

AfricOG: The Gen Z Uprising in Kenya and Africa's Youthquake

Recent youth protests in Kenya have been unprecedented in their countrywide mobilisation and political impact. Triggered by massive planned tax hikes and rage at the broken promises and excesses of profligate politicians, the Gen Z movement uses social media to deploy and demand. The government resorted to killings, torture and abductions to try and identify the organisers of what is termed a leaderless movement, but has lacked the strategy and skills to handle the crisis. The Gen Z protests caught many flat-footed; although in truth it has been years in the making on a continent where 70% of the population is now below the age of thirty. A rapidly urbanising and educating youth has increasingly defected from elective politics that have failed to deliver jobs and livelihoods. They have taken to the streets instead to force change on old systems and aging regimes.

Should this 'youthquake' in Africa be compared to the Arab Spring?

Gen Z¹ demonstrations in Kenya over the Finance Bill have provoked a broad impetus for change and forced a new debate on governance. The local and global causes that have triggered this 'youthquake' are strikingly similar to other movements across Africa, whether they have arrived in the form of coups, uprisings or rebellions. Young, educated people are the bulk of the population but economies are growing without creating them jobs. It has caused despair and desperation. Every African country says more jobs are being created in the informal sector, but when the youth go there, they are not considered a work force. They are treated as a public order problem, living with uncertainty and risk, in areas where municipal authorities pull down kiosks. It is not a coincidence that the protest that sparked the Arab Spring in Tunisia in 2010 was the result of a young man, Bouazizi, in the informal sector setting himself on fire.

African regimes have typically met this kind of uprising with a three-pronged strategy: repress, co-opt or deflect. But with Kenyan protesters focusing on an issue – the Finance Bill – the old strategies haven't worked. Co-option fails because protesters are not asking for political positions, and the law and order infrastructure is struggling to effectively repress. Police, trained to beat protesters into submission, cannot handle teenagers who come dancing and taking selfies. The lack of fear among the youth has disarmed and split the security forces. Bringing out the military also proved to be a big mistake when Gen Z protesters received them as if they were an army of liberation: soldiers feeling they are more popular than the Commander-in-Chief presents a huge problem for a president.

The Gen Z movement has also effectively shamed critical institutions that platform politicians, like churches and schools. When churches called for calm, Gen Z told them "stop receiving money from politicians, then you can talk to us", which had the effect of denying the government its claim to moral authority. The youth tactics have created a new pathway of de-legitimising the government.

"We are looking at a regime whose vulnerabilities have been exposed, which lacks moral anchorage, and is in a situation where the economy is only going to get worse" says Wachira Maina.

So, is it a crisis or an opportunity?

¹ The generation born between 1997 - 2012

That will depend on how it's handled by the protesters and the government. The youthquake is a new sort of street power, raising questions on how it can be sustained. Is there a need for the movement to connect with broader civil society, opposition groups and political parties - or is success due to the fact it hasn't?

There are three categories of countries that have experienced the protests in Africa, observes Dr. Olawale Ismail. The first are military coups - in Mali, Niger, Burkino Faso, and Gabon Guinea – where the people involved are remarkably similar in terms of generation and ideas, and young people in uniform have spearheaded the push for accountability and change. Whether military rulers are able to do this is a different debate. A second category - like Kenya and Nigeria - is angling for change within existing laws, constitutions, democratic systems and structures. This category includes Senegal, Togo, South Africa, Ghana and Zimbabwe, where a coalition of young people in youth-led groups and social movements have pushed to renegotiate the state-citizen relationship and the balance of power. The third category is one of outright armed uprising. It includes like Ethiopia, Libya and Somalia, where people have taken up arms to displace the existing order.

Although each episode of youth protest tends to get talked about in an isolated sense, the protests are very connected. Almost a third of all African countries are experiencing a push for change, coinciding with major changes in the international system. The countries are all underpinned by important structural similarities, with protesters sharing a similar age and strategies. The question is whether these group dynamics can be sustained beyond the single issue that united them, and whether youth power can play the long game.

Thandikile Moyo points to lessons from previous African struggles. Solidarity can slip into a popularity competition among individuals eager for power and positions, fragmenting and weakening movements. Marginalised groups who 'lend voice' to a struggle, find that it continues to oppress on the basis of sex, gender and ethnicity. And events in the Arab Spring demonstrated how popular movements can successfully displace an old system only to be replaced by an even worse one, resulting in more human rights violations, reduced public spaces, and greater disrespect for the rule of law. Both Zimbabwe and Sudan are stark reminders that the removal of one individual does not necessarily mean getting rid of the system that sustained them.

By concentrating on policies and issues, a system is less able to regenerate itself by sacrificing an individual. Gen Z has been applauded for remaining focused on the Finance Bill and better livelihoods for everyone. Knowing the values of the struggle rather than focusing on who the leaders are helps reduce division and mistrust, while trying to anticipate methods the government will use to fragment the movement.

Revolutions and uprisings usually start with moments of openings which are quite similar - typically bread and butter issues which have a lot to do with economic deterioration, bad governance and security force brutality. In the case of Kenya, this was accompanied by a major legitimacy deficit in the 2022 general election. Some 5-6 million people eligible to vote did not register, and of the 22 million who did register, 14 million actually voted. Of those 14 million, only 7.1 voted for William Ruto – which he treated as an overwhelming endorsement. The election figures mean there is a likelihood that about 70% of those protesting on the street did not vote for the government they are challenging. The situation in Nigeria is worse, where the winning candidate got about 10% of registered votes.

The fact that African regimes have been unable to respond economically and politically to the youth problem has resulted in them defecting from electoral politics. About 70% of Africa's population is now below the age of 30, and will be a driver for the foreseeable future. Even economies on the continent recording good figures are not creating jobs for the youth. Africa is releasing 10-12 million young people

into the job market every year, but only creating jobs for 3 million. This is primarily because a lot of the growth has been fuelled by debt on infrastructure development - like Kenya, which borrowed more than \$300 billion from China for the Standard Gauge Railway, a project that couldn't have employed more than 3000 people because it was built by machines.

The protests over the Finance Bill show the important connection between local and international dynamics, with the global financial system playing a major role in jobless growth on the continent. Youth-led protests in Africa have almost all been triggered by macroeconomic changes or policies relating to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Without the revenue targets that the Kenyan government had hoped to achieve using the Finance Bill, the IMF programme will fall apart and the country is likely to be downgraded a second time, creating more pressure on currency and the cost of living.

Radwa Saad points to the importance of transnational activism and the need to look beyond borders. Issues are connected in ways that traditional geopolitical analysis often fails to account for. The neo-capitalism that has damaged African economies connect to international power structures and international private power, including the forced presence of US military bases and unreasonable aid and development conditions. There are 'predatory' connections that are not immediately obvious – like minerals mined out of Congo being used for defence weapons that are tested on Palestinian bodies in Gaza by the same Israeli military forces that train police in the US.

Nadishani Perera from Transparency International (TI) in Sri Lanka says international financial institutions are very hesitant to talk about reforms, but have been forced to shift through persistent advocacy. TI told the IMF it was not respecting the Do No Harm principle for as long as the Sri Lankan government could happily tick all the boxes of reforms while changing nothing at ground level.

The IMF “need to be ashamed”, she says, that the support they have given is pumped into systems rigged by kleptocracy. Kleptocracy is rule by a group of thieves – politicians, public officials, businesses, criminal gangs, lawyers, accountants – who stay in power for decades. Public debt is used as a tool by the kleptocrats, who tie up the country to pay loans for decades. The money is used to fund useless white elephant projects to market their image and keep a grip on power – ‘I made an airport (that has no planes), I made a stadium (that is not used)’ – while citizens don't have enough money for health, education, and drinking water.

It is very recognisable syndrome for Kenyans. Edward Ouko, Kenya's former Auditor General, agrees that grand theft depends on 'budgeted corruption', which needs correcting at constitutional level to “change the politics which is the bedrock of our corruption”.

The youth protesters have taken up a cause that makes moral demands about corrupt leaders. This is a major trigger for a population fed up with egregious corruption. Since the Gen Z protests started, there has been a striking hostility on traditional and social media towards the conspicuous consumption of politicians, focusing on their flashy watches, expensive shoes as they fly around in helicopters, donating tens of millions of shillings at harambees, evading questions about where the money comes from. Ruto has steadfastly avoided dealing with the basic integrity of leaders – although he has been directly confronted about his own excessive international travel and wasteful development projects on prime time TV.

If this isn't addressed, says John Githongo, and politicians are not held to account, the sense of upset and indignation is likely to be sustained, along with the outrage over the violence that has been meted out against Kenyans.