

The Kenyan Uprising: Realizing Resistance After Decades of Plunder and Poverty

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More than two months after its government's controversial Finance Bill 2024 sparked widespread unrest, the flame of resistance remains bright across Kenya. The youth-led struggle—largely forged on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and WhatsApp by Generation-Z Kenyans—has ignited years of smoldering frustration into fresh demands for accountable governance, dignity, and justice.

Following the government's cancellation of the bill, the rallying call shifted from #RejectFinanceBill2024 to #RutoMustGo—a shift from opposition to a tax increase that would disproportionately impact the poorest of Kenyans to a rejection of the neocolonial political arrangement, a public indictment of both elite colonial agents and the comprador class, and a mandate to renegotiate the broken social contract between Kenyan citizens and leadership. Kenyan youth are rejecting the poverty and humiliation perpetuated through the inequitable power relations of the global capitalist system, which have left Kenya vulnerable to aggressive foreign interests and the shadowy manipulation common within the imperial global agenda.

Entangled in the Debt Crisis



A proposal to alleviate Kenya's extensive debt crisis by generating approximately \$2.7 billion in taxes sparked nationwide criticism and the eruption of social unrest on June 18. In an effort to stave off default and remain one of Africa's fastest growing economies, Kenyan **President William Ruto** promoted Finance Bill 2024 as a necessary step towards paying

down the staggering \$80 billion in domestic and foreign public debt, which accounts for nearly three-quarters of the country's economic output. This is more than double the amount of public debt owed by neighboring East African nations Uganda and Tanzania, who are due to repay \$26 million and \$37 million, respectively.

According to the [United Nations Conference on Trade and Development](#), Kenya currently spends 27 percent of annual revenue on [interest](#) payments alone. [1]

At this current rate, Kenya is spending 4.8 percent of [GDP](#) on public debt interest payments, surpassing the 4.4 percent dedicated to education and the mere 1.9 percent invested in health—two of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promoted by the United Nations (UN) in their 2030 Agenda and said to be prioritized by international development agencies and multilateral financial institutions.

Calling attention to the inherent contradiction between sustainable development and the priorities of the country's blueprint for economic growth, Kenya Vision 2030—the multilateral stakeholders who crafted the newly adopted UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF)—maintain that the nation can best make strides towards realizing SDGs by expanding public-private partnerships and welcoming a greater amount and diversity of public and private financing and investment. [2] Agreed upon in January 2022, the adopted development roadmap requires austerity policies that increase taxes and decrease government spending in order to reduce budget deficits and repay debts, encouraging development financing and foreign investments. Of the \$80 billion in public debt, nearly half (47.7 percent) is owed to external multilateral creditors and another 30 percent is owed to foreign bilateral lenders.

Crucially, the [International Monetary Fund](#) (IMF) has played a major role in contributing to the economic hardships facing the majority of Kenyan citizens. While years of government corruption and financial mismanagement have plagued Kenya's economic health—both adding to and camouflaging systemic causes of the current debt crisis—stringent IMF loans have inflamed hardships, perpetuating a cycle of debt that disproportionately affects the poorest and most vulnerable communities. In April 2021, the IMF entered into a 38-month loan agreement with Kenya that would allow the nation to access \$2.34 billion in return for enacting a set of IMF conditionalities that require the government to increase taxes, reduce subsidies, and cut wasteful spending by privatizing state-owned enterprises. [3]

This agreement was extended by ten months last summer and an additional \$941 million was approved in January 2024, bringing the current total IMF-endorsed debt to \$3.9 billion in exchange for broader governance reforms that the organization claims will address weaknesses in public programs, strengthen anticorruption efforts, bolster antiterrorism finance frameworks, improve central banking operations, and advance policies for sustained and inclusive growth. According to IMF records, Kenya has entered into more than twenty similar IMF lending agreements since becoming a member of the institution in 1964. [4] These agreements economically entrapped Kenya; Kenya's people would need to critically examine fiscally imposed imperialism and emancipate themselves from the architecture of neocolonial international finance to escape.

Imperialism, Financing, and Favors

There is no denying that United States—the IMF's main shareholder and power—backs the imposition of these austerity measures in Kenya. There is also no hiding that, since his 2022

election, President Ruto has become the new darling of US and G7 foreign cooperation in Africa; Ruto's decision to send 1,000 Kenyan police officers to Haiti to support a US-brokered "peacekeeping" mission over the opposition of the Kenyan people confirmed his commitment to the interests of the Western ruling class. Despite domestic protest and international criticism, 400 Kenyan police officers landed in Haiti on June 26.

Working with Haitian authorities and a contingent of 2,500 officers from various countries, Kenyan officers are tasked with deploying force to restore security from gang violence and establish law and order. Speaking with enthusiasm, Ruto addressed the UN Security Council on the policing mission in October 2023, where, according to Gathanga Ndung'u, "he reiterated his Pan-African populist rhetoric of 'cooperation' and 'solidarity' among black people everywhere." [5] President Ruto's adept ability to cater to the gallery of pan-African sentiment masks a traitorous imposture the people of Africa have witnessed many times before, making him a particularly disingenuous and dangerous Kenyan leader.



Kenyan police in a meeting with President Ruto before departing to Haiti. Photo: Presidency of Kenya

After endearing himself to fellow Africans as a Pan-Africanist guided by principles of bottom-up economics and politics during his rise to power, Ruto—adjusting his diplomatic posture—has set a seat for himself at the imperialist table by committing his allegiance to the needs of Western powers. [6] In return, US leadership has praised the Ruto presidency as "endearing" and "enduring," despite the Kenyan government's excessive use of brutal and deadly force against protesters over the past two months, forced evictions of citizens from areas impacted by climate-related disasters, and tacit grants of impunity for state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings. [7]

As Black Alliance for Peace's analysis suggests, "the excessive support and public adoration the US government has given to Kenya's President William Ruto represents the racist contempt this settler state has for all of Africa." [8] In accepting the damaging conditions of

financial agreements and indiscriminately performing the duties required by the Kenyan state's geopolitical commitments to the US, Britain, and other foreign powers, President Ruto has cemented Kenya's position as the face of Western imperialism in Africa—a position celebrated by US President Biden in his announcement of Kenya's designation as a major non-[NATO](#) ally. [9]

Given the defense and security role that Kenya is now playing in Haiti, Somalia, and the Red Sea, the US political establishment is likely more than willing to work alongside Ruto to quell the current cost of living and antigovernment protests in order to maintain Kenya's peaceful and stable image to its multinational investors. In the midst of anxieties about market and natural resource competition with China and Russia, the souring of US-Ethiopia relations, and the recent loss of Niger as a security partner in the Sahel region, the United States will be all the more desperate to protect its existing partnerships on the continent. Steps to cement this military and policing partnership are being taken in the form of a proposed expansion of US military presence at Camp Simba in Manda Bay, Kenya. [10]

Securing the favor of US military might against unfavorable political voices, the Kenyan government has deployed its forces to serve as the foot soldiers of imperialism, maintaining law and order in occupied lands rendered ungovernable by foreign-generated civil wars and political unrest. Kenya's ruling class have agreed to enlist their own people to fight and die in foreign lands on behalf of Western interests, sacrificing Kenyan lives at the altar of global capitalism in return for political recognition, impunity, and financial favors. The country serves as a mercenary force for Western imperialism despite the current debt trap that has crippled Kenya's economy and left it dependent on foreign financial assistance and loans from international lenders like the IMF and [World Bank](#).

However, as evolving global power dynamics continue to contribute to the consolidation of multinational private sector power and the growing influence of Chinese and Russian investments, the list of creditors that hold Kenya's foreign debt continues to expand beyond the big banks located in New York and London. China has quickly emerged as one of the most consequential lenders and investors in Africa. According to a recent Boston University study, since 2000, China has loaned African nations more than \$170 billion dollars, \$134 billion of which come from China's development finance institutions. [11] A recent *New York Times* report suggests that China continues to maintain a loan portfolio that rivals the Bretton Woods financial institutions'. [12] According to IMF estimates, at the end of 2022, Kenya owed more than \$6 billion to China for loans received since 2000.

The completion of the Lamu Project (a deep-water port connecting the Kenyan coast to Asian markets) will only bolster China's strategic [trading](#) advantage in east Africa. Brokered through the Maritime Silk Road program, China will gain substantial access to African resources and markets in return for continued defense loans and a counter-terrorism base in Northern Kenya. According to the Group for Research and Initiative for the Liberation of Africa (GRILA-Toronto),

“if Kenya defaults on the debt they have incurred, which seems likely, the Lamu port will soon become yet another space of Chinese state sovereignty in sub-Saharan Africa.” [13]

In addition to Chinese cooperation and financial assistance, the IMF reported that Kenya owed more than \$7 billion to foreign bondholders, \$3.8 million to industrialized countries, more than \$3 billion to the African Development Bank, and another \$2 billion to

international commercial banks. Questions of economic sovereignty and inequality, as well as public outrage over unrepresentative and irresponsible political leadership, culminated into the fierce resistance that has sustained fervor for more than two months in Kenya—but as protestors build their movement for change, they must not lose sight of the fluidity of broader geopolitical dynamics that are likely to impact the situation on the ground.

The international community's narrow measure of progress as neoliberal development and market-driven economic growth—according to which Kenya appears as East Africa's capitalist beacon—are merely well-packaged imaginaries that obscure the internal inequalities, injustices, and political betrayals that persist sixty years after independence. As freedom fighters of the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) were executed by British colonial forces, the emerging post-colonial elite—the national bourgeoisie who rose to power by collaborating with British authorities against the KLFA—replaced the colonial settler as the dominant class and amassed large tracts of land at the expense of the country's majority. As Wairimu Gathimba describes, just as the private sector and international actors have materially and economically benefited from land elsewhere throughout Africa, Kenya has experienced the colonization of its acreage for commercial agriculture, natural resource extraction, and the conservation lie, developing Kenyan land into a place where imperial masters endure. [14]

The comprador class and political elite continue to align themselves and Kenyan land with multinational capital and foreign interests, promoting the comforts of the minority and leaving the people to declare “not yet Uhuru”—not yet liberation, not yet sovereignty over ancestral lands, and not yet the prioritization of the people's needs. The nation's short history has shown that, until promises of political and economic decolonization are fully realized, the Kenyan government will continue to be met with their people's fury and burning desire to forge social change towards an inclusive, equitable, and just independence.

Igniting Resistance

On June 18, Kenyan citizens took the criticisms, discussions, and deliberations that had been bubbling online for more than a year from those virtual spaces to the streets. In the months leading up to the initial #RejectFinanceBill2024 demonstration, Kenyan youth had used social media platforms to [share](#) information, collectively condemn government corruption, and discuss notions of sovereignty, political agency, and their constitutional responsibility to collectively struggle for a free and just society. Utilizing social media platforms, Kenyan millennials and Gen-Z youth claimed a virtual space both outside the conventional political realm and distant from formal interface with government. Their use of these virtual spaces opened movement participation to a wider spectrum of actors, provided an alternative route to generate critical mass, and encouraged direct, collective citizen engagement with the state.

Kenyan youth have turned cyberspace into a terrain of resistance where they continue to mobilize, strategize, and inspire fellow citizens to take to the streets. While the early stages of this uprising have again shown social media's undeniable power to mobilize people into action for political ends, questions surrounding its ability to safeguard against misinformation and polarization continues to be a concern. The likely risks of private industry monitoring and state repression make the long-term viability of social media as a space for radical organizing uncertain.



Kenya young people demonstrate demanding the resignation of President Ruto

Following a week of public unrest and the storming of the Kenyan Parliament building by thousands of protestors on June 25, the uprising scored its first and central demand—the total rejection of the Finance Bill. [15] At least nineteen citizens were killed by police in the chaos surrounding the people’s capture of Parliament, which ultimately resulted in President Ruto’s withdrawal of the bill the following day. While June 25 will no doubt be memorialized as a landmark victory for the Kenyan people, the success of the *#RejectFinanceBill2024* campaign also deflated the widespread energy of the uprising.

Subsequent online discussions and protests in Nairobi and across the country under the rallying call of *#RutoMustGo* have been less impactful. While some citizens have retreated to the safety of virtual political spaces on social media platforms, others continue to organize both virtually and in their communities—convening their discontents, crafting collective actions, and consolidating their demands for social change. Decentralized antigovernment protests have persisted across the country, demonstrating the people’s renewed demands for accountable leadership, economic justice, and national sovereignty free from international interference.

In a recent interview with the *Africa [Stream]* podcast, Deputy Chairperson and National Organizing Secretary of the Communist Party of Kenya, **Booker Ngesa Omole**, explained the party’s use of a boiling water analogy to illustrate the uprising’s foundation in long-term organizing efforts; just as a pot of water does not boil until constant heat brings it to a boiling point, the people’s uprising and ongoing protests are the fruit of years of struggle and organization. [16] Since the struggle for the adoption of a people-first, multiparty, democratic constitution in 2010—concluding a process that began as part of the resolution of the violent conflict that followed the 2007 elections—Kenyans have organized as part of what Njuki Githethwa refers to as, the fifth wave of social movements for consolidated constitutionalism and justice within the existing social and political order. [17]

The culmination of years of resistance that included the fight for independence and the people's triumph over authoritarian dictatorship, the 2010 constitution limits executive power, balances authority, and [guarantees](#) rights to women, minorities, and marginalized communities, thus paving the way for a more inclusive political system and protected citizen participation. Like the battle for constitutional democracy, the current uprising did not result from a lone catalyst. Rather, the proposed tax legislation (Finance Bill 2024) is but one of a number of combustible grievances that include exploitation, oppression, and disregard for the people.

The bubbling public unrest against inequities and injustices has been on display in Kenya for more than a year. Similar to current circumstances, cost-of-living marches were seen on the streets of Nairobi last summer as opposition politician and former prime minister, **Raila Odinga**, rallied angered citizens in protest over newly posed tax increases. [18]

Since elected, President Ruto has repeatedly claimed he wants to put an end to the violence and terror wrought by Kenya police, yet according to human rights defenders 130 citizens were murdered in 2022 and 118 were victims of extrajudicial killings last year. [19] The consistent abuses of power and excessive use of force have influenced the ongoing social justice campaign against unlawful police killings, kidnappings, and disappearances. In April 2024, after devastating floods inundated communities along the Mathare River—impacting those in Nairobi with the greatest needs the most and forcing thousands across the country to flee and seek refuge—the government ignored pleas for help and instead seized land and bulldozed homes to prevent future catastrophe and encourage profitable riverside investments where these informal Eastlands residences once stood.

The people quickly responded to the government's disregard and mismanagement, launching a campaign against future state brutality and taking their demands for dignity and housing rights to the streets. [20] Teacher protests also resurged in April, with union leaders across the country highlighting sectoral issues concerning pay, contracts, and worker status. [21] The dispute between the government and the Kenya Nation Union of Teachers (KNUT) persists and a nationwide teachers strike looms amid calls for President Ruto to fully implement terms of the 2021–2025 collective bargaining agreement. [22]

A month earlier, almost four thousand doctors in Kenya's public healthcare sector went on strike for nearly two months to demand government approval of a 2017 collective bargaining agreement and comprehensive labor rights. [23] Additionally, climate activists continue to organize routine public demonstrations in response to the expanding fossil fuel industry in Kisumu. [24] As contestations have flared and grievances continue to smolder, a mass movement demanding change has gained steam.

Mapping the Trajectory of Resistance

The youth-led uprising that defeated Finance Bill 2024 has grown into widespread discontent for the deep-seated socioeconomic issues within Kenya. The uprising has exposed the fissures within the government's façade of stability and silenced the false characterization of the country's young generation as apolitical. Instead, the uprising marks this the political awakening and assumption of power of a generation that will no longer live in poverty and humiliation, nor be beaten into silence; it is a generation's declaration to stand at this rupture of Kenyan political history and demand dignity and justice for the masses.

Thus far, they have stayed true to their self-prescribed description as leaderless, tribeless, and fearless. Despite violent policing and state repression, citizens continue to assemble, demonstrate, and present petitions to leadership—even dancing in the streets to celebrate their energy and unity in their struggle for justice and equality. Their courage and determination are clear, as was evidenced in a viral video of social justice coordinator Wanjira Wanjiru refusing arrest and declaring, “when we lose our fear, they lose their power.” [25] There could be no better fitting mantra for this youth-led movement at this revolutionary moment in Kenyan history.

Through political discussion and organizing in virtual spaces, Kenyan digital natives—a population made up of millennial and Gen-Z youth—are fanning the flames of radical social change, rightfully identifying their lack of control over their labor and its product (that is, tax payments), and demanding liberation from the decades of economic violence, Western extractionism, and imperialism that the political class has tethered itself to since independence. Broadening its reach and building through coalition, the mass movement demands the government prioritize the people’s interest and build a country in which they can live, work, and thrive.

From the KLFA in the 1950s to the December Twelve Movement-Mwakenya (DTM, a underground Marxist movement) in the 1980s, alternative paths have been forged before, during, and after Kenyan independence. The current struggle has shown a new collective hope for building an alternative political reality, but history suggests that concentrated organizing, political clarity, and cohesive political program will be necessary for the people to rise as one and achieve liberation for themselves.

According to Njuki Githethwa, how this uprising is to be directed towards a radical and just social order in Kenya depends on how well-placed the social forces, radical organizations, and revolutionary movements are to harness and build on current momentum. [26] There is already some movement in this direction with the formation of the National Provisional Coordination Committee of the People’s Assembly (NCCPA), a united front made up of various leftist political organizations and movements, such as Communist Party of Kenya, the Revolutionary Socialist League, Kongomano la Mapinduzi, student groups, social justice centers, and feminist collectives.

As concerned citizens continue to deliberate and educate each other in virtual spaces, leftist organizers are organically building the movement from the grassroots with members of the community. In a recent interview with the *Millennials are Killing Capitalism* podcast, Wanjira Wanjiru explains that a national coalition of leftist organizations have launched a series of public meetings to further educate and mobilize the masses for revolutionary change. [27] Prior to the NaneNane march on August 9, the Social Justice Centres Working Group (SJCWG)—a grassroots movement based in Nairobi and made up of several social justice community centers that advocate for inclusive democracy and human rights—began to host routine people’s assemblies. Held at social justice centers around the city, these assemblies provide a venue for Kenyans to come together, discuss issues, share ideas, and strategize for a collective way forward.

Congregating in public forums to learn and build a radical movement together is itself a form of resistance to the individualism promoted by the deepening neoliberalism in Kenyan society. However, if this resistance is to effectively pursue radical change, it must continue to move beyond its current decentralized infrastructure and spontaneous actions. The movement shares a history of colonial exploitation and oppression; this shared identity that

can be fostered into a collective sense of power and possibility.

While the movement's buoyancy is encouraging, the test of any oppositional politics is its sustainability. Maintaining the movement's overall success against a well-organized and resourced ruling elite will require consolidated political organization, revolutionary strategic thinking, and tactical discipline. It's too early to know in which direction the current movement in Kenya may turn, as the brutalization and arrests of protestors continue with each organized collective action. [28] The defeat of Finance Bill 2024 has renewed a spirit of people-first democracy in the country, and organizers are seizing the moment to give substantive meaning to the otherwise bankrupt rhetoric of "democratization" and "good governance" in Africa.

The national coalition faces many obstacles as they strive to broaden the movement and consolidate the struggle under a shared ideological and political program. The state-sponsored narrative characterizes this movement as unorganized, terminally spontaneous, and lacking political vision or cohesive strategy. Many Western-funded civil society actors and NGOs have echoed this narrative, encouraging progressives and revolutionaries to remain unorganized around material realities, identify with central leadership, and seek policy reforms and conventional institutional solutions to grievances.

A grounded Marxist analysis would correctly assert that any grand ideals purportedly necessary to organize a mass movement would merely reflect material reality, and thus indirectly appeal to material relations and tendencies. Whether or not this movement will embrace a socialist orientation remains uncertain—but revealing the radical social changes needed to achieve a fair and just political and economic sovereignty for Kenya and its people must prevent the state, global finance, and their geopolitical allies from obscuring the future Kenyans deserve. Doing so requires a revolutionary, anti-imperialist lens that only a Marxist perspective can bring into focus.

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