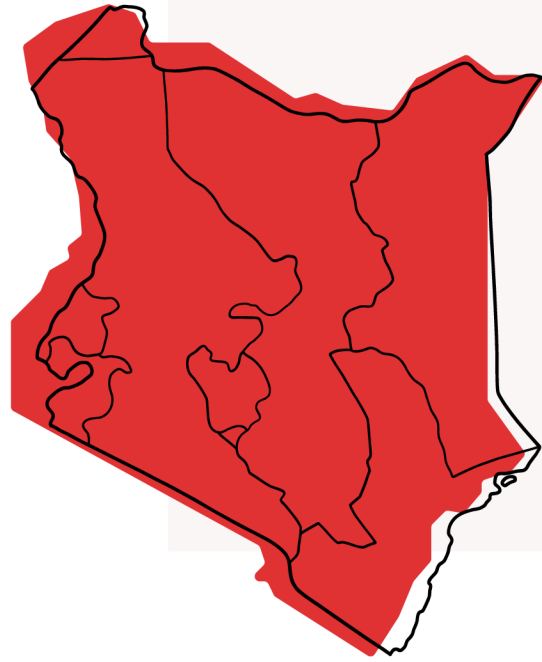


KEY ASKS KENYA

Preventing Electoral Violence, Protecting Civic Space and Engaging Youth Ahead of the 2027 Elections in Kenya



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

June 2024 anti-Finance Bill protests marked a turning point in youth political engagement, as young Kenyans mobilized around demands for accountability, transparency, and governance reforms. However, increase in civic activism has been accompanied by reports of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and coordinated intimidation of protesters, activists, and human rights defenders online. Additionally, Kenya is approaching the 2027 general elections amid growing concerns about democratic governance, political violence, shrinking civic space, and declining public trust in public institutions. A study by AFSC (2027) on Mapping and Analyzing Electoral Violence Hotspots in Kenya and Leveraging Technology for Peacebuilding ahead of the 2027 Elections, revealed that violence has become more localized, episodic and hybrid, combining physical confrontation, organized coercion, political intimidation, misinformation, hate speech and digitally mediated mobilization.

Why This Matters to U.S. Policy

The Gen-Z-led protest movement has inspired similar youth-led civic mobilization across Africa, positioning the country as an influential example for democratic engagement on the continent. As one of Africa's leading democratic and economic powers, Kenya often sets political precedents that resonate beyond its borders. If government responses to peaceful protests and civic activism are characterized by repression, excessive force, or attacks on human rights defenders, it could normalize similar practices elsewhere and embolden other governments to restrict civic space. Promoting accountability, protecting fundamental freedoms, and safeguarding democratic participation in Kenya could have a positive spillover effect across the region.

The electoral violence mapping study (2026) too, states likelihood of violence in 2027 elections, has become more localized, episodic and hybrid, combining physical confrontation, organized coercion, political intimidation, misinformation, hate speech and digitally mediated mobilization. There is also a shift from large national violence crises toward conflict concentrated at lower levels (ward, informal-settlement, polling-zone and community levels).

BACKGROUND

The deadly June 2024 anti-Finance Bill protests, political tensions have remained high, with increasing fears that some actors within the political establishment are using repressive measures to maintain power and shape the political landscape in their favor. These concerns are unfolding against a backdrop of declining public confidence in democratic institutions and heightened uncertainty about the integrity of the country's electoral processes. Since June 2026 protests, young Kenyans have become increasingly active in demanding accountability, transparency, and governance reforms, transforming civic engagement across the country.

Additionally, Kenya is entering a critical political period ahead of the 2027 general elections amid growing concerns about democratic governance, political competition, violence, and shrinking civic space. There are reports of rapid institutionalization of a "goon culture", the direct employment of violent, hired gangs, by politicians (both opposition and ruling party) poses an immediate threat to the integrity of the 2027 ballot. Driven by severe economic desperation and an estimated 40% national poverty rate, idle urban youth from informal settlements are easily trapped into working as political enforcers. There are reports too (Reuters February 19, 2026), that over 1,000 had allegedly been misled with promises of jobs in Russia, while indeed they have been ruled to fight in Ukraine. This shows how youth are gullible and ready to be utilized for violence due to poverty.

Political and Security Developments

Reports suggest that politicians from ruling party have relied on these militia-like groups to disrupt opposition activities, intimidate rivals, and influence political outcomes. These trends are further compounded by widespread public mistrust in government and electoral institutions. As of May 2025, only 20% of Kenyans reported being very confident that the 2027 general election would be free and fair, while 50% expressed no confidence at all and 21% were only somewhat confident (Trends and Insights for Africa, 2025). Confidence in government is similarly low, with only 47% of Kenyans indicating that they trust the government to do what is right, making it the only major national institution trusted by less than half of the population (Edelman, 2026).

The combination of declining institutional legitimacy, rising political violence, and persistent human rights violations raises serious concerns about the state of Kenya's democracy and the potential risks facing the country as it approaches the 2027 electoral cycle. Indeed, Koffi Annan Foundation (2026), report puts likelihood of electoral violence in Kenya at 81% likelihood.

Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

Between 2024 and June 2026, there were 347 reported cases of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings (Missing Voices, 2026), highlighting an increasingly hostile environment for activists, protesters, and government critics. Available trends further indicate that incidents of disappearances and killings tend to rise in June, coinciding with commemorative events marking the anniversary of the anti-Finance Bill protests, despite these events having remained largely peaceful. Of the reported killings and disappearances, 128 killings, 83 disappearances and over, 3,000 arrests are specifically linked to 2024 and 2025 Gen-Z protests (Amnesty International, 2025). The 2027 electoral period therefore presents an opportunity to strengthen institutional responses to gender-based violence alongside wider efforts to improve human-rights protection and access to justice.

Key Policy Issues

- **Shrinking civic space:** Restrictions on peaceful assembly, arbitrary arrests and excessive use of force undermine constitutional freedoms and youth participation.
- **Weak accountability:** Investigations and prosecutions relating to killings, disappearances, police brutality and other abuses remain unaddressed, inadequate or slow, weakening public trust.
- **Risk of electoral violence:** Political use of organized youth groups (goons), ethnic polarization, misinformation and economic vulnerability could increase localized violence ahead of 2027.
- **Digital intimidation:** Social media is increasingly used to target activists, protesters and human rights defenders through coordinated harassment, threats and misinformation.
- **Gendered violence:** Persistent femicide and gender-based violence demonstrates broader weaknesses in protection, prevention and access to justice that require stronger institutional responses.

KEY ASKS U.S. GOVERNMENT

1. **Protect civic freedoms:** Publicly support Kenya's constitutional rights to peaceful assembly, expression, association and political participation, particularly for youth, women and human rights defenders.
2. **Support the promotion of accountability:** By calling for independent investigations and accountability for enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, police brutality and politically sponsored violence.
3. **Strengthen peaceful youth participation:** By supporting youth-led civic engagement, peacebuilding and democracy initiatives, while using diplomatic and financial engagement to advance democratic governance and prevent electoral violence.

KEY ASKS

UNITED NATIONS AND DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS

1. Monitor and report: Track and publicly report on civic space, political violence, police brutality, disappearances and electoral-related human rights violations.
2. Strengthen prevention and protection: Support early warning, conflict prevention, community peacebuilding, and protection of human rights defenders, journalists and youth activists.
3. Support electoral integrity and accountability: Strengthen independent accountability mechanisms and support credible, transparent electoral institutions, including the Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission.

KEY ASKS

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

1. Support the amplification of youth and victims' voices through advocacy, public dialogue, media and policy engagement.
2. Strengthen the mobilization of resources and partnerships for human rights monitoring, civic education, legal aid, election observation and peacebuilding.
3. Support promotion of accountability and peaceful engagement by advocating against police brutality, disappearances and political violence while strengthening social cohesion and respect for human rights.

ABOUT THE CONVENERS

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Salama Hub and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) jointly implement the Horn of Africa Research and Advocacy Joint Project, an initiative established to respond to the complex and evolving peace and security challenges facing the Horn of Africa. The project convenes a diverse coalition of civil society organizations, faith leaders from multiple religious traditions, women and youth-led movements, and academic institutions to promote collaborative research and advocacy on peace and security in the Horn of Africa.

Through this partnership, AFSC and AACC work to address the root causes of violent conflict, militarization, shrinking civic and democratic space, and the humanitarian crises affecting communities across the region. By fostering inclusive dialogue, supporting locally led solutions, and amplifying the voices of affected communities in key policy and advocacy forums, including the United Nations, African Union, and United States Government, the project seeks to advance sustainable peace throughout the Horn of Africa.

ABOUT AFSC

The American Friends Service Committee, AFSC, is a 109-year Quaker international NGO (1917-2026) and a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of all Quakers (1947). AFSC promotes a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. We work with people and partners worldwide of all faiths and backgrounds to meet urgent community needs, challenge injustice, and build peace. AFSC is particularly active in the Horn of Africa, where we have created the Salama Hub, a research and advocacy program for peace and stability.

The AFSC's Salama Hub, a research and advocacy program, works for peace and stability in the Horn of Africa by strengthening local civil society organizations and faith leaders in influencing policies from research. It also fosters community-led healing and reconciliation. What makes it unique is its African-led research, that connects issues from the communities to the policy level. The program presents an opportunity for civil society organizations (CSOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) capacities to be strengthened. The program works with a wide range of partners—from local groups to regional and international bodies like the African Union, IGAD, European Union, and the U.S. policymakers—to ensure these local insights directly influence policies and social dynamics.

ABOUT AACC

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) 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 more than 215 members comprising of Churches, National Christian Councils (NCCs), theological and lay training institutions, and other Christian organizations in 43 African countries.

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