

## **“Kenya has changed”: The Gen-Z protests and what they mean**

By Gabrielle Lynch

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The past month has seen protests erupt across Kenya. Initially focused on the rejection of the country’s 2024 Finance Bill attention has since [shifted](#) to Ruto’s removal, police brutality, corruption, and politicians’ broken promises and lifestyles.

Protests are not new to Kenya. Just [last year](#), veteran opposition leader Raila Odinga and his Azimio la Umoja coalition called a [series of protests](#) to demand action against the country’s cost of living crisis. The [government’s response](#) to the current protests is unfortunately also not new. The shooting of unarmed protestors with dozens killed and many more injured is tragically something that has happened during almost every period of [mass action](#) – from protests against President Jomo Kenyatta’s regime in Kisumu in 1969 to protests against presidential election outcomes in [2007](#) and [2017](#). The mass arrests of alleged ring leaders (with [over 300](#) illegally detained) in turn reminiscent of Kenya’s more authoritarian past under President Moi; the apparent hiring of goons to undermine and discredit protestors another well-practiced strategy.

Nevertheless, the protests that Kenyans have witnessed over the past month are different in important ways.

The scale of protest on Tuesday 25 June – when MPs voted to support the widely unpopular Finance Bill – was unprecedented. Protestors came out across the country including in places that rarely witness demonstrations such as Lamu and Lodwar and in the President’s hometown. Protestors breached Parliament and for the first time since the attempted 1982 Air Force coup the government deployed the military on the streets of Nairobi.

Since 25 June the protests have reduced in size and geographic spread. However, regular countrywide protests are still ongoing with protests of national issues paralleled by more local-level protests that focus on the broken promises and alleged corruption of [county-level](#) politicians. Unusually, the protests have also been more intense in the Rift Valley and in Central Kenya, which predominately supported Ruto in the 2022 elections, than in Nyanza – a long-time opposition stronghold. Protestors have also been quick to diversify their tactics from a [concert](#) to commemorate those killed on 7 July 2024 (the day in 1990 when nation-wide protests called for multi-party elections) to a [website](#) tracking the government’s paltry progress on its promises.

Unprecedented in scale, protestors also won an almost immediate victory. Thus, while President Ruto came out on the evening of the [25 June](#) to remonstrate protestors as criminals and treasonous, in the face of growing calls for Kenyans to occupy State House and remove Ruto, the President opted to deescalate the situation on the [26 June](#) by announcing the withdrawal of the Finance Bill, austerity by the executive arm, and a new focus on tackling corruption.

Moreover, in the face of ongoing protests, Ruto has continued to take steps to try and appease his critics. This [includes](#) proposed spending cuts and additional borrowing to fill the budget gap created by the withdrawal of proposed tax hikes as Ruto simultaneously seeks to address the country’s [debt crisis](#). On 11 July Ruto went further and dismissed his entire cabinet except for his Deputy President and Finance minister.

Unprecedented in scale and immediate impact, the protests have also been unusual for not being associated with a particular politician, party, or ethnic groups. Instead, the protests have been organised largely online by a self-declared non-ethnic and youth or “Gen Z” mobilisers. The protests also supported by activists who have disliked Ruto since his alleged involvement in Kenya’s 2007/8 post-election crisis and collapsed trial at the [International Criminal Court](#) for crimes against humanity.

Not only have politicians been visibly absent from the protests but participants have been galvanised by widespread dissatisfaction with the political class. Indeed, while 25 June ostensibly focused on the rejection of the Finance Bill the protests have been about much more. Indeed, since their outset, the protests have also been a display of anger against a political situation in which Kenyans struggle with a cost-of-living crisis and increasing taxes, whilst politicians arrogantly display wealth that cannot come from official salaries and reasonable expenses alone – from their fancy watches and cars to massive donations to churches and new nightclubs and hotels. The protests also fuelled by the fact that – following an agreement between Ruto and Odinga to back the latter’s bid for the African Union chairmanship in [February 2024](#) – the country has lacked any meaningful political opposition with the majority of politicians seemingly more concerned with pleasing the President than with representing their constituents. The implication: if Kenyans wanted to challenge political developments they needed to take matters into their own hands. With time, the government’s response to the protests has simultaneously encouraged some to down their banners and reinvigorated others.

Most importantly in the face of the Finance Bill’s withdrawal, movement members began to debate a hashtag shift from #RejectFinanceBill2024 to #Rutomustgo. Would Ruto’s ejection do more to destabilise than save the country? Who or what would replace Ruto? Should people give the government time to see if they come good with their promises? Is the aim to bring down Ruto or bring about reforms?

This is important. While the government’s heavy-handed response to protests has taken a toll and no doubt put off many would be protestors, the main reason for the smaller turnout since the 25 June is a reassessment by movement members of goals and strategies following the withdrawal of the Finance Bill. The implication: further and perhaps even larger protests can be organised in the future if there is a spark or issue that fuels the requisite public outrage.

Again, this is contrary to earlier bouts of protests that have usually been squashed by a heavy-handed security response or by a deal with political organisers. Not only have these tactics not been the primary cause of the movement’s evolution, but they have proven counterproductive.

Cases of police brutality are now filmed and shared online fuelling popular anger and providing a focus for more recent protests. Such citizen journalism may also make police officers more reluctant to use displays of force as they see the identity of their peers and their families being made publicly available.

In turn, efforts to reach out to vocal voices in the movement have been rejected – organisers are not politicians and don’t seek inclusion in government. The self-consciously leaderless nature of the movement also means that the legitimacy of any self-appointed “representative” or “leader” is immediately and vocally questioned.

Given this context, it is yet to be seen whether Ruto’s attempt to resolve the crisis by

replacing his cabinet will help to appease protestors by signalling a commitment to more competent service delivery or simply further anger protestors by replaying a [well-rehearsed strategy](#) of conflict resolution through a “unity government” that ‘[consolidates intra-elite collusion](#)’.

Finally, but not least the protests have changed people’s political calculations. Kenyans and close observers are now acutely aware of the power that citizens can wield. They can – if they want – potentially bring down a government.

Politicians should similarly be aware that loyalty to the government without any consideration to public opinion can result in their properties being destroyed and persons being attacked. A failure to represent can also mobilise efforts for politicians to be recalled – a step that fortunately for MPs there is currently no legal process for given that the country’s electoral commission is not properly constituted – and ultimately make it highly unlikely that they will be re-elected in 2027.

Kenya today is not the same as it was last month.

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