

THE CATALYST BEHIND KENYA'S PEASANT PROTESTS

On June 25, 2024, over 400 Kenyan police officers arrived in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, as part of the Multilateral Security Support (MSS) Mission, ostensibly to “restore order” in the country. Ironically, on the same day, a significant protest erupted in Kenya, where outraged youth demonstrators stormed the Kenyan Parliament. This protest was a direct reaction to the Finance Bill 2024, which had been approved by the Kenyan parliament despite widespread opposition. The bill, heavily influenced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reform package, included controversial taxation proposals.

What began as an online rebellion by young people, known as Gen Z, quickly escalated into street protests and storming the Kenyan parliament. This institution has historically been used by the IMF to push through its reform agendas, including the contentious Finance Bill 2024.

Kenya's debt crisis is severe and well-known. As of April 2024, the country was facing loan maturities totaling KES 50 billion (USD368.32 million) per week. In January 2024, Kenya spent KES 123.53 billion (USD 910 million) on debt servicing, and another KES 66.7 billion (USD 491.34 million) in February 2024. The IMF is notorious for imposing unpopular tax measures on debt-ridden countries to prevent defaults. These measures often include debt restructuring that increases overall debt and promoting Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that support privatization and liberalization of key state-owned enterprises.

Since President Ruto took office in September 2022, his administration has deviated from its election campaign pledge to reduce debt. They



PHOTO BY LUIGI STATO/AFP

have instead been advocating for higher taxes to address the country's financial obligations. This shift led to protests in June 2023, during which some people were killed and many injured.

The Finance Bill 2024, which proposed a 16% Value Added Tax (VAT) on bread and bread supplies, ignited the Gen Z-led revolution. Ironically, the bill also suggested tax exemptions for motor vehicles used by the National Intelligence Service (NIS), packaging materials for tea processed by multinational corporations, and agricultural inputs for pest control, benefiting companies importing banned pesticides and harming the environment.

Despite Kenya's commitment to clean energy, the Finance Bill 2024 proposed a 16% tax on electric bicycles and solar panels, undermining its climate commitments to promote use of such technologies. It also suggested a 16% tax on transporting sugarcane, likely benefiting privatized sugar mills while increasing costs for local farmers.

The Gen Z-led protests have directly accused the IMF, World Bank, and WTO of imposing harsh taxes and prioritizing creditor interests over the needs of the Kenyan people. Kenyan peasants have had enough of the overreach by these institutions.

THE BATTLE FOR KENYA'S FUTURE AMIDST IMF INFLUENCE

The recent sequence of events reveals significant external influences on Kenya's domestic policies. After taking office on September 13, 2022, President Ruto traveled to the UK on September 18, where he supported Free Trade and biotechnology amid ongoing trade talks with the US about GMOs and pesticide regulations. On September 21, he visited the US and met with Senator Jim Inhofe, a prominent climate-science skeptic linked to gas industries since 1989.

In April 2022, the US had criticized Kenya's restrictions on GMO imports, claiming that these measures impeded exports. The external pressure

by the US set the stage for the Association of Kenya Manufacturers (AKEFEMA) to petition the government shortly after Ruto's US visit, requesting duty-free importation of GMO maize and soybeans to address local supply shortfalls. Thus, on October 3, 2022, the Kenyan government through a Cabinet Dispatch lifted a decade-old GMO importation ban without public consultation. This decision, influenced by external pressures, was later overturned by Kenyan courts following a challenge from the Kenyan Peasant League, a member organisation of La Via Campesina (LVC), effectively reinstating the ban. The case remains pending, with a ruling expected in October 2024.

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This timeline underscores the significant influence of international entities and corporations, such as the IMF, the US government, and major corporations like the United States Grain Council (USGC), on Kenya's domestic policies.

The Gen Z-led revolution caught the entire establishment off-guard, from the government to the opposition, religious organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the media. Despite attempts to marginalize their struggle, the takeover of the Kenyan Parliament on June 25, 2024, by Gen Z forced President Ruto to reject the Finance Bill 2024 and the dissolution of his cabinet.

In response, the IMF-backed Kenyan establishment has implemented strategies to counter the Gen Z-led revolution, which has evolved into a call for the resignation of the Ruto regime. One such strategy was the dissolution

of the cabinet and subsequent establishment of a broad-based government bringing about seven members of the opposition coalition into the government. Proposals for the establishment of a National Multisectoral Forum (NMF) by President Ruto to address issues raised by Gen Z have been shelved after this initiative was rejected by both the Gen Z and the majority of Kenyans, who have intensified their call for President Ruto's resignation. The strategy of bringing the opposition into the government seems to be bearing fruit as the much-hyped national demonstration that were scheduled to take place on 8 August 2024 failed to kick off in most parts of the country with the Gen Z and rights groups retreating to strategize. The inclusion of the opposition figures into that government has divided the opposition coalition with one faction aligned with Raila welcoming supporting the inclusion while another led by former Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka rejecting both the NMF and the inclusion of the opposition into the cabinet.

The political establishment also resorted to use of violence and employing hired militias to attack peaceful Gen Z protesters. Armed militias have been seen patrolling cities like Nairobi, Eldoret, Kisii, and Kericho, and have violently disrupted opposition events, including a press conference led by Kalonzo Musyoka on July 17, 2024. This violence aims to sway Kalonzo's faction towards

the establishment's goals, but Gen Z protesters have rejected any compromise, demanding a complete overhaul of the system.

So far, over 50 Kenyans, mostly youths, have been killed in the anti-IMF protests, with many still missing and thousands hospitalized due to injuries. Decomposing bodies of young people have been found in Nairobi, sparking speculation that these are victims of abductions by security agencies. One of the released abductees revealed that his captors sought information on the protesters' sources of information about the IMF, indicating the IMF's involvement in these policies and manipulation of Kenya's domestic affairs.

The Kenyan Peasant League continues to oppose the neoliberal policies of the IMF, World Bank, and WTO. They have been at the forefront of educating the public about these institutions' neo-colonial policies and the problematic deployment of Kenyan police to Haiti. This deployment is particularly concerning given the Kenyan police's poor human rights record, as evidenced by their handling of the Gen Z-led revolution, which seeks to liberate Kenyans from the oppression imposed by the IMF, World Bank, and WTO.

La Via Campesina and its Kenyan member, the Kenyan Peasant League call on the Kenyan government to:

- Protect the rights of Kenyans to life, liberty, and security as enshrined in Article 6 of UNDROP.
- Uphold the rights to thought, opinion, and expression as outlined in Article 8 of UNDROP.
- Ensure freedom of association as guaranteed by Article 9 of UNDROP.
- Respect rights to participation and association as specified in Articles 10 and 11 of UNDROP.
- Safeguard the rights to seeds as stated in Article 19 of UNDROP.

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