

Kenyan Police Under Scrutiny After Crackdown on Demonstrations Opposing Tax Hikes

Hundreds were injured and one killed as police used teargas, batons and live ammunition to break-up youth-led protests

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Kenyan President William Ruto unleashed riot police against largely youthful demonstrators who are demanding the withdrawal of legislative proposals which would drastically increase taxes on consumer goods in this East African state.

Police in Nairobi utilized water cannons and live ammunition to disperse peaceful activists concerned about the impact of the government's policies on their current livelihoods and futures.

These demonstrations, which erupted first on June 18, have been labelled as "Occupy Parliament." Thousands of young people have been brought into the latest round of protests denouncing the economic policies of the current administration.

Over the last few years, Kenya has experienced deep disaffection from the youth. Suffering from widespread joblessness and economic distress, many have refused to participate in national elections.

Journalists and human rights organizations in Kenya said that over 200 people were arrested and at least one person was killed due to police actions. 29-year-old Rex Kanyike Masai was wounded in the thigh by police on June 20. He later bled to death as a result of the failure of the authorities to rapidly transport him to a reputable hospital in Nairobi.

In the aftermath of Masai's death, social media was trending with denunciations of the police shootings. Several other people were wounded, some of whom remain in a critical condition.

Although the economy of Kenya is rated as the largest in the East African region, recent reports indicate that the government is facing a monumental surge in the national debt. The Ruto administration has prompted profound opposition as a result of its policies which stem from adherence to the austerity demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

As a way of passing on the burgeoning economic crisis to the workers, farmers and youth inside the country, the parliament had proposed a series of increases in taxes to boost government revenue. As a result of the international media coverage of the police actions beginning on June 20, some of the bills were taken off the agenda for the present period.

[According to](#) the [statistica.com](https://www.statista.com) website which tracks governmental debt internationally:

“The national debt in Kenya was forecast to continuously increase between 2024 and 2029 by in total 38.6 billion U.S. dollars (+40.95 percent). After the tenth consecutive increasing year, the national debt is estimated to reach 132.83 billion U.S. dollars and therefore a new peak in 2029. Notably, the national debt was continuously increasing over the past years. According to the International Monetary Fund, the general government gross debt consists of all liabilities that require payment or payments of interest and/or principal by the debtor to the creditor at a date or dates in the future.”

However, it remains unclear whether the tax bills will be rewritten and then reintroduced in parliament. Demonstrators took to the streets initially in the capital of Nairobi between June 18-20. By the following days, rallies and marches were held in 19 out of the 47 counties in the country.



Kenya demonstration against tax bill (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

These new taxes were placed inside the national budget for the coming fiscal year. The Ruto government must raise an additional \$US2.7 billion in an attempt to ease the growing deficit.

[A report in the East African newspaper said](#) of the current situation:

“Protesters want the government to completely abandon the finance bill, saying it will choke the economy and raise the cost of living for Kenyans who are already struggling to make ends meet. The International Monetary Fund says, however, that the government needs to increase revenues to reduce the budget deficit and state borrowing. Earlier this week the government softened its position a little, with President William Ruto endorsing recommendations to scrap some of the new levies, including on car ownership, bread, cooking oil and financial transactions.”

As in many other states across the continent, the reliance upon western Foreign Direct Investment has only worsened the plight of the majority of people. The failure to meet the terms of repayment for loans has prompted the imposition of austerity measures.

Opposition Activists Being Targeted by Police

On June 24, a high-profile organizer involved in the “Occupy Parliament” demonstrations was reportedly abducted at a shopping mall in Nairobi. Shad Khalif, who has been active on social media and in the streets, was last seen being trailed by two vehicles and later forced into one of them.

[Kenya Star emphasized on their website that:](#)

“Khalif has been vocal in opposing the bill. He even held interviews explaining how he got himself and his friends in the drive. He said he has no financier and leader in the protests insisting the movement is organic. Police did not respond to inquiries on the incident. His abduction came hours after medic Dr. Austin Omondi who was also in the protests was abducted and released. He was released at the Parklands police station on Sunday evening after persistent online protests. This also came hours after Attorney General Justine Muturi’s son Leslie was also abducted and released. Leslie is believed to have been among those targeted to distract the protests. He was detained at the Anti-Terror Police Unit offices for hours before his father went to pick him up. The motive for the move is yet to be disclosed. Earlier on, social media influencer Billy Simani, better known as Crazy Nairobi, was on Saturday evening released from police custody following his arrest on Friday. His release came after over 50,000 Kenyans joined an X Space on Saturday, calling for his release.”

Despite the repressive measures taken against the demonstrations, President Ruto announced on June 23 that he is willing to hold discussions with youth representatives. In his statement he characterized the demonstrators as “peaceful.”

However, many youth organizers are skeptical of his appeal for talks. Many want to know why he is deploying riot police rather than withdrawing the Finance Bill from consideration by parliament.

Hanifa Adan, one of the organizers, told the French Press Agency (AFP) that she is in hiding to avoid arrest. She urged the president to publicly rebuke the proposed tax hikes as a means of restoring trust in the country.

[Adan told AFP](#) in regard to her concerns:

“President Ruto can’t claim to support us while his police brutalize peaceful protesters. We’re past the talking stage and won’t be silenced. We demand an end to police violence, respect for our constitutional rights, and the freedom to speak up without fear

of arrest or harm.”

The Kenyan president recently visited the United States at the invitation of the White House. President Joe Biden gave Ruto a red-carpet reception as he praised the relationship between Nairobi and Washington.

Biden is desperate to make it appear as if his government wants good relations with leaders on the African continent. Biden, after being in office for nearly four years, has not visited any African Union (AU) member-state.

The current administration in Washington has failed miserably in all of its diplomatic initiatives while igniting wars in Ukraine and Palestine. The president has garnered widespread opposition to his foreign policies towards Palestinians who are being subjected to an eight-month-long genocidal onslaught by the Israeli government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In several West African states, governments backed by their populations have demanded the exodus of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) troops from their territories. Also, within the continent, there is broad support for the cause of Palestinian liberation.

Kenyan Police Cannot be Trusted in Planned Deployment to Haiti

In addition, there is opposition to the U.S.-engineered plan to send 1,000 Kenyan police to Haiti ostensibly to serve as a stabilizing force. Within Kenya itself, many members of parliament and the judiciary at the highest level have rejected the scheme which is slated to be funded by the Biden administration to the tune of \$109 million.

Delays in the deployment only highlight the potentially disastrous situation which would arise if the project was to move forward. Many Haitians have warned that the presence of U.S.-backed police units from Kenya will only worsen the political crisis plaguing the Caribbean-island nation.

However, the White House and the Ruto government have indicated that the deployment will begin on June 25. This approach to U.S.-Haitian relations is a reflection of the imperialist militarization which characterizes the Biden administration. (See [this](#))

These developments in Kenya reveal that many AU member-states cannot follow the foreign policy imperatives of imperialism. Any orientation in this regard will only bring about greater instability and internal divisions within these states.

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Featured image: Kenya demonstrators confronted by riot police (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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