

# Global Issues

## Kenya's Protests Herald a New Age of Anti-Austerity Youth Politics

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On 18 June, a wave of youth-led protests began to roil Kenya. These protests quickly gained momentum, occurring every Tuesday and Thursday into July. The most significant of these demonstrations took place on 25 June, when protestors occupied parliament. Clashes with police resulted in several deaths.

To understand the significance of these events, it is important to consider the broader socio-political context in Kenya. The protest movement was not an isolated development but rather reflected deep-seated frustrations among the Kenyan population, particularly the nation's youth. These frustrations stemmed from a range of issues including economic hardship, unemployment, corruption and a perceived disconnect between government priorities and the needs of the people.

What made these protests particularly distinct was the composition and approach of the demonstrators. Unlike previous movements, these protests were driven primarily by Gen Z youth. These youths leveraged the use of social media such as X (formerly Twitter) for communication, mobilization and amplification of their demands, showcasing a new era of digital activism in Kenya.

This generation of protesters was also notable for being “tribeless”, a significant departure from Kenya's historical pattern of ethnic-based politics. This shift indicated a potential political transformation in the country, as the youth rallied around shared ideals rather than tribal affiliations.

The protests began as a response to tax hikes, which were largely driven by the need to repay IMF loans. By mid-2020, amid the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic, Kenya's public debt had swelled to nearly 6.3 trillion shillings. This figure represented a daily borrowing rate of about 4.5 billion shillings during the pandemic's early months (Olingo, 2020). The trend continued, with total public debt rising by approximately 17 per cent over the following year, reaching 7.34 trillion shillings by March 2021 (KIPPRA, 2021).

The global landscape shifted again in 2022 with the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, further straining Kenya's economy. Under guidance from the IMF, the government shifted the financial burden onto citizens with measures such as doubling the fuel Value Added Tax in July 2023, which led to record-high fuel prices. Additional proposals targeted staple foods such as sugar and maize flour for new taxation, policies that had the most brutal impact on the country's most vulnerable (Kalevera, 2023).

Earlier this year, under pressure to conform to IMF conditions, President William Ruto supported a controversial finance bill that included even greater tax hikes. The announcement came as many Kenyans, especially young people, were struggling to make ends meet, with inflation at an all-time high and the cost of living already skyrocketing. The unemployment rate, particularly among youth, had reached alarming levels, leaving many young people feeling neglected and

without hope for the future.

At the same time, widespread corruption had eroded public trust in the government. High-profile scandals and the misuse of public funds, which had come to light without any official being held accountable, fueled public anger and distrust. The government's perceived inaction in addressing these issues only added to the discontent, leading to the eruption of protests.

The youth, who make up a significant portion of Kenya's population, were at the forefront of these demonstrations. Frustrated by the lack of opportunities and a government they felt was unresponsive to their needs, they took to the streets to demand change.

The protests were characterized by a high level of organization and a notable absence of ethnic divisions – a shift away from the usual dominance of ethnicity in organizing factions and ideologies in Kenyan politics. They were also notable for their size and unwavering persistence, as demonstrators came out in large numbers every Tuesday and Thursday.

The protest on 25 June marked a significant shift in the protests from the streets to the halls of power, as demonstrators occupied parliament demanding urgent government action. The occupation was a bold move, symbolizing the deep-seated anger and desperation felt by the protesters.

The day was particularly charged, as it coincided with the second reading of the controversial finance bill in parliament which was on the verge of becoming law with only the president's assent remaining (a key trigger for the protest). The escalating tensions culminated in the first-ever forced entry into the parliament building in Kenya's history. Tragically, the day ended in violence, with several protesters killed in clashes with security forces.

In response to the heightened tensions, the president took an unexpected step by refraining from signing the bill. Instead, he sent it back to parliament. He also promised to engage with young people, including through social media platforms such as X, where much of the mobilisation for the protests had taken place.

This event drew international attention to Kenya's situation. The deaths of the protesters sparked outrage both locally and globally, raising serious questions about the government's response to the protests and its willingness to engage with the demands of the citizens. The president's reversal on the finance bill did not quell protests, which continued into early August.

The protests were not just about immediate economic grievances. They reflected a broader struggle for social and political reform. The youth demanded a system that was more transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of the people. They called for an end to corruption and the implementation of policies that would create jobs and improve living conditions.

The protests also highlighted the power of youth movements in shaping the political landscape. In a country where the majority of the population is under 35 years old, the youth demonstrated their potential to drive significant change. Their ability to organize and mobilize large numbers of people had a profound impact on the national dialogue.

As the protests continued, the situation in Kenya remained tense. The government faced a critical decision: whether to engage with the protestors and address their demands or to continue with a heavy-handed approach that could lead to further unrest. The international community watched closely, with many calling for dialogue and a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

For the global labor movement, the protests in Kenya served as a reminder of the power of collective action and the importance of addressing the root causes of social and economic inequality. The youth-led movement in Kenya was a powerful example of how ordinary citizens can come together to demand change, even in the face of significant challenges.

## References

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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