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CASE STUDY

January 2025



Tax revolt in Kenya:
When the streets bring the government to heel

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KEY POINTS

- In May 2024, the Kenyan government tabled a controversial finance bill aimed at increasing taxes to pay off the national debt.
- Young Kenyans were particularly mobilised, using digital tools and social platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to initiate the first protests.
- Massive demonstrations began on 18 June 2024, culminating in an attack on Parliament on 25 June and the withdrawal of the bill on 26 June.
- The movement was characterised by its use of innovative strategies, such as translating the bill into local languages and using digital tools to mobilise.
- Amnesty International and other organisations denounced police violence, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions.



CONTEXT

In May 2024, the Kenyan government tabled the Finance Bill 2024. The main aim of the Bill was to change the tax system in order to raise \$2.7 billion and alleviate the country's growing debt. The bill included tax hikes on everyday consumer goods and financial services, which provoked strong opposition, particularly from young Kenyans. Concerned about the impact of the measures on their economic future, they initiated the first demonstrations on 18 June 2024.

Hundreds of demonstrators, mostly young people, gathered in Nairobi¹ to denounce the bill. The police dispersed the crowd with tear gas and arrested 210 people. Despite this, the demonstrations continued and gained in intensity. The police violence was condemned by organisations such as the Law Society of Kenya and Amnesty International.²

THE ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND DIGITAL TOOLS

Young Kenyans have taken the lead by using social networks to raise public awareness. Hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament have emerged on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp. A specific tool, called Finance Bill Chatbot, has been designed by a group of young Kenyan activists specialising in technology. This tool, based on ChatGPT, enabled citizens to ask complex questions about the bill³ and obtain clear, detailed answers. It was used to simplify the technical details of the legislative text, break down language barriers by translating information into several local languages, and counter misinformation about the bill. Another innovative strategy was to publish MPs' telephone numbers so that citizens could contact them directly. This approach attracted national and international attention, amplifying opposition to the bill.



Kenyan President William Ruto at the WTO Public Forum in 2014

CONSEQUENCES

Under pressure from the demonstrators, Parliament proposed amendments to the bill on 19 June, removing certain controversial clauses, such as VAT on bread and excise duties on certain products. However, the demonstrators deemed these adjustments insufficient and continued to demand the complete rejection of the bill.

Despite the protests, Parliament passed the bill on 20 June by 204 votes to 115.

On 25 June 2024, on the eve of the vote to pass the bill into law, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered in Kenya's major cities, denouncing the vote and demanding the resignation of President Ruto, who has been in office since September 2022.⁴ In Nairobi, the demonstrators converged on the parliament building and invaded it after the bill was passed, setting fire to part of the building. The police used force, leading to deadly violence. This event marked a turning point in the movement, leading to international condemnation and a call for an independent investigation by Amnesty International.⁵ According to the latest figures published in September 2024, a total of at least 61 people have died, 27 are missing and hundreds more have been injured, according to a platform of several Kenyan civil society organisations.⁶

Faced with escalating violence and public pressure, President William Ruto announced the withdrawal of the bill on 26 June.⁷ This decision was seen as a major victory for the demonstrators, but the human cost of the protests was very high.

The political consequences are also nume-

-rous. Faced with continuing signs of discontent, the head of state was forced to dissolve his government on 11 July and include elements of the opposition in his new team. Weakened, William Ruto then sacked his vice-president, whom he accused of having discreetly supported the protest movement, and was forced to carry out a new reshuffle in December to integrate another fringe of the opposition, close to his predecessor Uhuru Kenyatta.



HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Human rights organisations have denounced the disproportionate response of the security forces. KNCHR, an independent public body that monitors respect for human rights, estimated that 29 of the 82 people recorded⁸ as having disappeared since June could not be found in December 2024. There have been calls for an independent enquiry into police violence, but no response from the government.

On 30 December 2024, the Kenyan police fired tear gas and violently arrested dozens of peaceful demonstrators who were denouncing the disappearances. On the same day, a Nairobi court ruled that the police must “*immediately and unconditionally*” release five men who had allegedly been abducted, and ordered the police to present them to the tribal council on

Tuesday or “*explain on oath the circumstances of the case*” or their whereabouts. None of the missing appeared in court. The police have denied involvement in the disappearances, but activists have questioned why they do not appear to be being investigated.

However, in his 2025 address, the President said: “*It cannot be denied that there have been cases of excessive and extrajudicial actions by members of the security services.*”⁹

CONCLUSION

These demonstrations are a powerful model of citizen mobilisation led by committed and innovative young people who are less dependent on the country's traditional mobilisation models. The movement has drawn the attention of the international community to the challenges of governance and social justice in Kenya.

The digital strategies employed marked a turning point in the organisation of the protests, enabling the issues to be effectively popularised and information to be widely disseminated via social networks. The coordinated use of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp made it possible to overcome language barriers, involve remote communities and maintain constant pressure on decision-makers by combining digital innovation with physical mobilisation.

As is often the case, the protests were triggered by economic concerns that spilled over into the political arena. They developed outside the control of the traditional trade unions and political parties, illustrating a horizontal, grassroots dynamic that was able to gain a foothold throughout the country. The brutal repression by the forces of law and

order, far from containing the movement, amplified the anger and determination of the demonstrators, particularly the young, whose courage was renewed by the feeling that they had nothing more to lose. This breaking point, at which the revolt becomes irreversible, shows the importance of identifying the factors that trigger a spontaneous revolt and the conditions for its transition to an organised revolution.

ANNEXES

- 1** - BBC News, Who are the new faces of protest in Kenya? published on 25/06/2024.
- 2** - Amnesty International, Kenya, the security services must respect fundamental rights, published on 02/07/2024.
- 3** - Citizen Digital, This Kenyan-made ChatGPT tool answers your questions about the 2024 Finance Bill, published on 13/06/2024.
- 4** - RFI, Kenya: un collectif de médecins dénonce la violence de la répression des récentes manifestations, published on 26/09/2024.
- 5** - Amnesty International, Stop the crackdown on people in Kenya, published on 06/2024.
- 6** - RFI, Kenya: un collectif de médecins dénonce la violence de la répression des récentes manifestations, published on 26/09/2024.
- 7** - France 24, Kenya: le président William Ruto retraits le projet de budget après des manifestations meurtrières, published on 26/06/2024.
- 8** - Le Monde, "Au Kenya, le président William Ruto reconnaît des exactions des forces de sécurité", publié le 31/12/2024
- 9** - ibid.