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Relentless resistance

As protests in Kenya enter their second month, the call for justice echoes across the region. How realistic is the risk of a regional spill over?

In yet another day of protests, Kenya's capital, Nairobi, filled up with smoke amid loud explosions on Tuesday 16 July 2024, as heavily armed police fired tear gas and live rounds at protesters waving the national flag and chanting anti-government slogans. Several pictures and videos have surfaced on X depicting police clashing with protesters. At least one shows a female journalist, identified as Catherine Wanjeri Kariuki, lying on the ground and writhing in pain after being shot while covering the protest in Nakuru, northwest of Nairobi.

Since last month, a wave of deadly protests has swept through the East African country best known internationally for its breath-taking safaris and lush countryside. Sparked by President William Ruto's controversial Finance Bill, which sought to impose additional taxes on Kenyans already weighed down by a high cost of living, the youth-driven protests have lasted over a month now despite a brutal crackdown.

As the protests in Kenya continue, revealing widespread disillusionment with the current state of affairs, similar unrest could soon erupt across the region. After all, the challenges facing Kenya are largely mirrored in other African nations.

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According to Kenya's National Commission on Human Rights, at least 39 demonstrators have been killed and more than 300 arrested since 18 June, when the protests started. There have also been reports of abductions and disappearances of activists and bloggers associated with the protests. The repression peaked on 25 June when irate protesters stormed the parliament in Nairobi, sending lawmakers scurrying into a basement. Late that evening, a livid President Ruto appeared on television to denounce the protesters as 'criminals' and vowed 'a full,

effective and expeditious response to today's treasonous events' — setting the stage for further abuses by the police and the army now deployed in the streets.

But if Ruto thought the crackdown would quell the protests, the opposite has happened as the uprising, leaderless and using social media platforms to mobilise for political discussions and street actions, has continued. This is despite the withdrawal of the Finance Bill and other concessions to pacify the movement. Last week, Ruto announced the resignation of Kenya's Police Inspector General, following public condemnation of the violent actions of officers towards protesters. Only the day before, the president fired his entire cabinet, save for the foreign minister, Musalia Mudavadi. But Kenya's GenZ has vowed not to back down from the protests until Ruto himself resigns.

Love abroad, scorn at home

Over the past two years, Ruto has managed to raise his profile abroad while deepening Kenya's historic partnership with the West in joint counter-insurgency operations against al-Shabaab in Somalia and other security threats in the region. In an unprecedented move last month, Washington named Kenya 'a major non-NATO ally', while hundreds of Kenyan police officers were deployed to Haiti to lead a foreign mission to restore order.

But while he is much loved abroad, at home, the unfolding protests have shaken Ruto's administration to its core. Kenya's economy is reeling from a polycrisis consisting of high inflation, mounting public debt and the impact of a prolonged drought in 2022 that disrupted the country's food supply.

When Ruto, now christened 'Zakayo' (Swahili for the biblical character Zacchaeus, who was a tax collector), came to power just two years ago, there was much expectation and hope among the country's poor. But the president is doing the exact opposite of what he had promised. 'His government's actions have only deepened the disillusionment and hardship of ordinary citizens', says Edgar Wabwire, a communications expert who was abducted by the police for his role in the protest.

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Ruto is criticised for 'operating the transparency of a brick wall' and implementing International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies that have 'only benefitted the West and Kenya's privileged elite, while leaving ordinary people grappling with

areas.

poverty and unemployment', adds Kenyan pan-Africanist Muoki Abel.

The now-abandoned Finance Bill is part of an IMF-mandated reform to generate an additional $2.7 billion in tax income to plug Kenya's budget deficit by introducing or raising taxes on a range of everyday goods and services, including bread, cooking oil, internet data, fuel, bank transfers, sanitary pads and diapers. But for a population already struggling to get by, the new tax is like a poisoned chalice.

At least 7.8 million of Kenya's 56 million people live in extreme poverty, most of them in rural areas. Young people, who make up at least 80 per cent of Kenya's population, are among the hardest hit. While the overall unemployment rate in Kenya is at 12.7 per cent, youth unemployment is the highest at 67 per cent, according to the country's Federation of Employers. In this desperate circumstance, half-measures are not enough. What Kenya needs are comprehensive, transformative measures that tackle the root causes of poverty and unemployment in the country and ultimately redistribute wealth more equitably.

Risk of regional spill over

As Kenya's protests continue to flare, chances are that similar movements could break out in any country across the region, where, just like Ruto, state authorities face the dilemma of raising taxes and trading off much-needed social investments in critical sectors to service burgeoning public debts.

According to the IMF, the average debt ratio in sub-Saharan Africa has almost doubled between 2010 and 2022, from 30 per cent of GDP to almost 60 per cent. The region's two largest economies, Nigeria and South Africa, have each seen their debt soar above the sub-Saharan Africa average of 43.7 per cent.

Repaying these debts has also become much more expensive. In 2022, an estimated 96 per cent of Nigeria's revenue went towards interest payments, prompting the government to withdraw fuel subsidies and devalue the national currency last year as part of a series of IMF-mandated austerity measures to raise revenue and cut spending.

But just as in Kenya, the result is high inflation and a cost-of-living crisis that has ushered in unprecedented hunger in the oil-producing country, prompting citizens and the country's labour union to embark on hunger protests.

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Civil society experts contend that the IMF's structural adjustment programmes for Africa do more harm than good by exacerbating existing economic and social pressures. 'In the context of underdeveloped nations, forcing states to slash expenditure on public services such as water, education and health is a recipe for disaster', says Akinbode Oluwafemi, Executive Director of Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa. 'The exploitative nature of the IMF's programmes is sharply reflected in the way they force governments to prioritise debt repayment and fiscal austerity over the well-being of their citizens. It is no surprise that the outcomes of these programmes manifest themselves as uprisings and social unrest', he adds.

Sadly, despite the accumulation of massive public debts, corruption has stymied development and growth in Africa. Critics maintain that for every dollar of foreign borrowing, at least 50 cents leave the borrowing country. As a result, sub-Saharan Africa has seen an exodus of more than $700 billion in capital flight since 1970, with some funds ending up in the very banks that issued the loans to African governments in the first place.

To achieve this criminal heist, Africa's elites act as both enablers and beneficiaries of the massive siphoning off of resources. Consequently, when they are forced to implement harsh revenue-raising policies to repay these debts, they often find themselves isolated and lacking public support. This scenario has played out for Kenya's Ruto, just as for Nigeria's President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, whose administration is bracing for another round of potential nationwide unrest next month as youth groups and civil society organisations in the country rally for 10 days of rage under the hashtag #EndBadGovernance.

Mobilisations for the forthcoming demonstrations have seen citizens congregate for political discussions on X Spaces and applaud young protesting Kenyans for remaining resolute and offering inspiration even in the face of state brutality. As Abel notes: 'Kenyans are already leading the way in reclaiming their government. It is time for other Africans to rise up and do the same.'



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