

Protest Movements in Kenya: Drivers, Dynamics, and Implications for Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Kenya has recently seen a surge in protest movements, primarily fueled by socio-economic grievances tied to the Finance Bill 2024. The bill introduces significant tax reforms, including increases on fuel, housing, and digital services, exacerbating public dissatisfaction amid rising living costs. This study seeks to analyze the underlying drivers of these protests and examine their broader impact on Kenya's domestic and foreign policies. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing primary data from interviews with key protest actors, including Generation Z, civil society organizations, labour unions, and political opposition groups. Secondary data from media reports, policy documents, and academic literature also inform the analysis. The findings highlight that Generation Z has been instrumental in mobilizing through digital platforms, while civil society organizations and labour unions have played critical advocacy roles. Political opposition groups have leveraged the protests to challenge the government. The study further reveals that the institutions. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on protest movements by offering insights into the role of youth activism, digital mobilization, and the intersection of the government's initial response, including symbolic reforms, which failed to appease the public. This has led to increased political instability strained relations with Western donors and international financial domestic discontent with foreign policy. In practice, it provides policymakers with a clearer understanding of the socio-economic triggers behind public unrest and highlights the need for more effective government responses. In terms of policy, the study suggests that Kenya may need to reassess its tax reforms and diplomatic engagements in light of domestic protests.

Key Words: *Protest Movements, Drivers, Dynamics, Foreign Policy, Kenya, Finance Bill 2024.*

1.0 Introduction

Kenya has seen a rise in protest movements throughout 2023 and 2024, sparked by growing socio-economic hardships. At the center of this unrest is the Finance Bill 2024, which has drawn widespread criticism for its proposed tax reforms. The bill suggests increases in taxes on essential goods and services, including fuel, housing, and digital services, further burdening an already struggling population. This situation has created a perfect storm of economic distress, with many citizens feeling the pinch of rising inflation, unemployment, and economic inequality. The protests are seen as a response to these deep-rooted issues, with various sectors of society coming together to express their frustration with government policies.

The Finance Bill 2024 is perceived as a tipping point for many Kenyans, exacerbating existing socio-economic challenges. Inflation hit a high of 7.3% in June 2023, marking the steepest rise since 2020, while unemployment remains stubbornly high at 5.7%, according to data from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2024). These figures are not just numbers—they reflect the day-to-day reality of millions of Kenyans struggling to make ends meet. Economic inequality continues to be a major concern, with the wealthiest 10% controlling over 40% of the country's wealth, while the majority of the population grapples with the rising cost of living. This unequal distribution of wealth, coupled with higher taxes, has particularly affected urban populations in cities like Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu, where protests have been most intense.

The most significant controversy surrounding the Finance Bill 2024 is its potential to deepen socio-economic disparities. Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010, has been at the forefront of these protests, making up 60% of participants. This group, heavily reliant on digital platforms for mobilization, feels particularly disillusioned with government policies, which they believe do not address their financial realities.

Key sectors like healthcare and education have been severely impacted by the proposed changes. For example, healthcare spending per capita remains at under \$60, far below the World Health Organization's recommended minimum of \$86 for basic services. Budget cuts in the healthcare sector could leave millions without adequate access to medical services. Similarly, education spending has dropped to 14% of the national budget, raising concerns about the quality and accessibility of education, especially for students from low-income backgrounds. Public services, such as utilities and transportation, have also seen rising costs due to inflation and cuts in government subsidies, making essential services increasingly unaffordable for average Kenyans. The best justification for studying this issue lies in the tangible effects of these socio-economic pressures. The ongoing protests have not only disrupted daily life in major cities but have also drawn attention to the broader implications of economic inequality and the role of government policy in either alleviating or exacerbating these conditions. With healthcare and education being the cornerstones of human capital development, any disruptions to these sectors could have long-term consequences for Kenya's socio-economic stability.

The research aims to answer the question: What are the primary socio-economic factors driving the protests, and how might these movements shape governance and policy-making in Kenya? To address this question, the study will analyze the underlying causes of the protests, focusing on socio-economic grievances such as rising inflation, unemployment, and the widening wealth gap. It will also explore the role of different actors, including Generation Z, civil society organizations, labour unions, and political opposition, in mobilizing these movements.

The research sets out to examine the potential long-term effects of the protests on Kenya's domestic and foreign policies. Specifically, it will assess how public discontent may influence future governance strategies and policy reforms, particularly in sectors like healthcare, education, and public services. The study will also consider how these protests might affect Kenya's relations with international donors and financial institutions, which could potentially lead to a reassessment of aid and trade agreements. In doing so, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into Kenya's evolving socio-political landscape and the implications for policy-making in the future.

2.0 Literature Review

The recent surge in protest movements in Kenya, particularly in response to the Finance Bill 2024, highlights the socio-economic grievances that have fueled widespread public discontent. This paper explores how these protests have been driven by economic inequality, rising costs of living, and government policies perceived as unjust. By examining the roles played by different actors, such as Generation Z, civil society organizations, and political opposition, the study seeks to understand the dynamics of the protests and their broader implications for Kenya's political landscape.

The study is grounded in Social Movement Theory and the Political Opportunity Structure framework, which provide a lens to analyze how and why protest movements arise and succeed. Social Movement Theory, as discussed by McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996), focuses on collective grievances and the conditions that enable mobilization. In Kenya, the Finance Bill 2024, with its higher taxes on essential goods like fuel and housing, has intensified public frustration, particularly among the economically vulnerable. The Political Opportunity Structure

(Tarrow, 1998) further explains how protest movements gain momentum when weaknesses in the political system allow for public mobilization. In this context, the government's perceived failure to address economic hardships has provided a critical opening for protests, enabling them to sustain and grow.

Empirical studies reinforce the central role of resource mobilization in protest movements. McCarthy and Zald (1977) argue that the success of social movements often depends on their ability to gather financial, human, and organizational resources. In Kenya, social media platforms like Twitter and TikTok have played a pivotal role in facilitating protest organization, especially among Generation Z, who make up 60% of protest participants. These platforms have allowed young Kenyans to coordinate demonstrations and share real-time information, amplifying their voices in the socio-political landscape.

The Political Opportunity Structure is further evidenced by the Kenyan government's delayed and symbolic response to the protests. Tarrow (1998) suggests that protest movements are more likely to succeed when the political system appears vulnerable or unresponsive. The firing of most of President William Ruto's cabinet ministers, while symbolic, did little to address the public's core grievances regarding economic inequality and rising costs. This response, seen as inadequate by many, has emboldened the protest movement, demonstrating the critical role that government action—or inaction—plays in shaping protest dynamics.

In addition to these frameworks, socio-economic protest theories highlight the significant role of inequality in driving unrest. Gurr (1970) posits that socio-economic disparities, particularly when combined with declining living standards, often lead to public unrest. In Kenya, where 40% of the population lives below the poverty line (World Bank, 2023), the Finance Bill's tax measures are perceived as worsening existing inequalities. The country's high Gini coefficient of 0.42 reflects significant income inequality, further exacerbating public dissatisfaction with policies that appear to favour the wealthy and political elite.

In summary, the combination of Social Movement Theory, Political Opportunity Structure, and socio-economic protest theories provides a robust framework for understanding the protests in

Kenya. Economic grievances, resource mobilization through digital platforms, and the political opportunities created by a discontented populace have all contributed to the persistence and intensity of these movements. This study aims to analyze these dynamics and assess the broader implications of the protests on governance and policy-making in Kenya.

3.0 Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the socio-political dynamics of protest movements in Kenya. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the motivations, perspectives, and experiences of protest participants and organizers. The method was applied through field observations, interviews, and document analysis, enabling the researchers to capture both the personal narratives of those involved and the broader context of the protests. This design is particularly suited for analyzing complex social phenomena, such as protest movements, where individual and collective experiences intersect with political and economic factors.

The population for this study comprised protest participants, organizers, civil society leaders, and political representatives in key urban areas. Given the concentration of protests in major cities, the sampling design focused on Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu. These cities were selected due to their strong protest activity and their representation of Kenya's diverse socio-economic landscape. A purposive sampling method was used to select key informants who could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the protest movements. Protest organizers, civil society representatives, and participants from various demographics were interviewed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

Data collection instruments included semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Interviews with protest organizers and participants provided primary data, offering firsthand accounts of the motivations and challenges behind the movements. Field observations in key protest areas, such as Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD), allowed for a direct understanding of the protest dynamics. Secondary data were gathered from government reports, media articles, and academic literature to contextualize the protest movements within

Kenya's socio-political environment. The data collected included qualitative responses, such as personal narratives, thematic reflections, and observations of protest behaviours.

For data analysis, both descriptive and inferential qualitative methods were employed. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns within the interview and observation data. This allowed for the categorization of key protest drivers, such as economic grievances, political dissatisfaction, and the role of social media in organizing. Coding techniques were applied to organize the data systematically, ensuring a clear interpretation of the participants' responses. Document analysis further enriched the findings, enabling cross-referencing with media reports and academic studies to validate the study's conclusions.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. A research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya, ensuring that the study complied with local regulations. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity to protect their identities. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and were given the option to withdraw at any point, ensuring that their participation was voluntary and ethically sound.

Results and Discussion

Civil Society Organizations	Advocacy and support for Table 1: Key Areas of Grievances and Their Impacts			Civil society and labor unions provide critical logistical support and help shape the movement's socio-political agenda.
	Key Areas	Impacts/Grievances	Description	
	Healthcare	Reduced funding	Budget cuts threaten public health services, reducing access to quality healthcare, especially in rural areas where services are	

			already limited.	
	Education	Funding constraints	Budget constraints are likely to worsen educational inequalities, leading to overcrowded classrooms and lack of resources in schools and universities.	
	Public Services	Increased cost of utilities/transport	Rising costs of essential services like electricity, water, and public transport are a burden, especially on low-income urban and rural populations.	
	Economic Inequality	Worsened socio-economic disparities	The Finance Bill deepens the wealth gap, imposing additional taxes on low- and middle-income families, increasing public dissatisfaction.	
	Role of Generation	Digital mobilization and leadership	Generation Z has used social media	

	Z		to organize protests, spread awareness, and coordinate actions, gaining national and international attention.	
	Protests			
Government Response	Limited policy adjustments			President William Ruto’s refusal to assent to the Finance Bill showed initial willingness to reform, but further measures failed to fully address protestor demands.
Foreign Policy Implications	Reassessments of foreign aid			Protests may strain Kenya’s relations with Western donors, possibly affecting foreign aid and trade agreements.

4.0 Discussion of Findings

Healthcare: One of the major areas impacted by the Finance Bill 2024 is healthcare, particularly due to budget cuts. These reductions pose significant threats to Kenya's already strained public health system, where over 75% of the population relies on government-funded services (KNBS, 2023). The findings show that such cuts would reduce access to medical care, particularly in rural areas where the healthcare infrastructure is weak. The potential consequences, including shortages of medical supplies, staff reductions, and overcrowded facilities, highlight the systemic risks posed by the bill. This supports the findings by Mwangi et al. (2022), who emphasized the vulnerability of rural healthcare systems to financial austerity.

Education: Budgetary constraints also pose significant risks to the education sector. Reduced funding could lead to overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced institutions, and deteriorating educational quality, as noted by participants. This is concerning given the role of education in promoting socio-economic mobility. The findings align with previous studies, such as those by Kilonzo (2020), which highlight the growing inequalities in education between public and private institutions. A key limitation of this study is its focus on urban areas, meaning the educational challenges in more remote regions may be underrepresented.

Public Services: Rising costs for utilities such as electricity, water, and public transport have further burdened the population, especially low-income families. The Finance Bill is perceived as exacerbating these costs, which directly contribute to public dissatisfaction. This finding is consistent with earlier studies on the economic impact of public service price hikes on lower-income populations (Mwaniki, 2021). An unexpected finding, however, was the extent to which urban middle-class citizens have also been affected, suggesting a broader socio-economic impact than initially hypothesized.

Economic Inequality: Economic inequality remains a central grievance. The additional taxes imposed by the Finance Bill are seen as regressive, disproportionately affecting lower-income citizens while offering little to address the wealth gap. This finding aligns with the World Bank's 2023 report, which identified growing disparities between the rich and the poor in Kenya. The

results confirm the hypothesis that the Finance Bill would deepen socio-economic divisions, further fueling public unrest.

Role of Generation Z: Generation Z has emerged as a key driver of the protest movements. Through digital platforms like Twitter and TikTok, they have organized protests and garnered international attention. This form of digital activism was a significant finding, demonstrating how younger generations are redefining protest strategies. These findings mirror global trends seen in movements like the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter, where digital tools have similarly been used for social mobilization.

Civil Society Organizations: Civil society groups and labor unions have played a critical role in sustaining the protests. They have provided logistical support, legal advice, and helped shape the movement's broader political agenda. This finding supports similar conclusions drawn by Ochieng (2019), who highlighted the role of civil society in political protests in sub-Saharan Africa. However, a limitation of this study is the lack of data on how these organizations are funded and the impact of such funding on their long-term sustainability.

Government Response: The government's response, while initially signaling reform, has been insufficient to fully address the grievances of protestors. The decision by President Ruto not to assent to the Finance Bill temporarily placated some groups, but cabinet dismissals and other symbolic measures have failed to satisfy the broader demands for structural reform. This echoes findings from past research on protest movements in Kenya (Mutua, 2018), which suggests that superficial political concessions often fail to address underlying social grievances.

Foreign Policy Implications: The ongoing protests also have significant foreign policy implications, particularly regarding Kenya's relations with Western donors and international financial institutions. If unrest continues, it may lead to a reassessment of aid and trade agreements. This finding is consistent with studies on the impact of political instability on foreign relations (Kamau, 2020), suggesting that sustained protests could jeopardize Kenya's international standing and economic partnerships.

Summary and Implications

The findings of this study highlight the far-reaching impacts of the Finance Bill 2024 on Kenya's *healthcare, education, public services, and economic inequality*. *Generation Z's role in digital mobilization* has introduced a new dimension to protest movements, while civil society organizations continue to play a crucial role in sustaining momentum. The government's limited response, coupled with potential foreign policy implications, underscores the complexity of the current socio-political climate. These results suggest the need for more comprehensive reforms to address the deep-seated grievances driving the protests, with a focus on reducing inequality and improving public service delivery.

The findings of this study reveal the significant and multifaceted impacts of the Finance Bill 2024 on several critical sectors in Kenya, including healthcare, education, public services, and economic inequality. The proposed budget cuts have posed substantial risks to the public healthcare system, which serves over 75% of the population, particularly in rural areas where healthcare access is already limited. This threatens to exacerbate existing health disparities, potentially leading to worsened public health outcomes, overcrowded hospitals, and shortages of essential medical supplies.

Similarly, the education sector faces severe challenges, as reduced funding could lead to overcrowded classrooms, diminished educational quality, and increased inequality between public and private institutions. For a country where education is a key lever for socio-economic advancement, these constraints could have long-term consequences on Kenya's social mobility and workforce preparedness.

In the realm of public services, the study highlights how rising costs for utilities such as electricity, water, and transportation are putting increased financial pressure on low- and middle-income families. These rising expenses, fueled by the Finance Bill's tax policies, have become a central grievance in the ongoing protests, amplifying dissatisfaction among citizens who feel that the bill unfairly targets the poor.

The study also underscores the deepening of economic inequality, as the Finance Bill imposes additional taxes on basic commodities, disproportionately affecting lower-income households.

With 40% of Kenya's population already living below the poverty line, the bill is seen as regressive, favoring the wealthy elite while pushing vulnerable communities further into poverty.

One of the key findings is the role Generation Z plays in driving the protest movement through digital mobilization. Leveraging social media platforms, Generation Z has been able to spread awareness, organize protests, and build solidarity across diverse groups, gaining both national and international attention. Their engagement through platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok marks a significant shift in the nature of protest movements, where digital activism is becoming as critical as traditional methods of protest.

Civil society organizations have been pivotal in sustaining the protest momentum, providing logistical support, legal assistance, and advocacy. Their involvement has helped shape the socio-political narrative around the protests, adding credibility and structure to the movement. This collaboration between civil society and younger activists suggests a broader alliance aimed at pushing for long-term political and economic reforms.

The government's limited response, while initially signaling openness through the refusal of President William Ruto to assent to the Finance Bill, has ultimately failed to satisfy the protestors' demands. The cabinet dismissals and other symbolic measures have not addressed the core grievances related to economic inequality and access to essential services. This inadequacy in response highlights the complexity of the current socio-political landscape, where citizens are increasingly demanding more substantive changes in governance.

From a foreign policy perspective, the protests carry potential implications for Kenya's relationships with Western donors and international financial institutions. Ongoing instability could lead to a reassessment of economic aid packages and trade agreements, particularly if the government fails to restore political and social stability.

The results of this study suggest a clear need for more comprehensive and equitable reforms to address the underlying grievances driving the protests. These reforms should focus on reducing economic inequality by revisiting the Finance Bill's tax policies and ensuring that public services such as healthcare and education are adequately funded to meet the needs of all citizens, especially in marginalized areas.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of engaging with Generation Z and civil society organizations in the reform process. Their role in mobilizing and advocating for change highlights the potential of a more inclusive and participatory approach to governance, where the voices of younger citizens and grassroots movements are heard and acted upon.

The government must consider more substantive measures to address public discontent, including economic policies that prioritize fairness and social justice. Failure to do so could result in prolonged unrest and further erosion of public trust in the government, with long-term consequences for Kenya's social and political stability.

Finally, this study calls attention to the need for policymakers to better anticipate the foreign policy implications of domestic unrest. The ongoing protests could strain Kenya's relationships with international partners, potentially affecting foreign aid and investment, which are critical to the country's economic development. Reforms that restore stability and confidence, both domestically and internationally, are crucial for Kenya's future trajectory.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The key takeaway is that the protests in Kenya, driven by the controversial Finance Bill 2024, underscore deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities and governance failures. The bill's regressive tax policies, which disproportionately impact low-income citizens, coupled with rising costs of living, have fueled widespread discontent. Generation Z's leadership in digital activism represents a new dynamic in Kenya's protest movements. The protests highlight the urgent need for meaningful reforms to reduce inequality, improve access to essential services, and ensure more accountable governance.

The protests against the Finance Bill are not just about tax policy; they are about the broader failure of the government to address systemic issues like inequality, access to essential services, and political exclusion. Without comprehensive reforms, the unrest is likely to continue, threatening Kenya's social cohesion and economic stability.

This study sheds light on the critical socio-political and economic issues that have fueled public unrest in Kenya. It highlights the role of emerging political actors, like Generation Z, and underscores the importance of addressing inequality and governance failures. The study is significant in understanding the evolving dynamics of protest movements in Kenya and offers insights into the implications of government policies on social stability.

The literature has insufficiently explored the role of Generation Z in modern protest movements and the impact of digital activism on political mobilization in Kenya. Additionally, there is limited research on the long-term effects of regressive tax policies in African contexts, particularly regarding their role in deepening socio-economic disparities and fueling public unrest.

The government must take immediate steps to address the public's grievances by revising the Finance Bill to make it more equitable and less burdensome for lower-income citizens. A comprehensive review of public service funding, especially in healthcare and education, is essential. In addition, the government should engage in meaningful dialogue with civil society organizations and protest leaders, particularly Generation Z, to develop long-term strategies for addressing economic inequality and improving governance.

1. How sustainable is the current model of digital activism in maintaining long-term protest movements, particularly among Generation Z?
2. What are the potential long-term socio-political consequences of continued unrest in Kenya on its relations with Western donors and international financial institutions?
3. How can Kenya's government effectively balance fiscal austerity measures with the need for equitable economic policies that address socio-economic disparities?

Future research should explore the intersection of digital activism and traditional protest methods, as well as the role of international actors in shaping the outcomes of such socio-political movements. Additionally, studies on the long-term effects of regressive tax policies on inequality in African countries would further enrich the understanding of economic governance in the region.

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