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Rising giant or fading echo?

The Gen Z protests have made Kenya's youth impossible to ignore — the question is whether they can now remake politics itself

Kenya is a young nation — demographically, at least. With a median age of about 19, and over 70 per cent of the population falling under the age of 35, nearly 60 per cent of registered voters are young people. But despite their numerical advantage, the youth have historically struggled to convert this into meaningful political influence.

As the 2027 general election approaches, familiar questions are surfacing. Once again, attention is turning to the youth: Will they seize this moment to upend entrenched political norms? Or will it be another cycle of enthusiasm fading into apathy?

Excluded by design

Kenya's political environment is currently tense. President William Ruto, elected in 2022 under the Kenya Kwanza coalition, promised bottom-up economic transformation. But his administration has been rocked by public backlash over economic mismanagement, corruption and heavy taxation. In June and July of 2024 and 2025, widespread anti-tax protests turned deadly, with at least 31 people killed and hundreds injured or arrested. The protests were largely youth-led, mobilised through digital platforms such as X, WhatsApp, and TikTok. The cost-of-living crisis has only sharpened frustrations. Inflation, youth unemployment and police brutality have left many feeling betrayed. According to Freedom House, Kenya remains a 'partly free' democracy, with growing concerns over freedom of expression and civil liberties.

Kenya has witnessed an encouraging rise in youthful voices in civic forums and on digital platforms. Social media has given young Kenyans tools to challenge power, demand accountability and shape public discourse. This renewed energy, however, comes with a caveat: not all activism translates into progress. If young people simply replicate the tactics of older politicians, including tribalism, chest-thumping and

patronage, then nothing changes.

The fundamental challenge lies in Kenya's political architecture, which remains largely inaccessible to newcomers. Ethnicity, money and legacy networks still dominate electoral success. As constitutional lawyer Waikwa Wanyoike notes, the system doesn't exclude the youth because they are few; it excludes them by design. Even those who break into the system often struggle to remain independent. Case in point: Babu Owino. Once a firebrand student leader, he is now seen by many as emblematic of the very politics he once railed against. This illustrates that youth alone is not a safeguard against political decay. Without a clear break from the past, youthful ambition can quickly be co-opted.

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Movements like #LindaKatiba have shown the strength of online activism. They captured national attention, stirred debate and briefly shifted political narratives. Political analyst Nerima Wako-Ojiwa has observed that young Kenyans are redefining engagement: moving away from traditional campaign rallies and toward digital mobilisation. But while social media offers reach and immediacy, it doesn't always lead to tangible outcomes. Online movements often remain confined to urban, educated and connected communities. Rural youth, many of whom are equally disillusioned, are still largely excluded from these conversations due to the digital divide.

An even more urgent concern is the growing temptation among the youth to abandon electoral politics altogether. Frustrated by broken promises, rising unemployment and a cost-of-living crisis, some have adopted abstention as a form of protest. Cynthia Njeri, a 26-year-old activist, captured this sentiment: 'Why should we vote? We've done it before, and nothing changed. Elections just pick who will disappoint you more politely.' While understandable, this retreat from participation has consequences. When young people withdraw, the political status quo remains unchallenged. Disengagement isn't resistance — it's surrender. By opting out, the youth leave the arena to those least interested in reform.

Though it's still early, predictions suggest the 2027 elections could either consolidate Ruto's power or mark a turning point for the opposition. While traditional heavyweights like former Prime Minister Raila Odinga and former President Uhuru Kenyatta remain politically relevant, there's

a real possibility of youth-led movements shifting the landscape. A recent analysis suggests that Kenyatta may play the role of 'kingmaker', with names like former Interior Cabinet Secretary Fred Matiang'i or a younger outsider candidate emerging as potential alternatives to Ruto. However, if young voters fail to unite and vote strategically, the same ethnic-based, elite-driven politics may again carry the day.

The real measure must be commitment to principle, not date of birth.

For Kenya's youth to reshape politics, several shifts must occur. Ideological clarity is needed. Outrage is easy. Policy? Much harder! Youth-led movements must move beyond personality politics and adopt issue-driven platforms that propose real alternatives. Coordination across class, ethnicity and region is essential. Fragmentation weakens momentum. Lessons can be drawn from Nigeria's #EndSARS protests, which thrived on broad-based unity and coordination.

Institutional infiltration also remains important. Activism has its place, but so does governance. Some youth must be willing to enter formal politics — not just to occupy space, but to transform it, with integrity and resilience. As Professor Karuti Kanyinga has argued, 'Politics is not a showground, it is a battleground of ideas. If the youth don't claim that space, others will.'

But there is a danger in assuming that age equals virtue. Some of the worst practices in Kenyan politics – incitement, vote-buying and ethnic mobilisation – are being perpetuated by young politicians. Age alone does not inoculate anyone against bad leadership. Blindly elevating youth without scrutinising their values risks replacing one flawed elite with another. The real measure must be commitment to principle, not date of birth.

Kenya's youth have the numbers, the tools and the grievances. What remains is the will — and the strategy. The 2027 election offers an opening, but not a guarantee. Real power lies not just in turning out to vote, but in shaping the conversation, contesting the system and committing to long-term civic engagement.



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