

Kenya: Anti-people Law Defeated by Dance-moves and Smartphones

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Angela Chukunzira writes about a protest movement in Kenya that has changed the country. The current regime has constantly bowed to western imperialism and the Finance Bill was an effort to offset Kenya's debt to the Bretton Woods Institutions by imposing heavy taxation and economic hardships on the poor. Armed with smartphones and dance moves, Gen-Z took to the streets to redefine Kenyan protest culture.

In May, there were public discussions on the Finance Bill and although concerns were raised on taxation of essential services and other issues connected it, public participation became a [facade](#) and concerns of taxpayers were ignored. This was further fuelled by the arrogance of the ruling class and their loyalty to President William Ruto as voting was along party lines. Although this has had some direct consequences on some of the businesses of those supporting the legislation being looted, this serves as a stark reminder to foreground public participation and that parliament should serve as a representative of the will of the people. The current regime has constantly and consistently bowed to western imperialism as observed recently with the [‘peacekeeping’](#) mission sent to Haiti, and the Finance Bill which was written to offset Kenya's debt to the Bretton Woods Institutions by imposing heavy taxation on a citizenry that is facing economic hardships.

Gen-Z powered protests

The controversial bill sparked nationwide protests over the past two weeks. The Bill itself was just a tip of the iceberg. There were several underlying issues that have been escalated anger among the citizens and more so, leading the youth into despair. This hopelessness was enough to mobilise across class and ethnicities. Armed with smartphones and dance moves, the youth took to the streets to redefine Kenyan protest culture. A creative mix of the old and new. TikTok met the streets creatively worded placards were raised, and fearless youth turned out in their massive numbers. The plunder, rot and destruction of Kenyan society could no longer be hidden.

The role of education became apparent and crucial in raising consciousness among this generations. Some of the books that were studied in high school literature served as a reminder and an inspiration of the events of the country. Indeed, the role of [literature](#) cannot be underestimated in the struggle. It has made legislators think of the education system and revealed how the new [imperialist-backed curriculum](#) is indeed a ploy to control and de-radicalise the coming younger generations.

Protests were led by the fearless Gen-Z (those born between 1997 and 2012). We witnessed a new crop of protesters. They irritated and shook power to its core specifically because it became difficult to divide them, especially across class. So much so that a legislator [criticised them](#) for using Ubers to get to the protests, recording on their iPhones and eating KFC fast foods after the protests. It was a mockery to divide the protestors across class lines, but it had the opposite effect, of strengthening cross class solidarity. It was also ironic to mention Apple, Uber and KFC, global corporations as

players in a protest taking place in the Global South.

One thing that struck me was the identity that the protestors chose. Many opted not to self-identify as activists. While this may seem baffling as anyone who advocates for social change could be termed as an activist, but this attitude is rooted in the history of NGOisation of struggle in Kenya. Where resistance has become a career. So, Gen-Z has witnessed those who speak truth to power only to retreat and become apolitical with age. Instead, the new protestors remained defiant, with constant references that they want to fix their own country, not because someone is paying them to be 'activists' and in the streets.

The need to fix the country and the extraordinary anger we have seen is also because of the futile capitalist dream that was sold to us by the older generations and the education system has proved to be utterly hollow - the lie that if you study and get a decent higher education, you will secure a job and enjoy a degree of material success. Now that these dreams have stubbornly refused to materialise, the young face multiple crises, as Kenya faces capitalist and imperial plunder. The protest served as a space to vent these deep grievances.

Ruto's regime has been insistent on youth [exportation of labour](#) to solve the issue of unemployment locally. The young [challenged](#) this notion demanding that they want to work in their own country, and decent work should be created locally. There has also been a narrative that digital jobs are [lucrative](#), yet it is the very expansion of capitalism behind technology which has created a more precarious workforce.

The role of social media and new technologies cannot be downplayed either. They have played an important role not only in mobilising but also in spreading information. On one hand, Artificial Intelligence played a major role in the creation of images and songs that were used in mobilising for the protests. On 22 June, there was a 10-hour long conversation on X(Twitter) that was used to mobilise and inform on the finance bill. There were translations of the Finance Bill in other Kenyan languages and sign language on Instagram and TikTok. Traditional media was also used in mobilising the symbols of the Kenyan flag at the protests, in songs and pamphlets.

From local to global solidarity

Due to police brutality, protestors were heavily teargassed and live bullets were used to disperse crowds. For those who died and were injured a solidarity fund was quickly set-up to help their families manage their medical and funeral expenses. The fund, on 28 June 2024, raised slightly over KES24, 000,000 which is approximately US\$186,000. The distribution of the money to the families is being accounted for with digital receipts being posted for public accountability on X. While this culture of pulling resources together is applauded and has been inherent in our culture since the early years of independence, it has also exposed the failure of our government with the collapse of social services. Specifically, the collapsed of the public health system.

One of the more positive outcomes of the protests is how younger people are coming to the realisation that neoliberal institutions of justice and human rights exist only to serve the interests of capital. Reflecting from what has happened in Palestine, Sudan and Congo being ignored by the international community, has exposed where their interests lie. These conversations were mostly taking place online when questioning why the international community did not come to our aid with solidarity statements that condemn the use of force by the state.

Although Ruto withdrew the Bill on 26 June, it was part of a strategy to demobilise the protestors. The military was deployed on the streets on 27 June and the numbers of protestors were significantly reduced due to fear of having witnessed deaths and fatal injuries during the earlier

protests. However, we cannot downplay the role that the youth-led movement has played in raising awareness on fundamental issues affecting the country. Whether or not the movement will continue mobilising beyond this week, there have been victories and a rise of youth-led protests once again. We celebrate this.

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