

POLICY BRIEF

GenZ Uprising in Kenya

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American
Friends
Service
Committee



Abbreviations

AACC	All Africa Conference of Churches
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AU	African Union
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
HoA	Horn of Africa
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IMLU	Independent Medico-Legal Unit
IPOA	Independent Policing Oversight Authority
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Executive Summary

In 2024, Kenya experienced a transformative wave of youth-led protests, driven by economic hardship, political disillusionment, and systemic exclusion. The Gen Z (youth) movement, fueled by digital activism, challenged traditional governance structures and demanded accountability, transparency, and inclusive participation. The protests illuminated deep-seated frustrations among young people arising from economic disenfranchisement, systemic governance failures, and the perceived betrayal of pro-poor political commitments. Yet, beyond the unrest, they revealed a generation determined to reclaim agency, reshape public discourse, and advance a new vision of accountable, people-centered leadership.

Introduction

Digital platforms emerged as the principal enablers of this civic awakening. Through TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Instagram, young Kenyans reimagined political engagement, transforming online spaces into arenas for civic education, mobilization, and policy advocacy. Hashtag campaigns, such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #JusticeForRexMasai, democratized access to information and galvanized solidarity. Despite state repression, which included excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, and the country's first-ever internet shutdown, youth resilience converted digital activism into a legitimate and transformative form of civic participation.

The movement's demands were clear and systemic. Young Kenyans rejected tokenism and symbolic engagement, insisting instead on structural reforms that guarantee meaningful participation in governance, equitable access to opportunities, and social justice. Their aspirations extended beyond inclusion; they sought partnership and policy influence. The uprising also sparked a broader regional consciousness, inspiring youth-led mobilizations across Africa, from Uganda's anti-corruption campaigns to Nigeria's renewed calls for police and governance reform.

This policy brief explores the 2024 youth-led protests in Kenya, unpacking their root causes, mobilization dynamics, and broader implications for governance and peacebuilding. Drawing on insights from the Salama Hub-commissioned case study on Kenya's Gen Z uprising, it offers actionable recommendations for governments, regional bodies, and civil society actors across the Horn of Africa. The Kenyan experience provides a compelling blueprint for strengthening youth agency, safeguarding civic space, and institutionalizing inclusive governance throughout the region.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) through its Salama Hub Program, is jointly implementing a project titled "Transforming Lives through Evidence-Based Advocacy and Campaigning for peaceful Change" with the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). This project is in its second phase (2024-2026) and serves as a regional platform for strengthening

civil society organizations and Faith Leaders in research, advocacy, and conflict analysis in the Horn of Africa. Youth is one of the target audiences and the CSOs and Faith Leaders engage with them to contribute to peace and stability. Through cross-border collaboration, youth-led research, and capacity-building in areas such as mediation, trauma healing, and digital security, the Hub bridges grassroots activism with formal governance processes.

Contextualizing the 2024 Youth Uprising in Kenya

The Gen Z-led protests in Kenya erupted in June 2024 in response to the Finance Bill, which proposed steep tax hikes on essential goods such as fuel, internet data, and sanitary products; measures that disproportionately burdened unemployed and underemployed youth. Beyond economic grievances, the protests were fueled by systemic governance failures, including entrenched corruption, exclusion from decision-making, and a perceived betrayal of the pro-poor "hustler" narrative that had propelled the incumbent President to power. The movement was marked by a radical shift in civic engagement: youth mobilized through decentralized digital platforms like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp, translating policy documents into local languages and organizing mass protests under hashtags like #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament. The state's response was severe; police used live ammunition, resulting in over sixty deaths, including the killing of dozens of youth, and enforced disappearances and injuries as documented by IPOA and IMLU. Despite the repression, the protests catalyzed a new civic consciousness, with youth rejecting traditional political structures and demanding a new social contract rooted in transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance.

Youth Voice and Agency in Kenya: Civic Transformation in Motion

Kenya's Gen Z movement has redefined civic engagement through digital activism, transforming platforms like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Instagram into powerful tools for real-time coordination, civic education, and mass mobilization. During the protests relating to the Finance Bill, youth translated complex policy documents into local languages, hosted TikTok Lives, and used infographics to demystify governance, reaching millions across the country. The movement was decentralized, leaderless, and values-driven, anchored in principles of transparency, justice, and inclusion. Hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #JusticeForRexMasai galvanized national and international attention, forcing policy reversals and reshaping Kenya's political discourse. Young people's demands extended beyond economic support to encompass meaningful participation in decision-making, access to dignified employment, legal safeguards, civic education, and opportunities for dialogue across generations. Their activism disrupted long-standing political practices and sparked the emergence of youth-led initiatives dedicated to policy advocacy, legal assistance, and monitoring public budgets.

Despite facing digital repression, police brutality, and gendered threats, Gen Z's resilience has positioned them as influential actors in Kenya's democratic transformation, underscoring the urgent need for institutional reforms that embed youth agency in governance and peacebuilding.

Barriers to Youth Expression: Risks, Repression, and Resilience

Youth in the Horn of Africa (HoA) face deep and complex restrictions on free expression that greatly limits their civic participation and fuels

regional instability. The 2024–2025 Gen Z-led protests related to the Finance Bill in Kenya exposed the extent of government-led digital repression, including internet shutdowns, surveillance, and platform censorship, which hindered organizing efforts and silenced dissent. Legal frameworks were weaponized to suppress peaceful demonstrations, with young activists facing arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, and harassment through the judicial system. The fatal shooting of Rex Masai in Nairobi's city center as police battled anti-tax protesters in June 2024, and the death of Albert Ojwang while in Central Police Station custody in Nairobi, underscore the excessive use of force and the absence of accountability, factors that silence public discourse and erode trust in state institutions.

These constraints are worsened by structural inequalities such as high internet data costs, economic marginalization, and uneven connectivity, which restrict who can participate in digital civic spaces. Gendered threats, including online sexual exploitation and harassment, disproportionately silence young women, while disinformation campaigns led by state-aligned influencers weakened youth-led movements. Despite these barriers, youth in Kenya showed remarkable resilience and innovation by translating complex policy documents into local languages, hosting civic education sessions on TikTok Live, and forming grassroots organizations to continue post-protest advocacy.

The Gen Z protests in Kenya reflect wider regional trends, where young people across the HoA are increasingly using digital platforms to call for accountability, justice, and inclusive governance. However, without urgent policy reforms to protect digital rights, ensure independent oversight of security forces, expand access to legal aid and civic education, and build inclusive, gender-sensitive digital infrastructure, civic expression will continue to be a risky activity.

Strategic Entry Points for Agency and Inclusion

The protests in Kenya marked a turning point in youth civic engagement, giving rise to youth-led formations dedicated to policy advocacy, legal reform, and civic education. These groups are evolving from reactive protest movements into proactive participants in governance, pushing for systemic changes that reflect their lived experiences and aspirations.

To institutionalize youth agency, policy frameworks must establish Youth Advisory Councils at national and county levels, integrate youth into peacebuilding, transitional justice, and constitutional reform processes, and promote youth-responsive budgeting. These entry points offer a pathway to embed youth voices in decision-making and ensure that governance structures reflect the aspirations of Kenya's majority demographic.

Sustaining this momentum calls for urgent reforms that safeguard the digital and civic space that enables youth mobilization. This includes protecting internet freedom and digital rights to ensure safe and inclusive civic engagement, investing in gender-sensitive digital infrastructure, and expanding access to legal aid, civic education, and trauma-informed support. Recognizing the leadership potential of youth-led organizations, governments and development partners must provide core funding, institutional recognition, and capacity-building support.

These measures will not only strengthen youth resilience but also help transform civic activism into a lasting driver of democratic renewal and inclusive governance, both in Kenya and across the Horn of Africa.

Policy Recommendations

The 2024 Gen Z protests in Kenya provide valuable insights into the shifting dynamics of youth civic engagement throughout the HoA. These demonstrations, driven by economic disenfranchisement, governance failures, and digital mobilization, revealed the transformative potential of youth-led activism when supported by inclusive policies and safe civic spaces. Kenya's experience underscores the urgency of

institutional reforms that move beyond symbolic participation to meaningful youth inclusion in governance, peacebuilding, and policymaking. For governments, regional institutions, and development partners across the HoA, this moment presents a timely opportunity to harness youth energy as a catalyst for sustainable democratic renewal.

The following recommendations are grounded in Kenya's experience and outline targeted strategies to strengthen youth agency throughout the region.

Horn of Africa States

- Enact youth-inclusive legislation that guarantees meaningful participation in governance, peacebuilding, and transitional justice, especially in post-conflict countries such as Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Somalia.
- Establish Youth Advisory Councils at national and sub-national levels with formal influence over budgets, peace processes, and constitutional reforms.
- Mandate youth quotas in peace negotiations and policymaking forums to ensure youth voices are central to democratic renewal.
- Protect digital rights by legislating against internet shutdowns, surveillance, and censorship, particularly in contexts where digital repression is common.
- Invest in digital infrastructure and innovation hubs to support youth-led civic tech, peacebuilding, and social entrepreneurship.
- Launch national programs to close the gender gap in digital technology, offering targeted training, mentorship, and access to devices for young women, and integrating these efforts into broader national development strategies.

Regional Bodies (IGAD, AU, Peace and Security Council)

- Strengthen and fund regional youth platforms such as the IGAD Youth Forum and AU Youth Division to support cross-border collaboration, policy engagement, and youth-led advocacy.
- Launch regional digital innovation challenges focused on peacebuilding and civic engagement, ensuring inclusive participation and leadership opportunities for young women.
- Align youth engagement strategies with the AU Digital Transformation Strategy to promote equitable access to digital tools and technologies across the region.

- Advocate for harmonized digital rights policies and integrate youth perspectives into regional digital governance frameworks to address disparities in access, skills, and leadership, especially for young women.
- Formally recognize youth-led organizations within IGAD and AU decision-making structures to enable their meaningful contributions to conflict prevention, democratic reform, and regional policy processes.

Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations

- Provide sustained funding and technical support to expand youth-led initiatives in civic education, legal aid, peacebuilding, and budget monitoring. Pair this with mentorship and leadership programs that build youth capacity in digital advocacy, policy engagement, and innovation.
- Implement community-based digital literacy programs targeting young women and marginalized groups. Leverage faith-based and community networks to promote responsible digital engagement and peaceful mobilization, integrating digital skills with civic education to empower youth as advocates and changemakers.
- Advocate for legal protections that safeguard peaceful protest and youth activism.
- Facilitate intergenerational dialogues to build trust between youth and traditional leadership, fostering inclusive and collaborative approaches to reform.

United Nations Agencies

- Prioritize direct support for youth-led peacebuilding, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected areas, by UN agencies such as UNDP, UN Women, and the UN Peacebuilding Support Office. This may include providing funding, technical assistance, and policy space for youth participation in transitional justice, electoral reform, and national dialogues.
- Lead regional digital innovation programs that empower youth through civic tech initiatives and work to close the gender gap in digital access. This may involve offering digital skills training, mentorship, and devices for young women, and supporting platforms that facilitate community dialogue and public

service monitoring.

- Develop youth-sensitive indicators to measure progress on civic inclusion and digital rights, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UN Youth Strategy.
- Align youth engagement efforts with regional frameworks such as the AU Digital Transformation Strategy and the IGAD Youth Agenda. Formalize partnerships with youth-led organizations to ensure sustained impact and inclusive transformation across the Horn of Africa.

Conclusion

Gen Z protests demonstrated that Kenya's young people are far from passive observers in national matters; they are active agents of change. Through their courage and creativity, they have sparked a movement toward more inclusive governance and lasting peace. By integrating youth participation into official decision-making structures and protecting avenues for civic engagement, Kenya and other nations in the region can harness the full potential of their young citizens to build a fairer and more resilient future.

References

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- Amnesty International / joint statements on Kenya demonstrations and internet disruptions (2025)
- CIPESA / regional internet-freedom monitoring reports on shutdowns and connectivity restrictions.
- Independent Medico-Legal Unit (IMLU), Silenced but Unbowed Report
- Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) protest data
- Law Society of Kenya report on human-rights violations during the 2024 Finance Bill protests. The Law Society of Kenya
- Verified social media data and hashtag analytics (e.g., #RejectFinanceBill2024)



About the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) promotes a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. Guided by the Quaker belief in the divine light within each person, we nurture the seeds of change and respect for human life to fundamentally transform our societies and institutions. We work with people and partners worldwide of all faiths and backgrounds to meet urgent community needs, challenge injustice, and build peace. Through its Africa Regional Office in Kenya, AFSC promotes projects in Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, and Zimbabwe, with an evidence-based advocacy component for policy change in the Horn of Africa, with an office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. AFSC has decades of experience leading advocacy, evidence-based research, and worldwide civil society strengthening programs. AFSC brings Global South leaders and Civil Society Organizations through the Dialogue and Exchange Program to learn and exchange ideas every year. Due to the challenging situation in the Horn of Africa, AFSC focused intensely on this region to link up with existing civil society networks and Faith Leaders to contribute with its specific expertise.

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About the All Africa Conference of Churches, AACC:

AACC (All Africa Conference of Churches) is a continental ecumenical body that accounts for over 200 million Christians across the African continent. AACC is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Indigenous churches in Africa, and a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. As an ecumenical body, AACC is a fellowship of 214 members comprising Churches, National Christian Councils (NCCs), theological and lay training institutions, and other Christian organizations in 43 African countries. With eleven programmatic focus areas, AACC's current strategy ensures that churches and other Christian institutions in Africa significantly contribute to the realization of the Continental and Global sustainable development agendas, such as the 17 SDGs and the AU Agenda 2065: "The Africa We Want."

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