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Kenya

How Kenya's Youth, Middle Classes and Working Poor Joined Forces

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I remember Kenya's June 25 protests like they were yesterday. The energy on the streets of Nairobi was frenetic, filled with the sound of whistles, motorcycle honks, vuvuzelas (long horns used to cheer in soccer games) and loud blasts of teargas.

"We are tired," chanted the thousands of demonstrators who had turned out to oppose government plans to introduce wide-ranging tax hikes, on what would become the bloodiest day of the protests. Hoisting up Kenyan flags, they marched through one of the city's main avenues, which was colored pink from water cannon spray, dodging rounds of rubber bullets and teargas. As the cloudy haze cleared up, a protester held a bandana over his mouth with one hand, defiantly holding up a placard with the other: "It's not teargas but the fragrance of change," it read.

The tax increase plan had attracted the ire of the country's middle class and working poor, with its wide-ranging hikes on car ownership, medical bills, financial transactions, digital content creation and essentials like sanitary towels, oil and bread.

An analysis by World Bank economists shows that while tax policies and government expenditure policies in high-income countries cushion their poor, they make poor households even poorer in low and middle-income countries. Kenya currently spends more of its national revenue servicing debt than it does on all other spending combined, including spending on social security, health and education. This risks deepening inequality and throwing the country's poorest even deeper into poverty.

As I covered news of the day's events, weaving my way through the crowd and speaking with protesters, it was clear that while the now-withdrawn tax hike plan had brought people to the streets, it was also the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back."

The nationwide demonstrations grew into wider calls for the country's leaders to cut government spending, crack down on corruption, and invest in development and essential services. The youth demanded an audit on how the nation saddled itself with soaring \$80bn public debt, a fivefold increase in the last decade, tied to infrastructure projects dogged by corruption claims and concerns over financial viability.

I've come to view Kenyans as like a friend whose temper is not quick to boil over, but when it does, it erupts. During the June 25 protests, I knew that things had come to a head when protesters stormed Parliament after lawmakers approved the contentious bill, and set part of the building on fire. Several protesters were killed in ensuing clashes with the police. Like many Kenyans, I wondered if the uprising would push the country over the edge or reel it back from decades of poor governance.

Kenyan President William Ruto withdrew the bill on June 26, changing course amid escalations in violence and growing calls for his resignation. Online, many called it "too little, too late." At least 39 people were killed by police in the last two weeks of protests, according to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights. Up to 32 people suspected of playing a leading role in the protests say they were abducted by government agents over the course of the protests. A number were held incommunicado, without access to their families or legal representation, according to Amnesty International.

The government has shifted dramatically in its reactions to the events of the last three weeks, going from minor concessions to brutal police crackdowns on protesters, to withdrawing the bill and calling for dialogue. Even after

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Ruto revoked the bill, the wave of protests continued to sweep over the country. They slowed after turning bloody on June 25, and as many young people became reluctant to demonstrate after reports emerged, from activists and local media, that politicians had hired poor young people to disrupt and delegitimize the movement by looting local businesses and causing mayhem.

Ruto called the protests an "important inflection point" for the country, saying in a televised debate on June 30 that "candid conversations" on the debt crisis were necessary. He defended the finance bill, saying that the \$2.7 billion that it would have raised in tax could have reduced borrowing and helped improve public services. "There are only two things you can do: Either you raise money from taxes or you borrow, period," said Ruto. "There is no magic."

Under growing pressure to address the mounting upheaval, Ruto agreed to calls from Kenyan youth for a live meeting on X (formerly Twitter). 163,000 live participants attended the July 5 discussions at its peak, and around 5.6 million users over the session. While some people viewed the engagement as a historic conversation between a president and a public openly opposed to his administration, others considered it a whitewashing exercise and boycotted the talks.

An hour before the event, Ruto announced that he would appoint an independent task force to audit the public debt. It will report its findings in three months. He also announced \$1.39 billion in budget cuts, including on government spending. He dissolved 47 unnecessary state agencies, reduced the number of government advisers by 50% and suspended costly and controversial new appointments to the executive. He also scrapped the offices of the first lady, the spouse of the deputy president, and the prime cabinet secretary, as well as plans to renovate government offices. He suspended all nonessential state travel and banned state officers from participating in "harambees," fundraising events that are viewed as opportunities for the political class to gain backing by corrupting the public.

Those changes, he said during the live talks, would address public anger over wasteful spending and what he termed the "obnoxious opulence" of state officers, while the government would need to borrow \$1.3 billion to tackle the budgetary crisis after withdrawing the finance bill.

In just a matter of weeks, Kenya has witnessed a public awakening that's prompted deep public scrutiny of the governance crisis that's plagued the country for decades.

Kenyans are bearing the consequences of the country's public debt through highly taxed goods, and there is a growing disconnect between the public and the government, which Kenyans accuse of corruption and wasteful spending, including overstaffing, excessive travel and corruption. The country's lawmakers are known to carry wads of cash, drive fancy cars and live in posh estates.

The country has faced economic shocks caused by the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, currency depreciation, inflation, unemployment and recurring climate disasters like droughts and flooding. The difficult economy has also focused public attention on leaders' performances as they attempt to address the economic challenges facing the country. In Kenya's last elections, I found Kenyans more interested in debates over the cost of living, debt and youth unemployment than in the ethnic and personality-driven contests that have dominated many previous cycles.

Ruto rode in on promises to make life easier for the working poor, but the public is now disenchanted with the president, whom they have nicknamed "Zakayo" after the biblical tax collector Zaccheus. Some view the jet-setting president as more invested in the country's international image than the situation at home, and accuse him of prioritizing the policies of lenders like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over domestic needs.

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The IMF had urged Kenya to increase domestic revenue collection to access more funding, at a time when many are grappling with the cost of living crisis and beset with questions over how the country's debt was accumulated. While many are struggling to get by, some view Ruto as prioritizing debt repayments over their interests.

Many Kenyans I met on the streets felt that tax increases in recent years had made life more difficult yet hadn't noticeably improved public services. I've watched the country's poor turn to community-run groups for social support in emergency situations because state options are poor or unavailable, and the middle class resort to costly private services.

The country's working-age youth, who make up just over a third of the country's population, are grappling with the high cost of living while unemployed. One protester I spoke with during last week's protests had a bachelor's degree, yet could not find work and ended up taking a job as a security guard in the city center. It reminded me of warnings from grassroots leaders that the lack of opportunity and deepening wealth inequalities are "a time bomb" that could trigger an uprising by frustrated youth. Even as protests have waned, I've wondered if there are signs of this now.

I found it striking that public-driven social media protests, with no political or apparent leader, could trigger a mass street turnout. The protests were led by an unlikely group of Kenyans: under 27s ("Gen Z"), who were perceived until recently as apathetic to mainstream politics, and millennials, who were widely viewed as more inclined to digital activism over street marches. While Gen Z's involvement carried important symbolism, I've also wondered if the media obsession with their leading role has led to narrow views about whose interests the movement represents. The youth are championing issues that affect the vast majority of Kenyans, and which have been the subject of decades-long struggles. We still have a long way to go, but many of the political and social freedoms we enjoy today were hard-won, and paved the way for the public awakening we are witnessing today.

When the protests first began, high-ranking officials downplayed the discontent that was mounting online. "Digital wankers," Ruto's economic adviser David Ndii called those protesting on social media. But online opposition represented deep-seated public anger over how the country is run, as became clear when the social media protests spilled onto the streets and tens of thousands marched across the country. Everyone, from influencers to informal workers rallied behind the calls for lawmakers to rule out the tax proposals.

The working poor showed up with fervor. Motorcycle riders ferried protesters in and out of a packed capital. Residents of Nairobi's informal settlements, who make up more than half of the city's population, filled the streets. A new generation of young, educated and upwardly mobile protesters also took to the streets, like the suited, bow tie-wearing Gen Z protester Kasmuel McOure. Influential figures like rugby player-turned-celebrity chef Dennis Ombachi became vocal, and established grassroots organizers like the hijabi activist Honey Farsafi ran public crowdfunding.

The heavy middle-class presence was a new development, mocked by one member of Parliament who called the youth protesters "iPhone-using, Uber-riding, KFC-eating and bottled water-drinking Kenyans" who were out of touch with real problems. Yet this demographic became instrumental in coordinating the protests. At the height of the protests, up to 60,000 X users at a time listened to a six-hour space debating the bill.

Techies developed artificial intelligence to help Kenyans understand it better, lawyers helped facilitate the release of those detained or abducted during the protests, the public translated concerns over the bill into common vernacular, and millions of shillings were raised for those killed or injured. Kenyans in the diaspora launched solidarity protests from major cities across the world and medics ran volunteer emergency response centers across the capital that saved many lives. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen, as a Kenyan and as a journalist, in a country where class differences have been known to divide, rather than unify, the public politically. The demonstrations attracted interest across the continent, becoming a subject of discussion in countries like Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana, where some

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people saw their struggles with government corruption and debt mirrored in the Kenyan uprising.

While protesters were largely united by calls for change, there were some tensions in the movement too. In its early days, moves by one activist to solicit funding from politicians were shot down over fears that the movement would be co-opted by the political class. Protesters were also divided on whether to attempt to occupy the State House — the president's residence — after many were killed during the occupation of Parliament on June 25. Feminist organizers opposed the release and distribution of revenge porn of a female lawmaker who supported the tax measures. The public hunt for a police officer who killed a protester prompted different views on X over how he would be dealt with, and whether or not his family would be kept from harm.

The country's political class has also found itself under deep public scrutiny. A specialized ChatGPT that lists politicians' corruption scandals on demand circulated, along with spreadsheets of the current administration's track record in achieving campaign pledges. The country's first lady Rachel Ruto and other members of the political class had to cancel church appearances because of the growing pushback against what the public perceives as an "unholy alliance" between the church and the country's leaders. Many believe the close links breed corruption and a lack of public accountability in both institutions.

While the measures Ruto announced on July 5 may have tamed the street protests and cooled the spiraling calls for his resignation, the public scrutiny of his government has risen to heights not seen in recent years, and that's unlikely to die down any time soon.

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