

Uprising in Kenya - Thousands protest austerity and struggle for liberation

Tuesday 9 July 2024, by [PATTERSON Zachary](#) (Date first published: 27 June 2024).

A new chapter in Kenya's history is being written as young people of Gen-Z express their discontent, undergo political awakening, and collectively protest for a life free of poverty and humiliation. In their messages and actions, Gen-Z protesters have made it clear that their demands for change go beyond policy reforms and challenge the heart of global power relations and capitalism. As Kenyans take to the streets again to exercise their democratic rights, Zachary Patterson reflects on the context, challenges, and successes of the past 10 days of protests. [This article](#) originally ran in the Review of African Political Economy.

Broadcast for the world to see through TikTok live stream before quickly going viral across several other social media platforms, a video shared early Tuesday, June 25 by a young Kenyan TikTok user showed a group of anti-riot police-teargas cannisters in hand and truncheons drawn-surrounded by hundreds of peacefully protesting citizens, forcing the officers to retreat to their vehicle and speed away from the Central Business District (CBD) intersection. The nearly two-minute video shows the protestors jointly chanting "we are peaceful" as they rush to the intersection to encircle the officers, defuse hostilities, and prevent further violent repression. Other images of unity and collective action portray siblings protecting each other from unlawful arrests, groups of young protesters caring for one another amidst clouds of teargas, and Supreme Court staff and lawyers distributing water to protesters as they marched towards their destination, where they would seize and occupy parliament. These photos and videos of collective people-power are just a few of hundreds-if not thousands-of images and clips shared by Kenyan protesters on that historical day as they took to the streets of Nairobi, Kisumu, Mombasa, Kakamega, Nakuru, and Kericho to resist and challenge parliament's approval of President William Ruto's austerity Finance Bill, which introduced unpopular tax proposals and levies that would further increase an already onerous cost of living for the majority of citizens.

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Public outrage and collective demonstrations opposing Finance Bill 2024 began the week prior, when on Tuesday, June 18 hundreds of primarily Gen-Z Kenyans gathered to protest the legislation in Nairobi CBD. As Rasna Warah [explains](#), the events marked the first time since Kenya's independence that a spontaneous and organic people-driven movement took to the streets in droves

to oppose political leadership and IMF-influenced austerity policies. Protesters were met in the streets by brute police force, resulting in the arrests of nearly 200 peaceful protesters including the detainment of Njeri Mwangi, a member of the [Mathare Social Justice Centre](#) Secretariat.

In the hours and days that followed, more Kenyans raised their voices against the punitive Finance Bill and the government's violation of citizens' constitutionally protected right to peaceful and unarmed assembly and protest. Mobilized through social media under hashtags #OccupyParliament and #RejectFinanceBill2024, the politically amorphous yet unified movement quickly grew, collectively rallying around issues of concern and demands for change rather than ethnic divisions historically cultivated and exploited by the governing class for political control. On the morning of June 16, mass protests erupted across the country and following the murder of Rex Kanyike Masai by riot police and the use of live ammunition during a peaceful demonstration on the afternoon of June 20, the movement launched '7 Days of Rage'—a week of planned protest actions that include #OccupyStateHouse and #totalshutdown among others to express their undying determination in opposing Finance Bill 2024 and challenging the unaccountable leadership of the Ruto administration.

For the many who fought a Western-supported KANU dictatorship for decades, such as NARC Party leader [Martha Karua](#), the Generation Z challenge to the oppressive Kenya Kwanza regime is a continuation of the struggle to liberate the country from foreign influence and revolutionize the status quo of politicians favoring their own interests. A historical, fearless moment

Public discontent reached new heights on Tuesday, June 25 as young Kenyans—many of whom are directly impacted by these financial measures—were joined by other community members and activists to show their disapproval and desire for change in the streets of cities across the country. As the day progressed, what started as a mass protest against a proposed tax bill morphed into widespread dissatisfaction with President Ruto—namely his use of colonial-era violence against peaceful protesters and the announcement of the arrival of 400 Kenyan police officers in Haiti to terrorize the population of the Caribbean Island in the service of U.S. imperialism.

In the early hours of June 25, thousands of anti-Finance Bill protesters surrounded the parliament building in the capital city to shut down procedures to approve the government's plans to raise more than U.S. \$2.7 billion in new tax revenue from workers and rural poor, as dictated by a new financial agreement with the IMF. Despite threats of police violence, internet shutdowns, and the arrests of hundreds of protesters in the days before—including the abductions of many known bloggers, activists, and social media political influencers the previous night—protesters refused to be intimidated and courageously stormed parliament in a direct action that echoed louder than ever before the youths' political consciousness and their demands for radical social change.

In a country with a history of Western-backed authoritarian leadership carrying out disappearances of left-wing students and workers—most notably done by former president Daniel Arap Moi's Special Branch—and the recent memory of bloody confrontation and the deaths of 75 protesters during the opposition party-led anti-austerity protests last year, Kenyans are fully aware of the dangers of opposing belligerent and brutal power and have remained fearless.

The mass demonstration on Tuesday did not end without violence, casualties, and property damage. Yet many of those active within the movement have reported that government-paid goons disrupted protests, instigating violence and looting—an infiltration tactic known all too well by many organizers and activists. Social media posts and witness accounts suggest that once again disorder, chaos, and division are what the ruling class seems intent on provoking during peaceful protests that challenge the status quo. In a comment given to [Socialist Worker](#), one protester stated that “we are the flames burning up the country and we will not stand still while we are robbed and made poor.”

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While numbers are contested, as the day ended it was reported that at least 14 protesters had lost their lives and over two hundred people were being treated for gunshot wounds and other injuries at Nairobi's central Kenyatta National Hospital. It's expected that thousands of others were injured across the country, and hundreds arrested. State-led violence continued into the night as Kenyan Defense Forces were deployed to harass and assault citizens as they returned home, and residents of Githurai suffered an evening of police terror that left a yet unconfirmed number of citizens dead. The day ended with President Ruto's public address where he called protesters treasonous and vowed to quell what he called "a grave threat to national security."

All eyes on Kenya

In a sudden reversal on Wednesday June 26, President Ruto announced plans to withdraw the controversial Finance Bill. In a statement given to the press, the president said that the people of Kenya have spoken loudly in opposition to the bill. However, according to Article 115 (1) of the [Constitution of Kenya](#), the president does not have the authority to withdraw a bill, and instead can only assent or return the bill to parliament with recommendations. In fact, under Article 115 (6), even if the president refuses to sign the bill, after 14 days the bill automatically becomes law. Like the empty promises offered during his 2022 presidential campaign that assured voters of his platform to ease economic hardships for the poor and working class, Ruto seems to have done nothing more than provide Kenyans and the international community with political theater.

In its simplest understanding, the government's 2024 tax bill will drastically increase the cost of foods and other basic needs. This tax increase comes by suggestion from the IMF as a way to increase state revenue, offset the budget deficit, and lessen the national debt. These are not taxes on the rich or the wealth of the bosses, but instead on daily staples such as bread and milk, as well as fuel and hygiene or menstrual products. The mass opposition to these measures comes from those who will bear the greatest burden—the poor and working class of Kenya who consume these goods at the greatest level per capita.

The IMF has influenced Kenya's economic policies since the 1990s, but since his election in September 2022, Ruto has been an enthusiastic servant to the demands of international finance capital. As a result of his allegiance to Western influence, the demands for change from the working poor stretch beyond the Finance Bill to a rejection of public sector privatization, social benefit cuts, and the dismantling of domestic health and education systems. The visible beneficiaries to this faithfulness have been the ruling elite and political class, which has aided the wide popularity and support for the current mass, youth-led movement.

The popular uprising in Kenya has shaken the government and the ruling class. It has raised fears in other African capitals and Western boardrooms where international finance capital is negotiated. Today, June 27, Kenyans peacefully take to the streets once again to demand accountability, and remind Ruto and his government that the people in their majority hold real power in their democracy. Mobilizing people using the hashtags #RejectFianceBill2024 and #ZakayoStopKillingUs, the coalition of organizers are calling on Gen-X, Millennials, Gen-Z, and all other Kenyan citizens to join the one million people march to the state house and parliament.

While questions remain about whether this youth-led movement can inspire a broader, more inclusive national social movement that can mobilize the various factions of the working class while avoiding the cooption and depoliticization that often accompanies the support offered by international NGOs and civil society organizations, it is clear that their actions to date have sparked a nationwide political awakening. What the youth have decided for themselves is that they will not sit idly by as pawns of Western multinationals and organizations, and that they will make their voices heard for the future they desire—shedding their fear and exerting their collective power to forge a Kenya that is equal and just. Those of us in the global north, in ROAPE, and across Africa, stand in full solidarity with these emancipatory demands and with all Kenyans in their opposition to the repression of democratic rights. The world will be watching Kenya today, and we will be cheering for the people in their struggle for liberation.

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Featured Image credit: Brian Inganga. Image shows Tafari Davis of the Social Justice Traveling Theatre on June 25, 2024.

P.S.

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