inmates within the prison. However, these individuals exercise no authority over others and are therefore not considered super-detainees within the scope of this study.

28: See above • 29: On this subject, see Morelle 2022.

→ A single mechanism with many faces

In all the countries studied, organised groups of detainees assume functions that go beyond simple daily organisation. Their authority is not limited to logistical responsibilities, such as organising meals, distributing food sent by families, supervising sports activities, or accompanying sick detainees to the infirmary; it extends to conducting searches at the entrance to prison wings or within the cells, to monitoring spaces, to maintaining order, and to enforcing sanctions—which will be examined in greater detail below.

These figures of authority within the prison population are designated by specific titles unique to each national context. These titles, often borrowed from political, military, or administrative terminology, reveal the existence of a structured internal hierarchy, where super-detainees are assigned different levels of responsibility.

In Cameroon, authority at the cell level is exercised by the “cell leader”, who reports to a “block leader” who in turn reports to a detainee “president” in charge of all block leaders in the prison.

In Congo, central authority is embodied by a person called, depending on the prison, the *king* or the inspector: this is the “head of detainees” and “chief of discipline”³⁰. He works with *coqs*, or cell leaders, whose role, as one of them explained, is to “enforce discipline within the prison”³¹. For example, a Coq can gather individuals involved in thefts or fights to hear them out and has the authority to place detainees in disciplinary unit (the *kidé*). There are Coqs in every cell, including the children’s cell.

In Côte d’Ivoire, power in certain prisons is exercised by the *CB* (*Building Commissioner*). As one detainee described, “he’s the one in charge”; he is the person to whom other detainees must turn first in the event of a dispute. The CB has disciplinary authority, as explained by a former detainee:



“When there is a problem, we are brought to him to sort things out: if there has been a fight, a theft, someone has been hurt... He is the one in charge. He punishes you; he judges you. He can send you to 004—which is a prison within a prison; it is solitary confinement. You go there with only the clothes on your back. Until you have served the sentence he gave you, you don’t get out.”

Former detainee, Côte d’Ivoire

In each cell, the CB supervises a CC (*cell chief*), assisted by a *commissioner* (his deputy in charge of conflict resolution) and other staff, such as a sanitation officer, a television officer, or clerks responsible for counting detainees under the supervision of guards. In other prisons, the yard supervisor is called a *yard commando* or *yard chief*. He supervises *cell commandos* or *cell chiefs*. The *commandos* are responsible for security: they search their fellow inmates, monitor them, and have the right to sanction them if they do not follow the rules. The scope of their disciplinary power will be discussed in more detail below.

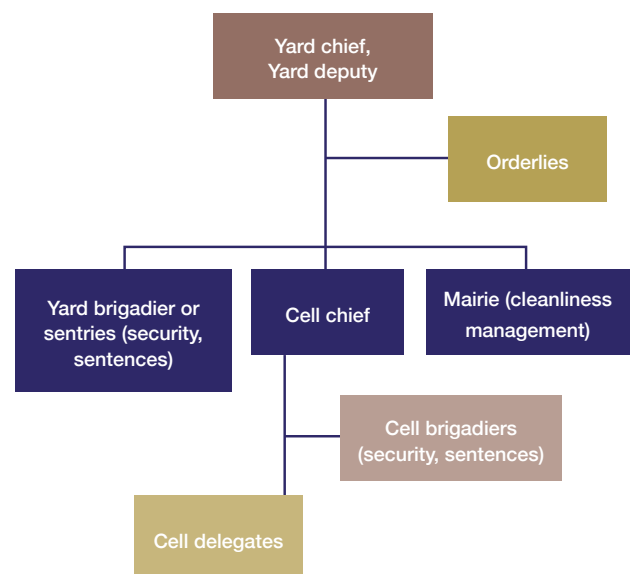
In Madagascar, the organisational structure varies depending on the size of the prison visited, although, as one prison officer explained, this system exists “in all prisons in Madagascar, even the facilities known in French as ‘maisons de sûreté’”—that is small prisons intended, in theory, to house pretrial detainees and those serving short sentences³². In the smallest facilities visited, authority may be limited to a *cell leader* or, in penal camps, to a *team leader*.

In facilities with multiple cells, there is a *block leader* who supervises several *cell leaders*, sometimes assisted by *cell officers*. In the largest facilities, the structure is much more developed. In one of them, security duties in the yard are carried out by the *andry maso* (from the Malagasy *andry* = pillar, and *maso* = gaze/eye), under the supervision of an *andry maso chief*. This team includes, among others, the person responsible for opening and closing the gate, a *search officer*, and several *sentry* posts (fixed surveillance posts). In another prison, these tasks are carried out by individuals known as “*GIR*”³³. In addition, other roles exist, such as the “*pointeurs*” (responsible for recording movements—entrances and exits), “*Tilimparitra*” (responsible for cleanliness), “*Tilin’ny infirmerie*” (responsible for transfers to the infirmary), “*Lakozia*” (responsible for the kitchen), and “*voyageurs*” (in charge of transporting packages and meals)³⁴. Within the cells, the *cell leader* supervises the organisation of the cell and is responsible for enforcing the internal rules of each cell. He is assisted by a *deputy*, a *commissioner* (security and searches), a “*pointeurs*”, as well as several people assigned to chores, including “*factions*” responsible for monitoring the cell at night.

In the DRC, a complex system has been described. At its top, the “*capita general*” embodies the supreme authority among the detainees. He is supported by a *section 02 chief*—described by one detainee as a “prime minister”—and a *section 03 chief*, responsible for discipline and security, who can be compared to a “commander of the armed forces”. The latter can place a person “*who is defiant*” in a detention area located in the *capita general’s* dormitory. A *troop chief 04*, likened to a governor, completes this structure.

In Chad, titles are drawn from military and civilian terminology and reflect the outside world. In a prison, responsibility for discipline and security falls to the *yard chief*, assisted by his *deputy* and *orderlies*. This chief supervises yard *brigadiers* (tasked with enforcing punishments), *sentries*, and *cell chiefs*, who are in turn supported by *cell brigadiers* and *cell delegates*. Cleanliness management is handled by a person called the “*mairie*,” with various sub-roles: *central mairie*, *courtyard mairie*, and *cell mairie*. A simplified diagram, shown below, illustrates this organisation. In another prison, the elite inmates at the top of the prison hierarchy are “*commanders*,” who oversee *brigadiers*. There is also a *mairie* there.

The titles given to super-detainees thus vary depending on the context. The table below provides an overview, noting that each prison may have its own terms, even within the same country.



Organisational chart
of super-detainees in Chad

32: Article 9, Decree 2006-015 (Madagascar) • 33: Neither the detainees nor the prison officers interviewed are familiar with the meaning of this term. It is, however, possible that it derives from the term “rapid response unit,” used in the police context in Madagascar • 34: However, these individuals do not have disciplinary authority over other inmates—in accordance with our definition (See the box on terminological clarifications), they are therefore not akin to super-detainees.

Titles given to female and male super-detainees

Country	Main title	Other super-detainees
Cameroon	President	Cell leader, block leader
Congo	King, inspector	Coq
Côte d'Ivoire	CB, yard chief, yard commando	Cell chief, cell commando, commissioner
Madagascar	Block leader	<i>Andry Maso</i> , cell chiefs, GIR, cell officers, commissioners, sentry
DRC	Capita general	Section 02 chief, section 03 chief
Chad	Yard chief	Commanders, brigadier, sentries

→ The benefits associated with positions of responsibility

The duties of super-detainees come with various privileges, which help shield them, at least partially, from the dehumanising conditions of detention experienced by others (Dufaux 2010).

Freedom of movement, including outside the prison

One of the most frequently reported benefits is freedom of movement. Whereas ordinary male and female detainees are strictly confined to their quarters or cells, super-detainees enjoy greater freedom of movement. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, CBs remain outside their cells after 6 p.m., while others are locked up. In Madagascar, super-detainees leave their cells earlier than others in the morning and return later in the evening. Some male super-detainees also have access to all prison wings, including those reserved for women or children. This greater freedom of movement reduces the feeling of confinement, as one of them explains:

“ I can go to all the prison sections on my own. It's a kind of freedom; I don't feel locked up.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

In the men's sections of two prisons visited in Madagascar, wearing a badge, a necklace, or an armband even signifies permission to move outside the wing to which they are assigned. Indeed, in most of the prisons studied, super-detainees are difficult to identify in the absence of a specific outfit or uniform—although certain clues allow for the indirect identification of their status within the prison, such as clean clothes, a more well-groomed appearance, jewellery or glasses, or, in the case of the *capita general* in the DRC, a bodyguard accompanying him at all times. However, in these Malagasy

prisons, inmates wear accessories that, depending on their type, size, and colour, represent their role and rank³⁵ and grant them access to more or less extensive areas within the prison.

In one of these prisons, the badge—for block leader—and the necklace—for cell chiefs—allow access to most areas of the prison. These items are ordered by the super-detainees from another inmate in the prison. The cost of an armband ranges from 2,500 to 3,000 Ariary [€0.49 to €0.59] for the small



Distinctive signs of super-detainees (Madagascar, 2025)³⁶



³⁵: Block leaders wear a badge, while cell chiefs wear a necklace. The yellow armband distinguishes the *andry maso*; red is reserved for commissioners; blue identifies detainees responsible for liaising with families, white those who assist the nurse, and green those responsible for cleaning • ³⁶: The names appearing on the armbands as well as the indications regarding the quarters have been intentionally removed from the photographs.

model (deputies) to 5,000 Ariary [€0.98] for the large model (incumbents). In the other prison, these are laminated badges, ordered by the administration, as we will see. In some DRC facilities, the *capita general* also reportedly enjoys exceptional privileges, ranging from occasional outings outside the prison grounds to the possibility of spending certain nights outside—like temporary release permissions—without the judicial authorities being informed. Super-detainees in Congo have easier access to such privileges due to their close ties with prison guards³⁷.

Improved detention conditions

While the prison environments studied are often characterised by extreme precariousness, being a super-detainee allows one to enjoy better conditions of detention. These advantages are evident, for example, in sleeping arrangements: individual mats, sometimes mattresses, or even the possibility of sleeping outside the cell. This is the case in Chad and Madagascar: some super-detainees sleep in the courtyard, others in the infirmary, thus avoiding the often overcrowded and poorly ventilated collective cells. This opportunity to go outside allows them, in their own words, to “*breathe fresh air*” and to “*get away from illnesses caused by being too close to others*.”

Super-detainees also have better access to connections with the outside world. In Cameroon, Madagascar, Côte d’Ivoire, and the DRC, many of them mentioned having permission to use a phone, to obtain phone credit—even though this is theoretically prohibited—or to enjoy extended visiting hours with their families:

“*If a family member comes to visit me, I can have more time than the others.*”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

This type of privilege has also been portrayed in fiction, through the character of Blackbeard in the film *Night of the Kings*, inspired by the MACA prison (Côte d’Ivoire). Equipped with a respirator, this super-detainee symbolically embodies the power and material benefits associated with this status.

Access to material and financial resources

From the moment they arrive in prison, and throughout their detention, ordinary male and female inmates are subjected to corrupt practices carried out by super-detainees—practices that are part of a broader distribution system involving prison staff³⁸. To access services—a place to sleep, a meal, a medical visit—they must often pay money or submit to various forms of pressure. The status of super-detainee thus constitutes a strategic position, conferring not only power but also tangible benefits.

In several countries, searches at the entrance to detention facilities are conducted by super-detainees. This moment, which resembles an admission ritual, immediately informs new arrivals of the role played by these particular detainees in the prison hierarchy. It is often accompanied by humiliating acts—so-called “techniques of mortification” (Goffman 1968), which are considered even “*more dynamic and intense*” on the African continent (Gear 2021)—and serves as a means for the super-detainees to extort money or belongings:

“*— When we first arrived, they put us—how should I put it—in a room where they stripped us naked. We were naked, it must be said, and they put their hands on us ... We had to declare them all the money we had. We handed over the money we had, and they took it. Some detainees helped themselves to it—the super-detainees, you know. They took 1,000 francs, 2,000 francs from you—that’s it, they took it. If you don’t want to, it becomes a problem. [...] Another guy, they took his shoe. The guy hadn’t given them anything. He was forced to walk barefoot for days. So that’s how they confiscate things.*
— *And the searches, who carries them out?*
— *The prisoners.*”

Interview with a detainee, Côte d’Ivoire

Super-detainees also obtain resources by charging for basic prison services. In the cells, most ordinary male and female detainees in Côte d’Ivoire, Madagascar, the DRC, and Chad reported having to pay amounts ranging from 1,000 to 65,000 CFA francs [€1.52 to €99.10] to super-detainees to secure a spot upon arrival. In Cameroon, a super-detainee explained that the fee for cells was generally 7,500 francs [€11.43] but could reach 250,000 francs [€381.12] in less uncomfortable cells, and over one million francs in so-called VIP cells. Additional fees are then charged weekly for the purchase of cleaning supplies, minor repairs, and the “remuneration” of super-detainees— who themselves are exempt from these payments.

In Côte d’Ivoire, the weekly fee of 1,000 CFA francs [€1.52] is called “*baïgon*” and is paid to the CB (see also Morelle & Le Marcis 2016);

In DRC, these are “*consumer credit*” fees from the *capita general*, ranging from 2,000 to 5,000 francs [€3.05 to €7.62];

In Chad, these are “*room fees*” ranging from 2,000 to 7,500 francs [€3.05 to €11.43].

In Madagascar, the “*social*” contribution can reach 3,000 Ariary [€0.60]. Similarly, super-detainees make other inmates pay for the water container needed to use the toilets, even though they themselves are exempt from this requirement.

³⁷: See below • ³⁸: Corrupt practices involving prison staff have also been reported in prisons across several countries. In some cases, prison directors themselves have been imprisoned for such practices, as is the case in Madagascar (the director of the Majunga prison was in custody at the time of our visit). However, these issues are not the focus of our analysis, and we will therefore not discuss them here.

“ When [you are an ordinary detainee], you want to be able to move around, but you can't. [Since I've been a super-detainee], for example, if I want to go to the bathroom, I no longer need to fetch water; I can go directly. Even in the cells, I no longer pay room fees because normally you have to give money to the cleaners—300 Ariary [0.06 euro cents] every Thursday and Sunday.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

Furthermore, in Madagascar and Côte d'Ivoire, super-detainees reported taking a portion of the food sent to inmates by their relatives. They justify this practice as a form of compensation for the services they provide.

“ When food is sent, you can take whatever you like from it.”

Super-detainee, Côte d'Ivoire

“ The pay is one bowl of rice per basket. If a relative of the prisoner puts five handfuls of rice in the basket, we take one handful.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

In some prisons, female and male detainees even pay money simply to gain favour with the super-detainees, in the hope of avoiding punishment or receiving more lenient treatment:

“ For my part, I always do what I am told because I'm afraid of being punished. Sometimes I give money to the cell leader and the block leader, so they like me.”

Female detainee, Madagascar

In a prison in the DRC, an inmate reported that the financial benefits of being a *capita general* were so great that he chose to extend his detention, even though he should have been released over a year ago. According to this account, he spends his nights outside the facility and returns only in the early morning.



Physical barriers restricting movement within a wing (Madagascar, 2025)

Privileged access to the administration

Being a super-detainee allows for close contact with State administration. In many prisons, ordinary detainees are not allowed to approach the area where State officials are stationed. This prohibition is sometimes clearly marked on the floor, as shown in the photo above: the red door marks the entrance to the wing, while the barred window, protected by a sheet of metal, serves as a communication point with State agents. Unlike the super-detainees in this men's wing, ordinary detainees are not allowed to approach the area marked “STOP” unless they are being punished. This mechanism affects ordinary inmates' access to staff in case of complaints, as we will see below.

Easier access to the administration allows super-detainees to maintain privileged relationships with the prison staff. This relational capital translates into concrete benefits: in Cameroon, a cell leader explained that his health issues were quickly addressed because the hierarchy intervened to assist him; others in Madagascar simply mentioned the possibility of watching television in the station chief's office or easily securing a meeting with the prison director. ■

The consequences of the actions of male and female super-detainees on ordinary detainees

The forms of power exercised by female and male super-detainees have multiple consequences for their fellow inmates. Between, on the one hand, corrupt practices, which create mechanisms of inequality and exclusion in access to resources (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2007), and, on the other hand, the various forms of coercion, many detainees question the legitimacy of this system³⁹. Extortion and violent punishments should not, however, be generalised: the way super-detainees exercise their power can vary from one wing to another, even within the same prison. In some wings, female and male super-detainees sometimes play a moderating or protective role.

Unequal access to resources and services

In a context of severe restrictions, the unequal practices of super-detainees frequently hinder their fellow inmates' access to resources essential for their survival. These resources—food, water, hygiene, healthcare, or simply a place to sleep—are subject to power dynamics and clientelist logic and, in some cases, resemble practices of extortion.

Food is distributed in a highly unequal manner. A prisoner in Madagascar noted that the amount of food served to super-detainees was far greater than his own:

“It’s not fair. The block leader and the cell chief don’t get the same thing [as us]. I only eat in the evening, whereas normally it’s twice a day. And the block leader, the cell chief, and the cell officer get huge portions. We [ordinary detainees] have to share a bucket; they each get a soup tureen.”

Detainee, Madagascar



Daily meal distribution (cassava) (Madagascar, 2025)

Access to water is also subject to discriminatory controls. In one of Madagascar’s prisons, water shortages are frequent, making this resource even more precious. Its distribution is managed by the super-detainees who favour certain inmates based on their relationships:

“The block leader] favors those who have been here for several years, and the newcomers weren’t allowed any water. It’s for the veterans and those with privileges. Sometimes the water gets cut off, and we have to share the big blue jug. Sometimes we just beg for a drink.”

Detainee, Madagascar

In another Malagasy prison, access to water is monetised: between 500 and 1,000 Ariary [€0.10 to €0.20] per container, covering all needs, including personal hygiene. In Cameroon, access to showers and toilets is charged—50 francs [€0.08] to wash, 100 [€0.15] for “number two.” In the event of non-payment, the consequences are humiliating: as one inmate reported, “if you can’t afford it, you’re forced to defecate on yourself or wait until nightfall to do it in secret.”

³⁹ : This study does not adopt a legalistic perspective. It should nevertheless be noted that torture, as well as cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, is prohibited by international instruments (<https://www.ohchr.org/fr/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading>) and by numerous national laws.



Shared cell (Madagascar, 2025)⁴⁰

The allocation of sleeping spaces also strongly illustrates these inequalities. In the most overcrowded prisons, as mentioned above, super-detainees sleep in more comfortable conditions—sometimes even outside the cells—while most detainees must sleep “packed like sardines,” lying on their sides, head-to-toe, pressed tightly against each other. The cell shown in the photograph below is in one of the least uncomfortable men’s wings of one of the prisons we visited. It housed 131 inmates during our visit, in an area of approximately 30 m².

The situation is hardly any better in the women’s cells: the cell shown page 22, with an area of approximately 14 m², holds up to

28 people. It is intended for pregnant women, mothers with their babies, and girls.

This sometimes-extreme overcrowding facilitates the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis, respiratory illnesses, scabies, fungal infections, and boils—as well as HIV, due to unprotected sex, which is made easier by these conditions. In Madagascar, the monitoring team observed detainees with infected boils that had never been treated.

In fact, access to the infirmary is subject to severe restrictions. In some facilities, it is strictly controlled by the super-detainees. In the men’s wing of one prison in Madagascar, a limit of two

⁴⁰: To avoid disturbing the people in the cells, we chose not to ask them to leave. For confidentiality reasons, the detainees were asked not to show their faces. This is why they appear from behind or with their faces hidden in this photograph and the next one.



Shared cell (Madagascar, 2025)

detainees per room, three times a week, is enforced. Only cases deemed sufficiently serious by the super-detainees are treated. Access to care thus becomes limited and subject to their discretion. It also happens that cell leaders demand money for access to care that is otherwise provided free of charge by a civil society organisation.

Furthermore, access to a cell is frequently contingent on payment, particularly for male new arrivals. In several countries, these men are systematically placed in the most uncomfortable cells, unless they can pay. In Côte d'Ivoire, a detainee reported that he had to pay between 6,000 and 15,000 CFA francs [€9.15 to €22.90] to be released from the arrival cell. Unable to pay this amount, he spent the night in a cell in gruelling conditions, unable to sleep. In another Ivorian prison, a detainee reported paying 36,000 CFA francs [€54.90] to secure a spot with a mattress, then 10,000 francs [€15.25] per week to keep it. In Madagascar, similar accounts were gathered: paying 5,000 Ariary [€1] grants access to a better spot, but only temporarily—the spot can be taken by another inmate if they offer more. In another facility, a detainee reported paying 8,000 Ariary [€1.55] to the cell leader to secure a sleeping space.

The same is true in Chad, where detainees must pay the cell leader a “cell fee,” which ranges from 2,000 to 7,000 francs [€3.05 to €10.67]. For those who cannot pay, sleeping conditions are particularly degrading. It is no longer just a matter of discomfort or extreme overcrowding, but of violence and placement in unsanitary areas, permeated with foul odours. The impact on mental health can be severe, as described in the following testimony:

“ We suffer because of this ‘right to a spot’ issue. How can one prisoner ask another prisoner to pay 7,500 francs for a small spot in the cell, as if it were his own house that he built? When you don’t pay this fee, it’s a living hell for you. They beat you; they put you in solitary confinement, sometimes they move you to a cell called a high-security cell, and there your fate is dire. You stand for hours next to other people’s urine and waste; you can’t lie down normally. I almost committed suicide one day because of this punishment.”

Detainee, Chad

Thus, by making access to food, water, medical care, or even a simple place to sleep contingent on power dynamics or payment, the super-detainees establish a deeply unequal system, one that is sometimes experienced as humiliating or unbearable. This system of differentiated access not only creates a sense of injustice but also causes psychological and physical suffering. These inequalities in access are also frequently linked to other forms of coercion, which we will analyse below.

Forms of coercion

While the ways in which super-detainees exercise power vary, they frequently include violent practices. In each of the prisons visited, at least one case of physical or psychological violence was reported (see the following table). Whether **physical**, **psychological**, or **sexual**, these acts of violence constitute a central tool of prison control. This violence is neither systematic nor uniform: some wings are free of it, and certain super-detainees, as we will see page 26, may play a moderating or protective role. However, in many cases, this violence, along with **restrictions on mobility**, directly contributes to the exercise of disciplinary power by super-detainees.

Documented forms of coercion

Type of violence	Concrete examples
Physical	Beatings, whip lashes, assaults with electric rods, immersion in wastewater
Psychological	Degrading chores (cleaning toilets with bare hands), public humiliation
Sexual	Intrusive body searches, rape and sexual assaults on vulnerable detainees
Restrictions on movement	Forced postures, disciplinary isolation

Physical violence

“ *Young prisoners torture the older prisoners.*”

Detainee, Chad

In the six countries studied, acts of physical violence inflicted by block leaders, cell chiefs, cell officers, *andry maso*, or other super-detainees in the exercise of these disciplinary functions have been documented in men’s and children’s quarters⁴¹. Their intensity and frequency vary depending on the context. In the Republic of Congo, beatings are a recurring form of punishment. It may be accompanied by practices such as “*putting under the bed*”—where the detainee is placed under the bed for a limited time—or, as we will see below, the imposition of forced labor.

In Madagascar, a super-detainee pulled out the fingernails of a fellow inmate accused of theft; elsewhere, a child caught smoking marijuana was forced to kneel in the courtyard before being violently beaten by the cell leader in front of all the detainees—a staged punishment intended to deter others.

Elsewhere, the *andry maso* inflict humiliating or painful punishments on the groups they catch sleeping during their guard shifts, as reported by an interviewed detainee:

“ *The problem is the andry maso who abuse their power. They hand out more punishments than the wardens. For example, the andry maso are out at night and knock [on the cell door]. And if the guards are asleep, if they don’t hear, they throw cold water or sewage at them. Behind there, there is a slab with sewage. If a guard is asleep, the andry maso pushes him into the dirty water. Right now, they’re fixing the sewage system, but before, this happened often. That’s usually the punishment. Sometimes it’s solitary confinement⁴². When the andry maso are alone, they abuse their power. It used to happen every month, even two or three times a week. [Now] during the day, [offending inmates are punished] by being placed in solitary confinement. We replace the dirty water with nailing down a grater. You have to kneel on the nailed-down metal sheet, and it stings. When the guard is asleep and no one answers, you’re put in solitary confinement the next day for two or three hours. That happens every week.*”

Detainee, Madagascar

41: Several cases of violence by prison guards have also been reported. Since the purpose of this report is to examine the dynamics of the relationship between super-detainees and prison guards, the reported cases of violence will be analysed exclusively through this lens · 42: Here, detention is marked by a red circle drawn on the floor, which detainees are not allowed to leave until their punishment is over. We will return to this punishment below.

In Chad, several super-detainees describe their use of violence as an accepted management practice. They acknowledge administering blows, isolating recalcitrant inmates, or subjecting them to degrading punishments in unsanitary locations. This violence is sometimes, though not always, carried out at the request of prison officers—we will return to this point below.

“*We punish stubborn detainees by whipping them or sending them to another cell to be held in a place where inmates urinate and defecate, forcing them to endure the foul odors for hours or even days.*”

Super-detainee, Chad

In a Chadian prison, several detainees reported that the brigadiers were members of Boko Haram, known for their violence, and that they inflicted abuse on their fellow inmates to assert their authority. These accounts align with the findings reported by several human rights organisations regarding this facility (Human Rights Watch 2024).

“*All these posts are managed by Boko Haram inmates. There is a market where they sell cigarettes, medicine, and peanuts. If you go to get tap water without the permission of these inmate overseers, they beat you with electric prods.*”

Former detainee, Chad

In addition to this direct violence, other forms of violence are more insidious. This is the case, for example, with food rationing by the Coq reported in Congo, when inmates make demands. This is what a representative of an organisation working in prisons recounts:

“*Food deprivation is [the punishment] when inmates make demands. They take advantage of this to punish them, to delay their meals; they know that meals are already very irregular, meager, just plain white rice. [...] Violence isn't just physical. It's verbal and psychological. Violence is keeping people in these extremely harsh conditions, which are against the law. [...] There isn't necessarily physical violence. They no longer use the whip or the stick, but at the slightest complaint, you're put in a cell, and you can't eat.*”

Member of an NGO, Congo

Finally, it should be noted that acts of violence do not always go unpunished. In some countries, such as Madagascar, repeated acts of violence against ordinary detainees are sanctioned by prison staff and can lead to the dismissal of super-detainees if they exceed a certain level of severity. However, this requires that detainees be able to access prison staff to report these abuses, which is far from guaranteed. We will analyse these factors below.

■ Psychological violence: the imposition of degrading labor

The imposition of forced labor, particularly to clean up the excrement of other inmates, is frequently used in prisons. It serves both as a disciplinary sanction and as a punishment for new arrivals who cannot pay the mandatory room fees, which we discussed, page 14.

This system of chores, described in men's quarters in Cameroon, Congo, Madagascar, the DRC, and Chad, is accompanied by extremely degrading conditions: detainees must pick up waste with their hands, as the following individuals testified:

“*Every Friday, each detainee pays 50 CFA francs to the cell leader for cleaning the toilets. Detainees who do not pay this fee are punished. They pick up human waste with their hands to throw it outside, pump water, clean the gutters, and receive five lashes.*”

Former detainee, Chad

“*If the family can't afford it, we sleep in the courtyards and are subjected to torture like emptying toilets without gloves or a face mask, bare-chested from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., and afterward, those who do two hours of duty don't get a medical checkup.*”

Detainee, Cameroon

In the DRC, this task of cleaning with bare hands in tanks containing feces, imposed particularly on the *Ayomba*—the newcomers—can last up to six months. In Madagascar, those who fail to pay their room fees may be forced to do this for the entire duration of their detention.

■ Sexual violence

Sexual violence was not reported in all the countries studied. However, two distinct forms of violence committed by super-inmates were reported.

The first involves intrusive body searches conducted by super-detainees, performed while the detainee is naked and involving direct contact with intimate areas. In Côte d'Ivoire, this type of search is common, carried out by super-detainees under the supervision of the CB. They take place every time a detainee leaves their cell, in a setting described by several former detainees as humiliating:

“ [During the search,] if you don't have 100 francs, you wait in the sun. [The super-detainee] waits, takes his time searching you, puts his hand on your buttocks. He puts his hand everywhere, even touching your private parts. [...] On any given day, if you enter your building ten times, they'll search you ten times.”

Former detainee, Côte d'Ivoire

The second form of violence reported involves rape, committed by super-detainees exploiting their position of power. In one of the prisons visited in Madagascar, several men reported that sexual relations were forced upon detainees considered particularly vulnerable—the “youngest or weakest, especially those without family or outside support.” Unlike most other cases, this violence was reported not only by ordinary detainees, but also by other super-detainees.

■ Punitive measures and restrictions on mobility

Like violence, restrictions on mobility are a manifestation of the coercive power that super-detainees exercise over their fellow inmates in the various countries studied. In several facilities, male and female super-detainees impose physically restrictive postures on punished individuals, intended both to punish them and to publicly humiliate them. These punishments serve a symbolic and deterrent function: by inflicting the punishment in front of other detainees, the super-detainee reaffirms his authority while stigmatising the person being punished. Standing still for an hour and kneeling publicly in the yard are practices regularly observed, particularly in Cameroon and Madagascar, including in women's sections:

“ If there is a theft, for example, I force the person who stole to return the stolen items or replace them, and I punish them at the same time, such as by making them kneel for fifteen minutes in the courtyard in front of everyone.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

In one of Madagascar's prisons, one of the punishments a super-detainee can impose is called *police custody*. It involves forcing the person being punished to remain inside a red circle drawn on the ground, which they are not allowed to leave until the punishment has been lifted.



Place of a “police custody” (Madagascar, 2025)

While in some countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, super-detainees have the authority to send a person to a disciplinary cell, in the DRC, they also have access to a special disciplinary cell located within the *capita general* dormitory itself. The duration of this form of isolation varies depending on the severity of the alleged offenses and the super-detainees' decision, ranging from two to fourteen days. The punishment ends when the inmate is considered “reformed.”

Contrasting views on the legitimacy of this mechanism: the perspectives of detainees

When asked about their perception of the legitimacy of this system, detainees express contrasting views. Some see it as a necessary framework in an under-resourced environment, while others express discomfort, unease, or even hostility toward the idea that a detainee exercises authority over a fellow inmate.

It should first be noted that violence perpetrated by super-detainees is neither widespread nor systematic. Certain categories of inmates appear to be largely spared from it: in the Malagasy prisons visited, no violence inflicted by female super-detainees was reported⁴³.

Similarly, several female and male detainees reported that, in certain cells or sections, super-detainees play a protective role against an administration perceived as punitive. They reportedly prevent certain offenses from being reported to prison guards, who are considered more violent, thereby helping to limit repression:

“*I prefer to handle everything [at our level]; otherwise, we get beaten up or put in a cell.*”

Detainee, Madagascar

“*I think it's better to have a female detainee in charge like us, instead of being scolded by the yard supervisor [prison guard] every day, because the yard supervisors are very arrogant toward us.*”

Female detainee, Madagascar

“*I prefer that the cell leaders handle things, because if they're here, it's because they have the maturity and the ability to protect us. It's better to have the cell leaders than the administration. We trust them. We're afraid of the police.*”

Detainee, Madagascar

These attitudes are not merely rhetorical: during a visit to a prison in Madagascar, it was a super-detainee who alerted the research team to the regular violence inflicted by a prison guard on a fellow inmate⁴⁴.

Furthermore, several detainees emphasize that this system serves a practical purpose. According to them, the use of super-detainees helps maintain a minimum level of order and prevent tensions:

“*This system is good because there are rules against fighting. I think it's okay. There's a certain authority. We're afraid of the [cell leaders, block leaders]. It works for me.*”

Detainee, Madagascar

“*When there are a lot of men in one corner, they make noise. [...] The commando unit will separate you. It's a good system; it's normal. Without it, there would be a lot of deaths.*”

Detainee, Côte d'Ivoire

These testimonies highlight a form of *pragmatic acceptance* of the mechanism: in some cases, it is believed to prevent further violence; in others, it is seen as a bulwark against chaos. Even when accepted, this system is therefore based more on a logic of avoidance—avoidance of disorder, avoidance of institutional brutality—than on a genuine recognition of an authority deemed legitimate.

Nevertheless, this relative acceptance is far from universal. Many critical voices speak out against the very principle of this system. For many, it is difficult to accept that authority can be exercised by someone sharing the same status as a detainee.

“*That's not normal. You're a prisoner, I'm a prisoner. And you have authority over me?*”

Former detainee, Côte d'Ivoire

“*It doesn't make sense for it to be an inmate.*”

Detainee, Chad

“*It's weird, though, that we have the same status and yet there's this hierarchy. Generally, there's no abuse. But I ask: does the prison warden have to be a prisoner?*”

Detainee, Madagascar

43: Several hypotheses can be put forward, including: an increased desire to protect others from officers known to be violent toward women; a designation by fellow female detainees rather than by the prison administration (see below); reduced overcrowding, which would limit opportunities for violence; or a possible reluctance to report such violence to investigative teams. For further reading on gender stereotypes in prison, see Le Marcis, 2022. • 44: At this inmate's request, the prison warden was alerted by the ACAT-Madagascar team to the existence of violence within the prison, without his name being disclosed. The detainee in question, who was about to leave the prison, feared possible reprisals and preferred to report the incidents anonymously.

This sense of unease is accompanied by more direct complaints: violence, restrictions, “*tyrannical behavior*”, “*cronyism*” and “*favoritism*” were frequently mentioned by those interviewed. Some question the system as a whole, believing that it is this very system that paves the way for abuse.

“ *The cell chiefs mistreat us even though they are detainees just like the rest of us.*”

Detainee, Chad

These testimonies thus converge to show that the forms of power exercised by super-detainees are not based on a fully chosen mechanism. Even for detainees who find advantages in this system, these benefits appear to be a “lesser evil” rather than a choice. These findings stand in stark contrast to official narratives, which present this organisation as an internal, voluntary system supported by all detainees, as we will see. ■



Cells (Madagascar, 2025)



State administration at the heart of the delegation of power

While super-detainees exercise forms of power within prisons, their role cannot be separated from State authority. Contrary to what some of the literature suggests, their power does not stem from an institutional vacuum or a lack of State control, but from a deliberate arrangement, organised and supervised by State authorities, who justify its use with a variety of arguments. The participation of super-detainees in surveillance and discipline is part of a strategy, which is evident in the established hierarchical relationships and in the control mechanisms exercised by State agents.

Beyond the idea of an absent State: rethinking the role of super-detainees

Most studies on African prisons that examine the forms of power exercised by super-detainees perceive them as a sign of a dysfunction in State power. According to this interpretation, widely held in the literature on prisons in the Global South⁴⁵, the participation of inmates in functions that *a priori* fall under the purview of the prison administration stems from an institutional vacuum: the State has effectively ceded its role by default, due to a lack of sufficient financial or human resources.

From this perspective, the power of super-detainees is an improvised response to the African State's inability to maintain order in prisons: in the face of this "*power vacuum*," this mechanism allows officers to "*cope with the stress created by fear, work pressure, frustration, and physical exhaustion*" (Akoensi 2014)⁴⁶, or to compensate for the feeling of abandonment by their superiors (Faye et al. 2023). This type of analysis extends beyond the African context: in Latin America, researchers interpret the authority of super-detainees as the result of administrative failure. In response to administrative mismanagement and inefficiency, chronic understaffing, or staff absence, inmates would then develop "*institutions of governance*" (Skarbek 2020). Some even consider that prisons would become, in these contexts, "*ungovernable*" (Perez Guadalupe et al. 2021).

These analyses, which rightly highlight the management difficulties faced by authorities, nevertheless obscure the dimension of power delegation to female and male detainees. A few studies offer this reversal of perspective (Morelle 2013, Le Marcis & Faye 2019, Ayimpam & Bisa Kibul 2020, Martin 2021, Berrih 2022, 2023, Martin & Jefferson 2024). Far from viewing the authority of super-detainees as stemming from the absence of a failing State, some of these studies demonstrate, on the contrary, that their power is strictly regulated and controlled by prison authorities (Berrih 2023, 2025b). This power is therefore not the shadow of the State, but one of its extensions. In other words, male and female super-detainees do not exercise power against the State, but with it—and for it.

This research highlights the existence of authority relationships between government agencies and super-detainees—relationships that are unwritten yet structured, and stem from a delegation of power⁴⁷. From this perspective, government officials are not absent from the day-to-day operations of the super-detainees' organisation; rather, they play an active role in it. It is these dynamics of articulation—rather than opposition—between the authority of State agents and that of super-detainees that we will explore in the following sections.

The logics of legitimisation of State agents

First, it is necessary to clarify that in all the countries studied, the power of male and female super-detainees in prison is never challenged by prison authorities. Although, as noted above, these forms of authority contravene national and international standards, no institutional actor within the prison system challenges them. On the contrary, some of them even consider this practice to be in line with national standards, and, during the mission to Madagascar, cited legal texts to support the legitimacy of the system—even though these texts do not permit it⁴⁸. What matters here is that the statements made by State officials reveal a largely positive and pragmatic view of super-detainees' participation in prison management. This is sometimes justified by State officials as a necessary response to staff shortages, as a means of social reintegration or empowerment, but also, and above all, as a tool for surveillance.

45: We are aware that the use of this term may be criticised for its generalising nature, although it allows—better than "Global South"—for highlighting the diversity of contexts. We have chosen to use it for lack of a more satisfactory alternative • 46: Our translation • 47: This delegation of power is akin to a "discharge"—a Weberian term referring to the transfer of State functions to external actors, which has been used in the literature to describe a strategy for extending state power (Hibou 1999). This term has been used in the literature on prisons (Morelle & Le Marcis 2015, Berrih 2022, 2023) • 48: While this lack of understanding raises broader questions about the value placed on written law in a prison context, an analysis of it goes beyond the scope of this report.

■ A discourse of necessity: addressing staff shortages

The most common justification put forward by State officials is that of an organisational imperative in the face of a chronic shortage of human resources. Super-detainees are described as an indispensable internal workforce, helping to compensate for the shortage of guards.

“ *During the day, because we’re not there 24 hours a day. We have several wings, but we don’t even have twelve correctional security staff during the day. [...] We don’t have enough staff; we have to find alternatives. [At the central prison], there are 1,800 detainees now, and we only have twelve guards.*”

Prison official, Madagascar

This line of reasoning is echoed in other studies. In his research on Darline Prison in the DRC, Charles Kakule Kinombe also notes that officers justify the use of super-detainees by citing staff shortages. One of them stated:

“ *The major problem in our prison is the shortage of staff. The number of officers at my disposal is practically negligible. We have over 1,400 inmates. But the number of officers doesn’t even reach thirty. [...] It is the capitas who help us most in maintaining order and discipline inside the prison.*”

Prison officer, DRC (Kakule Kinombe 2019)

The same logic applies in other contexts. In Ghana, an officer explained:

“ *The work is very hard. In my unit, we have more than 500 detainees. You can imagine: all those inmates and just me... So, when it comes to work, we rely mainly on the leaders among the detainees, because without them, we can’t manage on our own.*”

Prison officer, Ghana⁴⁹ (Akoensi 2014)

Super-detainees are thus viewed by the administration as a vital tool of the prison system, not as autonomous actors, but as extensions of State power, intervening where officers cannot be present. Super-detainees are described as ensuring constant surveillance, particularly at night:

“ *It’s because of the staff shortage. It was the prison officials who decided to put detainees with good behavior to work [...]. Since the inmates are locked up all night, someone has to be inside to watch over them; otherwise, they might start fighting.*”

Prison official, Madagascar

This discourse of necessity thus presents the participation of male and female super-detainees as a pragmatic, almost unavoidable solution to ensure a minimum level of control in a context of chronic understaffing. It is sometimes accompanied by a more positive narrative, grounded in goals of empowerment or reintegration, which we explore in the following section.

■ A rhetoric of empowerment and social reintegration

In Madagascar, other discourses adopt a more positive tone, emphasising a dynamic of empowerment and reintegration. The forms of power exercised by super-detainees are then presented as a means of educating them in collective social life and mutual respect, with a view to facilitating their future reintegration into communities:

“ *This helps us a lot in our role as supervisors—in terms of control, on the one hand, but also in terms of education, on the other. It helps them grow up respecting one another.*”

Prison officer, Madagascar

“ *[This system] is part of social reintegration; it’s about empowering detainees.*”

Prison administrator, Madagascar

This discourse on accountability, however, seems quite removed from the reality described by inmates. Aside from a few specific cases where cell leaders do indeed play a protective and moderating role, as described above, the interviews primarily emphasise how super-detainees participate in enforcing discipline and reproducing authority. While this may indeed be a form of learning to live in society, it is based more on the internalisation of hierarchical relationships and forms of obedience—sometimes through violence—than on cooperation and mutual respect.

49 : Our translation.

■ Integration into the prison intelligence system

Several prison officials emphasise the central role that super-detainees play in gathering intelligence. These inmates are described as “*informants*” or even as full-fledged “*undercover agents*,” tasked with reporting on what happens in the cells and courtyards.

“*These are the inmates from whom we get all the information about what’s happening among the detainees. There aren’t enough prison officers.*”

Prison official, Madagascar

“*If we don’t collaborate with the inmates, we can’t get anything. It’s inside the cells that they hatch their plans. That’s why we’re able to maintain security in the prison. With our infrastructure—it’s not like in France—that’s not how we maintain security. There’s this trick.*”

Prison official, Madagascar

This legitimisation through intelligence functions is not limited to the countries studied. It has also been observed elsewhere, as evidenced by a prison official in Niger:

“*Detainees have always been our collaborators. [...] It’s a continuity. Without them, we can’t stay informed about everything. They’re the ones who provide us with information. We work well together. It’s really about intelligence. Even if you have 2,000 guards, if you don’t have information from the detainees, it’s useless. Information about an escape comes from a person.*”

Prison official, Niger (Berrih 2023)

The role of super-detainees as informants is not only recognised by prison staff. It is also well understood by other stakeholders: inmates and members of civil society know that these individuals pass on information to the administration.

“*The CB is the warden’s eyes and ears.*”

Detainee, Côte d’Ivoire

“*The gendarme or police officer controls the prisoners through the Coq. The Coq is an informant.*”

NGO member, Congo

Super-detainees thus play a full role in the administration’s control strategy. Far from acting independently, their actions take place within a framework defined and supervised by the State—as we will see in the following section.

The institutionalised supervision of super-detainees by the State

The power structure within prisons should not be viewed as a dichotomy between the prison administration on one side and super-detainees on the other. Rather, it is an integrated system characterised by a functional division of labor, in which super-detainees occupy an assigned role—even if, from one institution to another and from one country to another, the intensity of State control varies. To illustrate this structure, two main dimensions will be presented: the strategic management of positions of power and the relationship of subordination that binds them to prison staff.

■ The strategic management of positions of power

In the countries studied, State officials have the power to designate, directly or indirectly, super-detainees. While the method of designation varies depending on the super-detainees in question and the prison facilities—ranging from a direct decision by the administration to a selection among inmates validated by the authorities—it always involves the State administration. Prison staff can also demote or remove them, thereby ensuring constant control over their status. This power to designate and remove reveals a policy of managing prison hierarchies based on compliance with prison regulations and respect for State officials.

→ The direct appointment of the prison elite

In all the countries studied, the selection of members of the prison elite is far from being left to chance. Super-detainees holding the highest positions in the hierarchy are appointed by the prison administration. This appointment is based on several criteria⁵⁰. One of these is having earned the “*trust*” of the officers. While, in rare cases, the selection may be influenced by prior ties—family or neighbourhood connections—between an officer and a detainee, most super-detainees did not personally know the officers who appointed them. Earning this trust therefore requires having demonstrated “*good conduct*” or “*good behavior*,” according to several super-detainees from Congo and Madagascar. This implies, at a minimum, not having a negative reputation among State officials.

50: Another criterion, cited in Madagascar, is the leadership ability (Mpitrika) of super-detainees.

“It was the warden who appointed me after checking the disciplinary record and seeing that my name wasn’t on it.”

Super-detainee, Cameroon

As one prisoner from the DRC put it, this also means “agreeing to collaborate with the administration.” In Cameroon, one of the prisoners interviewed explained that these relationships could be based on corrupt collusion or a shared propensity for aggression.

“The people selected are chosen based on their affinity with the administration, based on their aggressiveness or brutality, so they can better mistreat the detainees and at the same time ensure the prison guards are well-fed.”

Detainee, Cameroon

Another criterion frequently cited is length of incarceration, which is necessary to prevent excessive *turnover* and to allow prison authorities to observe detainees’ behaviour over the long term. As Cameroonian and Ivorian inmates have stated, super-detainees are people “*who have lasted*”—that is, who have spent a considerable amount of time in prison. This criterion means that the highest ranks of the prison hierarchy are often entrusted to individuals sentenced to long prison terms or held in pretrial detention for crimes. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, the detainees interviewed indicated that the CB had been sentenced to more than twenty years in prison. In Madagascar, only those sentenced to long prison terms can hold these positions, and in one of the prisons in question, the post was held by a person sentenced to life imprisonment. This observation is particularly troubling given that these individuals are entrusted with the discipline and supervision of their fellow inmates.

When these two requirements—behavior and seniority—are considered together, the highest-ranking super-detainees in the hierarchy are those who, over a long period, have demonstrated conduct deemed irreproachable by the administration, reflecting their adherence to prison rules and their alignment with the administration’s expectations, particularly regarding the transmission of information, as mentioned above.

“I am a block leader in this prison, and it was the post commander himself who appointed me to this position, which is different from the others who are elected by the detainees. I am honored by this appointment even though it is unpaid. As a block leader, I sometimes report to the officials, which is very important to me.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

This direct appointment by State officials grants them a form of legitimacy among their fellow inmates—a legitimacy that some male super-detainees interpret as a sense of impunity, as several interviewees attest:

“Since the yard chief and his deputy are appointed by the military guards there, they think they’re kings in this yard. They beat us and punish us just like the police.”

Detainee, Chad

“It’s the andry maso who are really mean. They say they’re the right-hand men of those in charge.”

Detainee, Madagascar

“Once their role is endorsed by the prison’s highest authority, they feel they have legitimacy.”

Member of an NGO, Cameroon

The use of direct appointment shows that the delegation of power to super-detainees is not merely an arrangement, but a structured system implemented by State officials.

This structure is particularly evident in several men’s wings in Madagascar, where there are two distinct teams of super-detainees that rotate with the prison guards. In one of the prisons, two teams of *andry maso*—the “1st brigade” and the “2nd brigade”—alternate daily depending on which prison warden is on duty. Each warden has designated their own team of *andry maso*, following a logic that reflects an institutionalised framework for these roles.

→ The direct or indirect appointment of intermediate roles

While the highest-ranking positions in the hierarchy are appointed directly by State officials, individuals in intermediate roles are generally appointed either by their superiors or by other detainees. This method of appointment has been noted, for example, for cell block leaders in Côte d’Ivoire, for brigadiers in Chad, and for cell block leaders and *andry maso* in Madagascar.

“The prison guard] is never there, but delegates his authority to a prisoner who has been in prison for a long time, who becomes the building chief. And it is the building chief who, in turn, appoints a cell chief. And it is the cell chief who appoints his commissioner, who appoints his supervisor, who appoints his sanitation officers, who appoints his advisors.”

Former detainee, Côte d’Ivoire

When a super-detainee makes an appointment, several testimonies collected in Madagascar and Chad indicate that it may involve a financial payment, revealing corrupt practices in the allocation of these positions:

“ You have to pay 10,000 to 15,000 francs [€15 to €22] to secure this role [of brigadier].”

Detainee, Chad

When cell leaders are elected directly by the members of their chamber—as is the case in certain chambers in Madagascar, particularly in women’s quarters—the criteria cited by those interviewed include wisdom, age, or a disposition perceived as conciliatory.

It should be noted, however, that even in these situations, the choice remains subject to final approval by the administration, which has the right of veto. This approval is mandatory:

“ The cell leader is chosen by the detainees under our supervision. They hold a vote. The other members are nominated by him or by the prison guards. The main selection criteria are wisdom and good behavior.”

Government official, Côte d’Ivoire

“ They held a vote. There were two detainees, and I won by a show of hands. The post commander did not participate. But we submitted the nominations to the post commander.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

“ The cell leader chooses the person and proposes them to the inspector [super-detainee]. The latter presents them to the head of security for confirmation.”

Detainee, Congo

Thus, even when the administration does not initiate the selection of the super-detainee, this indirect method of appointment is fully compatible with the exercise of its broad control: the administration has full authority to reject the person presented.

It is also noteworthy that, in men’s quarters in Madagascar, in addition to the armbands mentioned above, certain newly appointed super-detainees are issued laminated badges bearing their name, photo, and position. These badges, printed externally by a company at the request of a prison officer, are reserved for inmates holding these positions on a long-term basis⁵¹. As one officer noted: “We only replace them in the event of dismissal.”

The production of badges by the prison administration explicitly illustrates the institutional recognition of the role of super-detainees and their integration into the prison system.



Badge of a super-detainee (Madagascar, 2025)⁵²

However, cell leaders are sometimes also appointed directly by State officials. In Congo, for example, the Coq is appointed directly by a prison officer⁵³. Similar cases have been reported in Madagascar. This method of appointment is sometimes accompanied by the payment of sums of money. For instance, in a Malagasy prison, a commissioner stated that he had paid the sum of 30,000 Ariary [€5,89] to a post commander to secure this position. In other situations, this direct appointment reflects instead a desire for tight control on the part of State officials, in response to specific risks, such as tensions in the cells or rumors of escapes.

“ The detainees are the ones who elect the leaders, but sometimes that’s not how it goes. Sometimes things happen, and people let us know what’s going on. And in those cases, we’re the ones who appoint them. We appointed the leader [of this block]. In this block, there were people throwing drugs over the walls [...] We replaced him with a new block leader.”

State official, Madagascar

Regardless of the process followed, the appointment of super-detainees—both men and women—remains strictly controlled by the prison administration. This hierarchical control also extends to their removal from office, as we will see in the following section.

⁵¹: For detainees in temporary positions, handwritten badges made inside the prison are used. • ⁵²: The identifying marks on the detainees (name, photo, wing) have been intentionally removed from the photographs. • ⁵³: Note that the Coq is always an adult—even when it comes to the children’s cell.

The special case of forced appointments

While the role of super-detainee is often perceived as a privileged position, sought after for the benefits it provides, the testimonies of several male and female super-detainees in Madagascar shed light on another reality: the lack of choice. Several people have in fact reported being forced to accept these responsibilities, despite explicitly refusing. Their appointment was made without regard for their consent, placing them from the outset in a position of being assigned to carry out tasks by the administration, as the following testimonies illustrate:

“ I am a cell leader. I was selected by the CE [prison warden]. [...] Cell leaders are appointed by the prison warden. But in my case, it was the CE who, in a way, forced me to take on this role. I refused several times [...] but he said, ‘Once you’re chosen, you have to do it.’ Maybe it’s because I was [in the security forces] before I came here.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

“ I was elected but I didn’t accept. But I was forced to do so by being told that I had to accept.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

“ I was chosen. The prison guards put me in this position. There was another block leader who was released. [...] I said no, I don’t want to. But I was told I couldn’t say no.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

Under these conditions, male and female super-detainees cannot in any way be considered autonomous actors, detached from the State. The system is based on a top-down chain of command: the State sets the rules, designates those responsible for enforcing them, and enforces their acceptance. The State’s responsibility is thus structural.

→ The removal of super-detainees

Once appointed, the challenge for a super-detainee is to retain their position—unless they decide to resign. Indeed, the prison administration has the power to remove super-detainees from office:

“ When [a super-detainee] misbehaves, he is automatically revoked by the prison administration.”

Detainee, DRC

“ [If a super-detainee breaks the rules,] we remove him from his duties; we take him away. This has already happened to people caught with drugs, for theft, and for practicing spiritism.”

Prison guard, Congo

Since the appointed person is expected to “last”—according to prison terminology—losing this position is generally viewed negatively. Dismissal results not only in the loss of the material benefits described below, but also in the loss of the symbolic status that distinguishes super-detainees from their fellow inmates. While some manage to hold onto their positions for long periods—such as a courtyard chief in Côte d’Ivoire who had held his position for over ten years—retaining one’s position is not always easy.

In the relatively rare cases where super-detainees are nominated by other inmates and then approved by the administration, their legitimacy rests above all on the trust of the group, particularly within their cell block. Since no re-election is provided for, their continued tenure depends on their ability to avoid abuses and maintain balance over the long term. In the event of tensions, it is the fellow inmates who initiate the challenge: pressure from the group can then lead the administration to formalise the removal—since, in all cases, it is indeed the administration that holds the formal power to revoke. Several such cases have been reported involving theft, violence, bias when problems arise, or simply a failure to respond to incidents:

“ Two years ago, there were thefts in a cell, and the cell leader didn’t lift a finger to find out what happened. He lost his position and became just like everyone else afterward.”

Detainee, Madagascar

“ [Super-detainees] can be disciplined for misconduct. The punishment can go as far as removal from their position. A cell leader has already been removed from his role because he was too biased when it came to resolving a conflict.”

Government official, Côte d’Ivoire

In most cases—that is, when super-detainees are appointed directly by the prison administration or by other super-detainees—their continued status does not depend on the trust of their fellow inmates, but on their adherence to a tolerance threshold set by State officials. As long as their actions are perceived as useful and do not exceed a certain threshold — “a major offense,” as one State official put it, or several repeated offenses—these individuals can retain their positions.

“*Detainees with responsibilities can lose their privileges after three mistakes over a certain period. This often happens in cases of insubordination or disrespect toward guards. They are reprimanded [...]. They can be demoted. They can also be replaced.*”

Prison officer, Côte d'Ivoire

This red line can be crossed in cases of violence deemed excessive, particularly in cases of sexual violence or unauthorised trafficking by officers. In these situations—which, in our study, involve only men—the practices of the super-detainee are considered a breach of trust and an affront to the officers' authority.

“*We're not allowed to have phones or drugs. But the station chief raided the place and they found phones and 35 bottles of alcohol. They removed all the cell leaders, the cell guards, and the block chief. That was five months ago. They singled everyone out right away.*”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

This dismissal mechanism thus allows the administration to periodically reaffirm its authority over the super-detainees.

Tensions and resignations among male and female super-detainees

The roles of super-detainees are sometimes accompanied by significant tensions. Several accounts describe emotional exhaustion, isolation, and even rejection by other inmates. Male and female super-detainees are often accused of colluding with the administration, which creates tensions and has led some people to resign from their positions:

“*I resigned because I could no longer handle the pressure from the inmates. They are extremely difficult to manage: they fight among themselves almost every night, never staying calm. And in the morning, when a serious problem arises, I'm forced to inform the shift supervisor, and they all blame me—throughout the night—for being ungrateful, for betraying the detainees instead of protecting them, and for being in cahoots with the prison guards. They even call me a traitor. I decided to resign on my own, because I felt very exhausted.*”

Female super-detainee, Madagascar

Beyond this moral pressure, other accounts reveal the physical risks faced by super-detainees. When they try to maintain order or assert authority, they themselves can become targets of violence.

“*I was a cell leader; I led a group. But it wasn't easy. Because if you're not careful, you risk getting hit yourself, so I was very wary.*”

Former detainee, Cameroon

The delegation of power to male and female detainees: postcolonial practices?

The origins of the use of delegated management in the prison system are the subject of scholarly debate. Some studies highlight the continuities between this system and the management practices of colonial prisons (Martin & Jefferson 2024), emphasising the use of African auxiliaries to maintain control over detainees. Notable similarities have been identified: for instance, in Côte d'Ivoire (Diabaté 2010), Dahomey (now Benin) (Brunet-La Ruche 2013), and Kenya (Branch 2005), research has shown that detainees were mobilised to participate in the management of correctional facilities, and even to supervise their fellow inmates. This interpretation in terms of colonial continuities is reinforced by the notion that prisons did not exist on the African continent prior to colonisation. The coloniser thus introduced the prison institution and, with it, a management model based on delegation to local actors.

However, this interpretation has also been subject to criticism. Some authors highlight the limitations of an approach that interprets contemporary African institutions primarily as legacies of the colonial past (Grangaud & Oualdi 2016). We share these reservations for several reasons.

First, the theory that prison structures were imported by colonisers does not hold up to historical analysis: forms of incarceration existed long before colonisation in several centralised kingdoms on the continent (Bernault 1999), such as in Cameroon (Bah 1999), Nigeria (Faye et al. 2023), Niger (Mahamane 2003, Berrih 2025c), and in Madagascar. On this island, the code of 305 articles promulgated by Queen Ranaivalona II contains more than 150 references

to imprisonment (*tranomaizina*) (Rakoto 2009), particularly for offenses such as disorder during religious gatherings or the pollution of springs. Guards who allowed a prisoner to escape were themselves liable to imprisonment (Thébault 1960)⁵⁴. As Ignace Rakoto has shown, the beginnings of a prison system began to emerge in the late 19th century with the establishment of prisons in several provinces (2009)⁵⁵. This initial development calls for a reevaluation of the exclusively colonial origins of incarceration.

Furthermore, contemporary forms of delegated management differ significantly from colonial systems. While the latter often relied on individual and temporary, contemporary super-detainees are part of collective, hierarchical, and enduring organisations with internal rules.

Finally, these practices are not specific to postcolonial contexts. The use of intermediaries to operate systems of coercion is a common mode of governance (Hibou 1999), including outside the African continent. In the prison system, examples can be found in Japanese prisons during the Tokugawa period, where a detainee designated by the administration managed internal affairs by relying on a hierarchy of "inmate-officials" under his command (Botsman 2005), or in Nazi camps, where the SS delegated disciplinary responsibilities to the *Kapos*.

These elements suggest moving beyond a strictly postcolonial reading of the phenomenon to examine more broadly the historical and cross-cutting forms of delegation within prison systems. The colonial origins of these practices, while remaining an important hypothesis, are today the subject of lively debate.

⁵⁴: Articles 137, 150, and 168 of the 305-article code. While the right to punish was also expressed through the death penalty, imprisonment in chains (*gadra*), or fines (Courtin 2012), imprisonment held a particularly important place in this code: it is mentioned far more frequently than *gadra*, which appears 96 times (Rakoto 2009) • ⁵⁵: We would like to thank Mr. Andriamaroahina Tovojanahary Ranaivo, former Director General of the Malagasy Prison Administration, who is preparing a book on the history of prisons in Madagascar and who generously gave us his time to discuss this topic.

■ The subordination of super-detainees to prison officers

Across all the countries studied, super-detainees, ordinary detainees, and State officials agree that the State sits at the top of the prison hierarchy, affirming the existence of a chain of command extending from the prison administration down to the super-detainees. This hierarchy does not stop with the latter: it extends all the way to administrative officials. Subordination is evident in discussions of authority, the flow of information, the enforcement of discipline, and respect for the hierarchy.

→ The “real boss” is the State

The relationship of authority is clearly perceived by prison stakeholders—correctional officers, super-detainees, ordinary detainees, and NGOs—and affirmed as such. As one prison administrator explains, “*there is a vertical relationship extending from the prison warden to the station chief and even into the dormitories themselves.*” All prison stakeholders agree that male and female super-detainees carry out their duties under the administration’s control:

“*The Coq doesn’t act on his own [...] It’s the police officer who has more power. There’s even collusion with civilian staff, but the coq himself doesn’t have the power.*”

Member of an NGO, Congo

“*A prisoner who has been appointed by the warden, but as a result, he is his boss. When you say CB, you mean the warden; when you say warden, you mean the CB. Because the CB replaces the warden in the building, in every building.*”

Former detainee, Côte d’Ivoire

“*The building itself is managed by a CB, a building chief who is also a prisoner. But the real building chief is a prison guard. But since he’s never there, he delegates his authority to a prisoner who has been in prison a long time, who becomes the building chief.*”

Former detainee, Côte d’Ivoire

“*We’re the ones who appoint them. They represent us a bit on the inside. It’s like the yard chief represents me. He’s a trusted man.*”

Prison officer, Madagascar

This recognition of the power entrusted to male and female super-detainees does not, however, mean that they enjoy a great deal of autonomy—quite the contrary. Their role is perceived as strictly supervised, limited to a relay or execution function.

“*The ward supervisors and block supervisors are, in a way, the representatives of the prison staff within the prison. At night and during lockdown, we need them to assist us. I say ‘collaborators’ in quotes because we don’t really collaborate, but they help with security and hygiene—though their role has its limits. They can’t make decisions, but [they can] report issues to management; otherwise, it would be chaos. They don’t really have any authority over the detainees.*”

Prison official, Madagascar

The scope of their authority is regularly reiterated by the prison administration. One prison official noted that, every two weeks during meetings, “*we have to remind the cell leader that he doesn’t have much authority.*”

→ The transmission of information

The chain of command for reporting incidents in the cells follows a bottom-up hierarchical structure, organised by level. In the event of a fight or theft, the information is theoretically relayed from the cell leader to the highest-ranking detainee, and then to the State administration—depending on the country, this could be the prison warden, the chief guard, the post commander, or the yard supervisor.

“*There are steps to follow; we first inform the cell chief, who looks for a solution. If the problem persists, he notifies the block leader. If that is not enough, the cell chief and the block leader refer the matter to the post commander, who takes charge of it.*”

Detainee, Madagascar

“*If there’s a problem in a cell, we go to the cell supervisor, who goes to the ward supervisor, and then to the detainees’ president—he’s the one who handles it. It keeps going up the chain, since everyone is under the warden’s authority.*”

NGO member, Cameroon

The relationship of subordination is also expressed through the regular reports required of the super-detainees. In some facilities, these exchanges are institutionalised in the form of regular meetings between the administration and the super-detainees.

“ On Mondays, all the prison guards meet with all the CBs from the buildings and hold a meeting. [...] At this meeting, we invite the block leaders, the commissioners, and the supervisor—that is, us. We are the ones who brief the CBs and the prison guards. They, in turn, brief the warden.”

Super-detainee, Côte d'Ivoire

“ There are detainees with responsibilities. [...] The administration takes the time to thoroughly instruct them on what they must do to maintain order and calm within the quarters.”

Detainee, Cameroon

These meetings are not solely for reporting incidents. They also allow the administration to evaluate the super-detainees, readjust their roles, or remove them from their positions if they are deemed to be failing in their duties.

Nevertheless, reporting information is not always automatic. Some super-detainees choose to conceal facts, either to cover up their own practices—which are theoretically prohibited (page 34), or to protect their fellow inmates from sanctions deemed violent (page 26):

“ The leader of this cell is the most generous. He knows everything but keeps quiet [in front of the guards].”

Detainee, Madagascar

Although this withholding of information indicates a degree of discretion, it is closely monitored. The administration has indeed put counter-monitoring mechanisms in place, notably through parallel informants who participate in the intelligence system.

“ We select people who discreetly monitor the block leader to see if he's doing his job properly. They aren't aware of what's going on. This detainee gathers intelligence. There are several informants; they all listen in, and several of them are listening to the leader. We cross-check multiple accounts.”

Prison officer, Madagascar

This mobilisation of detainees in the production of prison intelligence, analysed as a form of “low-tech” intelligence, is not unique to the settings studied. It has also been documented in Niger, where it constitutes a central mechanism of control exercised within prisons (Berrih 2023).

→ The disciplinary chain

The same hierarchical logic applies to the implementation of disciplinary sanctions. However, the chain does not function uniformly for all types of offenses. A gradation is observed in the management and nature of sanctions: minor offenses—*theft, minor fights*, which account for most cases—are generally handled directly by the super-detainees, without immediate referral to the administration.

“ If I can handle it on my own, I do. [...] Small thefts, some coal here and there—that can be worked out; it's not very serious; it's just everyday stuff.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar



Disciplinary cells (Madagascar, 2025)

When the incidents are deemed more serious—*drug trafficking, serious injuries, escape attempts*—they are immediately reported to State officials, who alone handle the investigation and impose the punishment. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, a former detainee noted that cases of sodomy were reported directly to the officials. In these cases, the punishment is imposed solely by the prison administration: in one of the prisons, the punishment for such cases is confinement in a disciplinary cell for about two weeks with only one meal a day.

“ Inside the prison, the brigadiers and cell leaders are called upon in cases of theft or fighting. If the problem is beyond their control, they can refer the matter to the security forces.”

Detainee, Chad

“If [the offense] is serious, it gets escalated. If it’s a fight, [the block leader] just separates [the two people], but he files a report with the yard supervisor. Sometimes there are fights but we don’t know about them; it’s just a verbal report. When it’s serious—like an escape attempt or murder—it goes up to the CE [prison warden]. It’s really our job to handle the very serious stuff. The wardens share information, but that’s all.”

Prison officer, Madagascar



Disciplinary cell (Madagascar, 2025)

A graduated approach also applies to the types of sanctions permitted. Correctional officers have broad discretion, for example, to strip super-detainees of their privileges, place them in disciplinary cells, impose visitation bans, or transfer them to another facility. In contrast, female and male super-detainees can only impose more limited sanctions, such as cleaning duties or punitive postures, as mentioned above, or room transfers

to spaces with harsher conditions. In most of the countries studied, as mentioned above, female and male super-detainees must report these sanctions to State officials.

“Problems often arise at night, inside the cell. The beds are too narrow, causing the detainees’ legs to cross, which leads to arguments because some detainees’ feet end up near others’ faces. If the situation cannot be calmed down and the fight continues, a punishment is imposed in the morning. The dorm leader reports to the yard supervisor in the morning during roll call, stating that today, a certain detainee is being punished because she caused a disturbance and a fight last night.”

Detainee, Madagascar

However, there are some borderline cases: as mentioned above, in the DRC, super-detainees can place offending detainees in cells located in the *capita general* quarters. Conversely, in certain sections of prisons in Madagascar, only prison guards are authorised to impose punishments.

It should also be noted that if the issue is not resolved at the level of the super-detainees, and if the detainee deemed at fault “does not take responsibility” as one Malagasy detainee notes, the super-detainees may then refer the matter to prison guards so they may exercise their authority to impose sanctions: the chain of command is thus ascended until the imposed sanctions are enforced.

“If those fighting injure each other, the block leader tries to reason with them. If they don’t obey the block leader, the matter is escalated to the post leader [correctional officer], and they are forced to carry out a punishment in front of everyone. The person is made to kneel in the red zone, in front of the post, for 30 minutes.”

Detainee, Madagascar

“In the event of theft or a fight, we first go to the cell leader, the Coq, to resolve the issue. We always start with the Coq, then we see the ‘king,’ and we end with the head of the detention unit.”

Detainee, Congo

In these situations, the administration's intervention is aimed not so much at punishing the initial offense as at enforcing the authority of the super-detainee. It is therefore not the severity of the offense that triggers the officers' intervention, but the refusal to comply with a punishment that has already been imposed. Far from constituting a means of appeal to challenge a decision perceived as unfair, the administration's intervention, on the contrary, reinforces the position of the super-detainee. Referral to the administration reflects that challenging their authority is not acceptable, insofar as it calls into question, at least partially, the prison's control system.

It also happens that super-detainees have no decision-making power whatsoever but are mobilised simply to carry out the orders of prison guards. They are then tasked with enforcing punishments, without having initiated them. This instrumentalisation of inmates is akin to delegating the "dirty work" of maintaining order⁵⁶, allowing the administration to retain its authority while distancing itself from direct coercive acts.

“ When there are punishments at the central prison, they make the inmates kneel or put them in a cold shower. It's the police who give the order for the detainee to be punished. The [super-detainees] tell you to lie down and they douse you with cold water.”

Detainee, Madagascar

These various configurations reveal the existence of a *continuum* in the exercise of discipline. While the methods vary by institution, the underlying logic remains the same: super-detainees participate in prison discipline to varying degrees, within a hierarchical structure where the administration remains the central actor, while relying on super-detainee intermediaries. These modalities reflect a division of labour—ultimately quite conventional—between leaders and subordinates, which is found in the methods of maintaining order by State groups in other contexts and countries (Grassin 2021, Berrih 2025b).

→ A hierarchical structure serving as a filter

In all the countries studied, detainees are strictly required to respect the chain of command. In this system, each level acts as a filter: an ordinary inmate is not permitted to have direct access to prison staff, regardless of the severity of the issue. As one female super-detainee notes, *“that's why we're here”*.

This structure reinforces the position of super-detainees as mandatory intermediaries between ordinary detainees and the

administration. Their role thus extends beyond day-to-day or disciplin: these individuals are the gatekeepers of access—or lack thereof—to State authority. In this highly segmented framework, super-detainees therefore actively participate, at every level, in filtering their fellow inmates' complaints:

“ You can't talk to the prison guards. You just can't. If you want to talk to someone, you have to talk to your CB first. A CB is like a general. You can't bypass your general to see the prison guards. You have to tell him first. If he agrees, it's a yes. If he doesn't agree, you have no right to speak to the prison guards.”

Detainee, Côte d'Ivoire

The chain of command must be strictly followed: in the event of a problem, detainees must first speak to the super-detainee in the cell, who will relay the complaint to the block leader, who will then bring it to the attention of the correctional officer if he or she deems the complaint warranted. The prohibition against approaching a prison officer directly is, in some cases, a rule communicated upon arrival:

“ We were told right from the start that we must first contact the cell leader if there is a problem, because we are not allowed to approach the red zone to speak with the yard supervisor.”

Detained boy, Madagascar

This principle also applies to super-detainees at the bottom of the hierarchy. These individuals also have no direct contact with officers, except through their own superior:

“ I am currently a cell guard [...] If there is a problem, I report it to the cell supervisor, who is responsible for forwarding it to the administration if necessary. [...] I have no direct contact with the administration.”

Super-detainee, Madagascar

It should be noted, however, that this hierarchy can, in exceptional cases, be bypassed when the problem originates at the top of the super-detainee hierarchy. In a case reported in Madagascar, detainees were able to report a ward leader accused of stealing a smartphone, which was causing a disturbance—these inmates had managed to alert a prison guard by banging loudly on the ward door. ■

⁵⁶: Such a mechanism has been highlighted particularly in the context of vigilantism (Rueda 2017). G. M. Rueda, "Grajales (Jacobo), Gouverner dans la violence, Paris, Karthala," bibliography, 2016," *Politix*, vol. 117, no. 1, 2017, pp. 251–253.

Conclusion

What is the State's responsibility?

“ *It looks like the staff does nothing but watch. But they keep an eye on everything that happens.*”

Prison official, Madagascar

Super-detainees play a central role in the functioning of prisons. Entrusted with responsibilities for management, supervision, or discipline, they occupy a position that may seem, at first glance, ambiguous: they are detainees, yet they are entrusted with forms of power exercised over other inmates. This situation represents a specific form of hierarchical organisation within the prison system, in which these super-detainees are not autonomous but are fully integrated into a top-down chain of command, extending from the administration down to the cells.

If we focus on the relationship of authority, super-detainees appear as direct subordinates of the prison administration. Whether these women and men are selected through co-optation or directly appointed, their accession to these roles is always subject to approval by State officials. Their continued employment depends on their ability to meet the administration's expectations, and their removal is, in most cases, the result of decisions made by State officials. Super-detainees report to prison staff, attend organisational meetings, and receive instructions. Their actions are governed by a framework structured around criteria of loyalty and efficiency defined by the administration. As such, it matters little that they are not State agents, nor even officially recognised in the prison hierarchy: they act on behalf of State authority. While prison guards view them as a necessary extension of prison authority, ordinary detainees, on the contrary, challenge this legitimacy, frequently denouncing arbitrary power marked by violence and abuse.

It is precisely this observation that raises the central question of the State's responsibility. When super-detainees restrict access to basic services, impose degrading sleeping conditions, oversee or enforce sanctions, or exercise violent and coercive control over their fellow inmates, these acts are not detached from the State but are part of a system orchestrated by it. The State, through its agents in prison, is the source of this delegation of

power. It defines the rules—without codifying them—selects the individuals authorised to perform these functions, validates or invalidates their actions, and retains the right to revoke their authority. Consequently, acts committed within this framework cannot be analysed independently of this logic of subordination. This observation thus opens new perspectives for considering the State's responsibility, particularly when the practices of super-detainees amount to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

That said, one question remains: for human rights organisations, what should be done about this mechanism? The written standards are unequivocal: they formally prohibit any delegation of disciplinary power to detainees. Defending its continuation would therefore amount to openly deviating from both national and international legal frameworks. Conversely, advocating for its abolition without addressing the very conditions of its institutionalisation—low-cost management, shifting the “dirty work” onto prisoners, and obscuring state responsibility behind a façade of autonomy—would amount to ignoring the structural dynamics at play and would lead to failure.

Added to this is an often-overlooked dimension: not all forms of engagement by super-detainees constitute oppression. Some play a role of moderation, appeasement, and sometimes even protection in a space saturated with tensions. These figures, though ambivalent, invite us to consider forms of participation in prison life that do not rely on coercion.

Reforming this system requires a rigorous and pragmatic debate on how to prevent mistreatment and guarantee human dignity in detention. Such a debate cannot be limited to reiterating existing written standards or abstractly condemning observed practices. It involves initiating a dialogue between the State, civil society, and the detainees themselves. It is by confronting this complexity, rather than avoiding it, that credible and sustainable reforms can be envisaged. ■

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Research questions

Prison management and governance practices

What forms does the power of super-detainees take in the prisons in question?

What types of inequalities emerge from these practices within the prison (health, sleeping arrangements, food, hygiene, etc.) and outside the prison (reintegration activities, prison labor, family visits, stays outside the prison, etc.)?

To what extent are a prisoner's conditions of detention determined by their socioeconomic status and/or their status within the prison? What roles do super-detainees play in the assignment of duties within prison life?

Specifically, how is discipline organised in prison? How is disciplinary power shared between super-detainees and State officials?

What is the role of super-detainees in organising and managing outside work and training programs? To what extent can the use of inmates as labor be characterised as forced labor or as an opportunity for inmates?

What is the impact of these practices on ordinary detainees, particularly in terms of violence (physical, sexual, psychological, economic), restrictions (health care, water, food, work, contact with the outside world), and their influence on the prison climate (division, mistrust, solidarity)?

Are the practices of super-detainees the same regardless of the group in question (gender, age, reason for incarceration, etc.)?

Analyse the State's responsibility in these practices

Is the power of super-detainees controlled by the State administration? In what ways? For what purposes? Are there mechanisms to regulate their power to prevent abuse?

Who are the super-detainees: men, women, children; convicted prisoners, pretrial detainees; foreigners, nationals; those serving long sentences, short sentences, pretrial detention, etc.? How are they selected?

Is this selection process the same regardless of the group in question (men, women, children, foreigners, etc.)?

Can super-detainees be promoted or removed by the State administration? Under what conditions?

What advantages do super-detainees enjoy compared to others? How are informal structures organised financially?

Exploring the influence of colonisation on contemporary prison practices

What similarities and differences exist between colonial and contemporary prison management practices?

To what extent can we hypothesise a continuity between colonial indirect management methods and contemporary prison practices?

Proposing avenues for further reflection

Can the practices of super-detainees be analysed as a continuation of State actions through relationships of subordination between super-detainees and State actors (informal delegation of authority)?

From this perspective to what extent could the State be held liable for ill-treatment or acts of torture committed by super-detainees?



Interview guides

Note on the guides: The guides are intended solely to guide the interviews and ensure that important points are not overlooked during the discussions. The questions will not necessarily be asked in the order described in the guides. The questions may vary depending on the participants' responses. New areas of interest may emerge during the discussions.

Before any interview, the following will be explained: the study's objective, the duration of the interviews, the voluntary nature of the interviews and the option to stop at any time if the interviewees wish, the method of taking detailed notes, and the consent of the participants.

Interview guide for detainees

Approximate duration per interview: 45 min – 1 hr

Length of detention

- How long have you been in detention?

Legal status

- What is your current status (convicted, accused, other)?

Arrival in detention

- Can you describe what happened when you arrived at the prison? For example, the reception at the main entrance, the steps involved (search, medical exam, etc.), and the assignment of your cell (who decides, did you have a choice, etc.)?

Daily routine

- How is the cleaning of cells, common areas, and courtyards organised? • Who is responsible for cleaning?
- Under what conditions are these tasks carried out?

Food from outside:

- Do you sometimes receive food from outside the prison?
- If so, under what conditions and how often?

If the person works:

- What do you do? How were you selected for this position?
- Are you satisfied with your work? • Why or why not?
- How would you describe your working conditions (schedule, environment, pay, etc.)??

Roles and responsibilities within the prison

- Are there any detainees who play a specific role in the management of the prison?
- In what situations do you interact with these detainees?
- In what situations do you interact with State authorities?
- What is your opinion of the system where certain detainees supervise certain tasks for others?
- Do you think this system has a positive or negative impact on overall operations? Why?
- In your experience, how do people typically attain this position? Who selects them? Based on what criteria?
- Have you been involved in their appointment or selection? If so, how did that process work?

Rights and remedies

- If you have a specific situation to report or a complaint to file within the prison (for example, theft or violence among detainees), what is the process to follow? Can you file a complaint with State authorities?
- If you are sick, how should you proceed?
- Do you have access to NGOs in case of difficulty?

Regulations and discipline

- What are the rules and standards that must be followed within the prison?
- What happens if these rules are not followed? What are the punishments?
- Has this ever happened to you? Could you explain why you were punished, who punished you, and what the punishment was?
- Are there any points we haven't covered that you'd like to share?

To be added if the person is a super-detainee:

- Through what process were you appointed to your current position within the prison?
- What exactly are your responsibilities in this role?
- What benefits do you derive from this position, whether material, in terms of recognition, or even regarding special privileges (for example, the right to leave)?
- In the event of a specific situation (such as a theft or a fight), who do you contact to report or resolve the issue? How is this type of problem generally handled?

Interview guide for prison staff

Approximate duration per interview: 45 min – 1 hr

Background

- How long has this prison been in operation?
- How long have you been in your current position?
- Where did you work previously?

Internal prison organisation

- Could you explain how the prison is organised?
- Are there certain detainees assigned specific tasks (trusted detainees)?
- If there is a problem inside the prison, who informs you?
- Can any detainee come see you, or is there a hierarchical system to follow?

Selection and monitoring of detainees

- How are these individuals selected? How are they monitored?
- Do you think these individuals have a more positive or more negative impact on the prison's operations? Why?

Internal rules and sanctions

- What rules must be followed in the prison?
- What are the punishments within the prison?
- What happens if a detainee in a position of responsibility breaks the rules?
- Do you have the authority to demote them? Has this ever happened? In what circumstances?
- Are there any prison rules and regulations? If so, could we have a copy?

Role of detainees in the implementation of rights

- Do you think that prisoners can play a positive role in the implementation of their fellow prisoners' rights? In what way? What would your recommendations be?
- Are there any points we haven't covered that you'd like to share?

Additionally, for the court clerk

Obtain up-to-date prison statistics

- In what circumstances are individuals transferred from one facility to another? Are transfers ever used as punishment if a person exhibits behaviour deemed inconsistent with expectations? Has this ever happened? In what circumstances?

Additionally, for healthcare staff

- What types of medical conditions do you observe most frequently among detainees?
- Do these illnesses affect all detainees, or are they more common in specific groups (for example, non-VIP detainees)?
- In your opinion, what are the main causes of these conditions (living conditions, diet, hygiene, stress, etc.)?
- How many deaths were recorded over the past year, and what were the main causes?
- Do detainees assist you in the infirmary? What criteria are used to select these detainees? Is this role open to all detainees? Have you ever removed a detainee from this position? If so, what were the reasons?

Interview guides for central authorities

Approximate interview duration: 45 min

Internal prison organisation

- *Could you explain how the prison system in Madagascar is organised? • Who oversees day-to-day operations?*
- *Are there certain detainees assigned specific duties in prison (trusted detainees)?*

Selection and supervision of detainees

- *How are these individuals selected? • How are they monitored?*
- *Do you think these individuals have a more positive or more negative impact on the functioning of the prison? Why?*

Internal regulations and sanctions

- *Is there a standard set of house rules applicable to all prisons?*
- *If so, could we have a copy?*

Role of detainees in the implementation of rights

- *Do you think that inmates can play a positive role in the implementation of their fellow inmates' rights? In what way? What would your recommendations be?*

History of prisons

- *Do you have any specific knowledge of the history of prisons in the country?*
- *Are the prisons currently in use mostly from the modern era?*
- *Is there any data on when the prisons were built?*
- *Are there any points we haven't covered that you'd like to share?*

Interview guide for NGOs, donors, and lawyers

Approximate interview duration : 30 min

Intervention strategy

- *What is your intervention strategy in prisons?*
- *What are your activities?*

Internal prison organisation

- *Are you aware of an informal internal system within the prison through which certain detainees manage the daily lives of other detainees, including matters of discipline?*
- *Does this mechanism have an impact on your activities? For example, for NGOs: do you rely on certain "trusted" detainees from the prison administration for your activities (selection of individuals, implementation, etc.)?*
- *What are your thoughts on this system?*
- *Are there any points we haven't covered that you'd like to share?*



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