

Kenya's Structural Reckoning

Social Protest or Social Control?

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At a Glance

- › Kenya is undergoing a historic uprising against state repression, with public anger still lingering after deadly protests
- › The demonstrations expose deep frustrations over economic injustice, elite impunity, and securitized governance
- › Youth-led resistance has sparked a civic awakening—the result is a blurring of lines between protest and control
- › This moment signals both a call for systemic change and the danger of normalizing authoritarian responses

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Introduction

Undoubtedly, Kenya is witnessing a historic uprising against state repression. Palpable tensions remain high following the protests on the 25th of July 2025, which gained international attention. Coincidentally, this year's demonstrations commemorated the anniversary of last year's infamous Finance Bill protests, which lit the flame of demonstrations by proposing largely unpopular and tax hikes. Anger, resentment and uncertainty with the government still lingers, as the country braces itself for the anticipated protests to peak on Monday, the 7th of July, marking the historic 1990 Saba Saba protests for democratic reforms.

Fundamentally, Kenya is experiencing a much deeper systemic outcry against generational and historical corruption, inequality, and overall disregard of citizens' voices. Concerns about continued disruption and confrontations between law and society lay the foundation for political instability, fracturing alliances and signals the importance for a structural reckoning, especially as the country prepares itself for the 2027 presidential elections.

Beyond Law and Order

Fueled by public outrage over the recent death of 31-year-old blogger Albert Ojwang¹, protesters took to the streets on June 25th, 2025. Youth-led demonstrations directed their anger at government and police buildings, chanted calls to occupy the presidential residence, and engaged in attacks, vandalizing, looting, and arson targeting shops and businesses – especially in Nairobi's central business district. Their very reasonable demands are grounded in legitimacy: accountability, economic justice, and democratic integrity. The two contrasting narratives surrounding last week's protest reflect two different perspectives. The opposition claims the protests were peaceful, advocating against police brutality but infiltrated by violent goons to discredit them. The current government insists that the unrest was beyond peaceful protests; rather, they were hijacked by organized criminal elements intent on destabilizing the state: an 'attempted coup' ¹.

However, to frame this solely as a clash over public order is to fundamentally misunderstand what's at stake. Kenya is not just experiencing a governance crisis; it is undergoing an ideological disruption. The youth are not simply rebelling against taxes—they are confronting a political culture that has normalized elite impunity, performative democracy, and structural exclusion. There is a widening gap between the state and the people, where power no longer derives from public consent but from coercion disguised as stability. To suggest this is only about policy reform is to miss the deeper, structural revolt which is unfolding in plain sight and might be intentionally ignored.

The truth is that Kenya's political establishment fears the ideological awakening of its youth. These protests are not just about bad governance—they are about reclaiming dignity, agency, and future. A generation that has inherited economic marginalization, climate precarity, and social inequality is now rejecting a system that demands silence in exchange for survival. That rejection is not disorder—it is clarity.

Repression, Resistance and The Politics of Violence

Today's political environment is a prime example of elitists treating peaceful citizenry as criminals, protests as criminal acts, and responding with excessive force and violence. This tendency follows a common pattern in democracies where rule of law is weak, institutions are non-independent, and protesters are seen as political threats rather than constituents with rights.

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Statistics clearly show: it only requires 3.5% of the population to engage in non-violent resistance for movements to be effective, and non-violent resistance is approximately ten times more likely to lead to democratisation than violent resistance². Kenya's history of self-determination, governance, and sovereign politics is marked by resistance movements, both pre- and post-colonial independence. While under specific circumstances resistance led to societal and political change, the issue arises when the constitutionally established right to peacefully assemble, demonstrate, picket, and petition public authorities while unarmed³ is undermined.

It is undeniable that while formal institutions remain intact, social norms and lived practices are shifting. The reality is that Kenyan citizens are demanding accountability and reforms—a move that threatens both patriarchal and gerontocratic hierarchies. The police's violations of constitutional rights function to reassert those hierarchies, even as dissent calls for a redistribution of power across age, gender, and class. Kenya's society is politicizing not just policy, but identity and power itself.

As mentioned, we are also witnessing symbolic violence—the non-physical, often unnoticed submission of marginalized groups through cultural norms. In Kenya, symbolic violence operates in synergies of patriarchal, ageist, and ethnic norms. Youth are deemed immature; women devalued. When women-led End Femicide protests emerged in early 2024, and youth-led End Finance Bill protests followed, they were met with teargas and arrests. Structural violence is not only about policy outcomes—it is embedded in the state's criminalization of dissent, especially when that dissent originates from marginalized groups. This creates a simulacrum of democracy while guaranteeing silence.

While street protests are powerful, peaceful resistance in Kenya has taken alternative forms. Digital activism, public petitions, sit-ins, symbolic occupations (such as at Parliament gates), and creative forms of resistance like music, poetry, and visual art have all become part of the non-confrontational methods of protest.

The Road Ahead

A historical analysis proves that peaceful protests have consistently emerged as a powerful force for political and social transformation. From Gandhi's Salt March in India to the U.S. civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., nonviolent resistance has shaped global consciousness and dismantled systems of oppression. In Africa, South Africa's anti-apartheid movement and Sudan's 2019 revolution demonstrated the power of organized civic action. Looking more closely at Kenya and its history of political resistance—from the 1922 Harry Thuku confrontation at Kingsway to the 1990 Saba Saba demonstrations on July 7, which marked a pivotal moment in Kenya's fight for multiparty democracy and remain a powerful symbol of civic resistance—we see that activism is deeply embedded in Kenya's nationalism.

Thus, we can conclude that peaceful political activism is the only way forward to disturb the unjust peace: a way to interrupt the system, garner public attention until there is an orchestrated disturbance in the state and the state—as well as outside observers—can no longer ignore calls for change. The protests successfully achieved national and international attention by hacking into mainstream political discourse and challenging paternalistic governance.

As we all anxiously look towards Monday, as Kenya braces for potential July 7th demonstrations in the spirit of Saba Saba—once a defiant stand against dictatorship and a call for accountable leadership—what is now a way forward? Maintain the right of self-determination and make a change in the rights that you want to see perpetuated. In the words of Mills, "power is reproduced through institutional structures and upheld by elite consensus."⁴ Hence, the only way forward is through—eliminating elite

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power in state institutions that rationalize violence to maintain control. What emerges is a dialectic: symbolic violence informs law, law enables structural violence, and structural violence reproduces symbolic acceptance of dominance. The result is a dangerous blurring of lines.

The question is no longer if change is possible. It is whether the state will embrace it—or continue to crush it. As proven, the state dismisses change. Structures change only when subjects refuse symbolic violence, dismantle elite consensus, and reshape institutional norms. Therefore, the question for Kenya today is whether symbolic rupture can forge structural transformation.

Evidently, Kenya is at a crossroads. Normatively, the legal right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression are fundamental pillars of the rule of law and must be protected and honoured at all costs. Impunity and lack of accountability undermine the rule of law. Transparent decision-making is key to upholding democratic values; biased enforcement and misuse of the law erode trust in democratic principles. Independent institutions must remain impartial and empowered to investigate and protect citizens—a legal obligation.

¹ Interior Cabinet Secretary Kipchumba Murkomen described the June 25, 2025, protests as an “attempted coup” during a press briefing on June 26, 2025, alleging the demonstrations were orchestrated to subvert President Ruto’s government. See: <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/113541-cs-murkomen-declares-june-25-protests-attempted-coup>

² Erica Chenoweth, “It May Only Take 3.5% of the Population to Topple a Dictator – With Civil Resistance,” *BBC Future*, May 14, 2019. Chenoweth notes that nonviolent campaigns are about 10 times more likely to lead to democratic transitions than violent ones, based on her research with Maria J. Stephan

³ Kenya Constitution, Article 37

⁴ “Power is reproduced through institutional structures and upheld by elite consensus” echoes C. Wright Mills’s central argument in *The Power Elite* (Oxford University Press, April 19 1956), where he shows how strategic positions in the economic, political, and military institutions form a coordinated ruling class

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