

The Impact of Generation Z on Kenya's 2024 Finance Protests

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ABSTRACT

Kenya's 2024 finance protests were a historic moment that redefined the nature of public dissent and showcased Generation Z's transformative power as a political force. Driven by economic discontent stemming from the controversial Finance Bill, which proposed regressive taxes on essential goods, Gen Z spearheaded a leaderless and tribeless movement that transcended traditional forms of protest. This paper delves into Gen Z's pivotal role in the protests, analyzing their methods of digital mobilization, commitment to social justice, and ability to navigate challenges such as internet blackouts and generational skepticism. It also explores the complex interplay between their activism and national security concerns, shedding light on how their actions disrupted governance and catalyzed political change. Ultimately, through critical discourse analysis, qualitative research, and a review of existing literature, this essay reveals how Gen Z redefined the boundaries of civic engagement, emphasizing their enduring impact on Kenya's socio-political landscape.

Introduction

Located in Eastern Africa, Kenya has long been a site of politically motivated protests typically rooted in tribal affiliations, elite interests, or struggles for political power redistribution. Historically, such demonstrations have been dominated by hierarchical structures with identifiable leaders and clear agendas. However, the June 25, 2024, finance protests signaled a dramatic departure from these traditional modes of dissent. Triggered by the recent Finance Bill, which proposed significant tax increases on essential goods to address budget deficits, these protests reflected widespread dissatisfaction with the government's economic policies and their disproportionate impact on low-income households.

Unlike previous movements, the 2024 protests were uniquely tribeless and leaderless, characterized by their broad, grassroots participation and focus on economic justice rather than ethnic or political alliances. At the heart of this movement was Generation Z, whose digital fluency and innovative activism reshaped the dynamics of public dissent. Through leveraging platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and WhatsApp, Gen Z organized decentralized protests that transcended traditional power structures, fostering a new inclusive and easily adaptable way to protest. This marked a significant shift in the nature of political engagement in Kenya, as these young activists used creative digital strategies to amplify their voices and mobilize both national and international support.

Background

The Finance Bill of 2024, proposed by President William Ruto's government, sought to raise \$2.7 billion through new taxes to address budget deficits (Miriri & Kumwenda-Mtambo, 2024). This new bill quickly sparked widespread discontent among those living in Kenya due to the high cost of living, unemployment, and perceived government mismanagement (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Controversial provisions within the Finance Bill included a 16% VAT on bread and an Eco-Levy on sanitary products (Ministry of Finance, 2024).

These drastic measures were perceived by those living in Kenya as efforts to increase government revenue in the face of rising national debt. The government faced widespread criticism for failing to take into account the socio-economic challenges that Kenyans were currently facing, particularly in a context where a large portion of the population was already grappling with significant economic hardship (Wamuyu, 2021).

This economic discontent found a powerful outlet in Generation Z, a generation known for their digital fluency, commitment to social justice, and preference for decentralized, leaderless movements. Within days of the Finance Bill's announcement, social media platforms, such as X (formerly known as Twitter) and TikTok, were flooded with posts condemning the bill and calling for action. Their activism regarding the Finance Bill showcases a broader historical trend occurring in Kenya, where youth movements have been instrumental in driving social and political change, dating back to the fight for independence (Branch & Mampilly, 2015).

Digital Strategies and Mobilization

The mobilization and coordination of the protests against the Finance Bill of 2024 were largely facilitated by digital strategies, which allowed activists to reach a wide audience and sustain momentum. Social media platforms were the primary tools for organizing and mobilizing groups, with hashtags such as #OccupyParliament and #RejectFinanceBill2024 uniting protesters and drawing international attention (Wamuyu, 2021). Viral videos, memes, and live updates played a significant role in amplifying the movement, as they help engage audiences through shared solidarity (Mwangi, 2023).

The protests also adopted hybrid forms of activism, combining digital campaigns with physical demonstrations such as sit-ins, roadblocks, and occupations of key public spaces. This, in turn, created an approach that maximized impact while maintaining adaptability in the face of government crackdowns (Mwangi, 2023). This integration of online and offline tactics proved to be a potent strategy for Gen Z activists seeking to challenge the government's economic policies.

Government Response

The initial response of the Kenyan government to the protests was dismissal and defiance. Arguing that the bill was necessary for economic stability and debt management, President William Ruto and his administration defended the Finance Bill and emphasized the need to raise revenue to meet its fiscal obligations to the IMF and argued that the proposed taxes were a practical solution (Kenya Ministry of Finance, 2024).

However, this stance failed to resonate with the public due to the economic hardships that the populace was experiencing. This negative reaction, alongside the growing protests forced the government to reconsider its position (Mwangi, 2023). However, as the protests intensified, the government started to aggressively respond to the protestors with Security forces being deployed to disperse demonstrators. The aggressive response led to violent clashes, with official reports indicating that over 20 people were killed in the confrontations, with many more injured (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2024). This heavy-handed approach led to widespread condemnation from human rights organizations and further galvanized public opposition to the bill.

Due to the immense pressure, President Ruto soon announced the withdrawal of the Finance Bill. This, was a significant victory for the protesters, as it was proof of youth activism's power and an official recognition of the widespread discontent. The withdrawal marked a pivotal moment in Kenyan politics as it demonstrated the capacity of organized, peaceful protest to effect change (Daily Nation, 2024).

Impact on Kenyan Society and Governance

In the end, the protests compelled the government to withdraw the Finance Bill and dissolve the cabinet. This reflected the efficacy of sustained, youth-led dissent (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2024). This marked a significant shift in Kenya's political landscape, demonstrating the power of organized civil society in influencing governance. The protests exposed vulnerabilities in Kenya's national security framework. Protesters leveraged real-time updates to bypass law enforcement and access restricted areas, which challenged traditional methods of crowd control and surveillance (Kenya Law Reform Commission, 2024).

The demonstrations disrupted critical sectors, such as aviation and hospitality, as international guests canceled bookings and investors expressed concerns about stability (Simiyu, 2024). These actions, on top of underscoring the urgency of the protesters' demands, also revealed the broader economic implications of prolonged unrest.

Conclusion

The 2024 protests in Kenya highlight the transformative power of Gen Z in shaping the country's socio-political discourse, signaling a profound shift in how activism is organized and executed. Gen Z's adeptness at leveraging digital tools for collective action represents a significant departure from traditional forms of protest, marking the emergence of a new paradigm in activism, particularly in Kenya. Empowering young people in Kenya, this digital-first strategy has challenged established political structures and brought attention to critical socio-economic issues, such as government mismanagement and regressive policies. Gen Z are re-shaping the dynamics of political engagement and activism in the country, amplifying their voices and catalyzing social and political change through technology.

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