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From Online and the Streets to the Corridors of Power: Gen Z Protests and the Promotion of Social Justice in Kenya.

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Abstract

This paper examines the impacts of Gen Z protests on the social justice movement in Kenya. The paper set out to: i) historicize the youth activism in Kenya; ii) examine the tactics and strategies used by the Gen Z to advocate for policy change in Kenya; iii) discuss the impacts of Gen Z protests on accountability, policy formulation, transparency and political change in Kenya iv) and finally to discuss the role of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 in emboldening Gen Z's advocacy for social justice in Kenya. The paper is anchored on deprivation theory. The paper utilizes qualitative tools to obtain data. These tools include newspapers, television and radio interviews, X-space recordings and personal observations. The secondary sources of information were obtained from journals, books and blogs of civil societies. The paper adopted a historical research design to collect data and the data was analyzed in a thematic manner and the study findings were written in a continuous narrative. The paper argues that the youth-led advocacy in post-independent Kenya can be traced to 1966 following the purge of Oginga Odinga from the independence government. However, the real impacts of youth activism started to be felt in Kenya during the pro-democracy protests in the 1990s. Since then, the youth have been pivotal in causing change in both the Kenyan socio-economic and political spheres. The paper further argues that the Gen Z protests of 25th June, 2024 forced President William Ruto to withdraw the finance bill of 2024/2025. The paper also acknowledges the critical role played by the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 in thwarting the efforts aimed at circumventing the Constitution of Kenya by the political class. The paper postulates that these youth-led advocacies will strengthen constitutionalism and creation of a just, responsive and democratic Kenyan society.

Keywords: Gen Z, Social Justice, Advocacy, Transparency, Accountability and Political Change.

1. Introduction

Youth activism in pre and post-independence Kenya is not a new phenomenon. For instance, since independence in 1963 the Kenyan youth have been actively involved in agitation of socio-economic and political change. The definition of who is a youth in Kenya and

Africa for that matter has been a subject of debate for a long time among scholars and the political elite and therefore the definition varies based on social, economic and political initiatives. The United Nations define a youth as a person between the age of 15

and 24 years (World Health Organisation, 1999) while the Kenya National Youth Policy (2019) describe a youth as a person aged between the age of 18 and 35 years. For the purpose of this paper, we adopt a definition given by the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 which describes a youth as a person between the age of 18 and 35 years (Government of Kenya, 2010).

Reid (2000) defines advocacy as a political activity aimed at causing policy change while Child and Gronbjerg (2007) avers that advocacy is a citizenry-driven activity whose main objective is to shape public policy from outside the government. For Moore (2011), policy advocacy grapples with adoption, modification or rejection of specific policy proposals in fiscal legislation that are not in tandem with the wishes of the people.

According to Bankston (2010) social justice is described as redistribution of public goods and resources to improve the situations of the disadvantaged people in the society. In this context, redistribution of public goods and resources is viewed as a matter of right rather than compassion. Social justice is thus viewed as a fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities and privileges within the society essentially to ensure that everyone accesses the basic necessities of life and can fully participate in the social, economic and political life of their country. It is against this backdrop that this paper sought to examine the impacts of Gen Z protests on promotion of social justice in Kenya.

2. Research Objectives

The paper sought to:

- i. Trace the origins of youth activism in Kenya.
- ii. Examine the tactics and strategies used by Gen Z to advocate for policy change in Kenya.
- iii. Assess the impacts of Gen Z protests on accountability, policy formulation, transparency and political change in Kenya.
- iv. Discuss the role of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 in emboldening Gen Z's advocacy for social justice in Kenya.

3. Research Questions.

- i. What is the origin of youth activism in Kenya?
- ii. What are the tactics and strategies used by the Gen Zs to advocate for policy change in Kenya?
- iii. How did Gen Z protests impact accountability, policy formulation, transparency and political change in Kenya?
- iv. What role did the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 play in emboldening Gen Z's advocacy for social justice in Kenya?

4. Theoretical Framework.

The study is anchored on deprivation theory. Deprivation theory is one of the sub-strands of social movement theories. The proponent of this theory is Robert K. Merton. According to Merton (1968), when people feel that they are deprived-off certain resources, opportunities, rights, justice or privileges they often mobilise into some form of social deviance as a result of frustration and deprivation in order to cause policy change. Therefore, social movements arise as an organisation of a group of people with a shared set of beliefs aimed at bringing some form of social change or promoting social order in the society through social deviance (Crosby, 1979). This theoretical approach is key in helping us

understand the Gen Z protests against the 2023/2024 finance bill from the sociological lens.

5. Youth Activism in Kenya: An Overview.

5.1 Pre-Independence Period.

Youth advocacy against the British imperialists in Kenya dates back to the late 1880s. The youthful trailblazers of this time are Otenyo Nyarigoti, a youthful warrior from the Gusii community who attacked and wounded Sir Geoffrey Northcote, an acting British District Commissioner in Kisii, formerly Southern Kavirondo District (Ongeri et al, 2022). The youth of this period also started pioneer political organisations like Young Kikuyu Association under the leadership of Harry Thuku (Beyan, 1989), Coast African Association under the leadership of Francis Khamisi and Ronald Ngala (Ajulu, 2002) and Young Kavirondo Association led by Jonathan Okwiri to agitate for African land rights in the wake of establishment of colonial rule in Kenya (Nyanchoga, 2023). Therefore, these political organisations were formed as a form of social deviance against the British colonial rule that had interfered with African land rights and African indigenous political systems.

The Mau Mau movement was also a purely youthful movement against British colonial rule (Kushner, 1965). These young men and women sacrificed their lives to secure Kenya's freedom. Dedan Kimathi, Waruhiu wa Itote (General China), Stanley Mathenge, General Ndung'u Gicheru, General Mwariama, General Matenjagwo, Muthoni Kirima, Bildad Kaggia, Pio Gama Pinto and Jacob Njagi Michange requires a special mention. Educated youth like Musa Gitau, a famous educator and preacher also used their education and the pulpit to advance African social and economic rights. For instance, Musa Gitau established learning institutions that enabled the youth of Kenya to access education. Musa Gitau's commitment to education could later lay the foundation for pre-independence political leaders who agitated for Kenya's independence (Natsoulas, 1998).

In the Trade Union Movement, the Kenyan youth led by Makhan Singh, Tom Mboya, Pio Gama Pinto, Fred Kubai, Chege Kibachia and Martin Shikuku agitated for the labour rights of the African workers. Using his international networks as a trade unionist, Tom Mboya who served as the Treasurer of Kenya African Union (KAU), the major post-World War II political organisation, mobilised finances for Kenya African Union (KAU) operations (Nyagaka, 2021). When Kenya African Union (KAU) was banned, Tom Mboya used the Trade Union Movement to agitate for Kenya's freedom. This therefore, is a testimony that the youth of this era were very pivotal in agitation for Kenya's freedom.

5.2 The Jomo Kenyatta State (1963-1978).

The pre-independence youth continued with agitation for protection of civil liberties that had informed the independence struggle when they realized that the political elite led by Jomo Kenyatta were determined to roll back the gains of independence struggle. The Jomo Kenyatta state deliberately destroyed the checks and balances that were in the independence constitution leading to the creation of an imperial presidency (Wafula, 2021). The ensuing clash between the rival political elite and the Kenyatta state witnessed the police clash with the youth in the major towns of Kenya. The Kenyan youth of this time rejected state repression characterized by Jomo Kenyatta's personal rule.

The notable youth figures of this time were Pio Gama Pinto, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, George Anyona Moseti, Martin Shikuku, Chelagat Mutai and University students. For example, Pio Gama Pinto was killed because of his active agitation against Jomo Kenyatta's autocracy (Maganda, 2012). Josiah Mwangi Kariuki better known as JM Kariuki questioned the excesses of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's government leading to his assassination in 1975. Philomena Chelagat Mutai spoke against political assassinations, land grabbing and corruption in the Jomo Kenyatta government in the 1970s leading to her incarceration alongside Jean Marie Seroney and Martin Shikuku. This agitation against the Jomo Kenyatta state was thus a social deviance aimed at causing policy change immediately after independence.

Chelagat Mutai, Mwashengu wa Mwachofi, Lawrence Sifuna, Abuya Abuya, Koigi wa Wamwere, Chibule wa Tsuma and James Orenge were later nicknamed as 'Seven Bearded Sisters' by then Attorney General Charles Njonjo, even though six of these activists were men, because of their active role in being the voice of the ordinary Kenyans (Mutua, 2014).

In 1969 the youth aligned to the Kenya Peoples Union (KPU) and the police clashed in Kisumu when President Jomo Kenyatta went to preside over the opening of the Soviet-built New Nyanza Provincial General Hospital, better known as Russia as an agitation against alienation of the Luo community from the post-independence government (*Daily Nation*, June 28, 2020).

In the 1970s, University students challenged Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's capitalist orientation. They argued that socialism had all answers to Kenya's problems. In addition, they stated that Kenya was better off identifying itself with the Soviet Union. This explains why Jomo Kenyatta's government denied Oginga Odinga permission to give a Public Lecture to students of the University of Nairobi. In the months that followed, the University of Nairobi students engaged the police in running battles in the streets of Nairobi to express their displeasure on political assassinations, economic strains and Jomo Kenyatta's autocracy (Savage and Taylor, 1991).

5.3 The Daniel Moi State (1978-2002)

Just like the Jomo Kenyatta state, the Moi state enacted repressive laws especially after the foiled coup of 1982 which had been organised by youthful military officers led by Hezekiah Ochuka and Pancreas Oteyo Okumu who were unhappy with President Moi's autocracy and personal rule (*The Star*, February 6, 2024). The casualties of these repressive laws were the youth who were shot at will by the police and the military, as the other youth were detained without trial, others went on self-imposed exile, while others lost their lives through enforced disappearances and murder (Mutua, 2023 and Wafula, 2021). During this period, there was increased youth agitation for social justice, equity, the rule of law, fairness and the return of multiparty democracy.

Students from the University of Nairobi took the lead again in agitating for social justice, supported by young parliamentarians better known as the Young Turks. The young people of this era agitated against one party rule and the shrinking democratic space (*The Standard*, August 14, 2016). Through protests, these young men and women alongside the church, political activists, university students, lawyers, and university lecturers played a critical role in ensuring Kenya transitioned to a multiparty democracy. Notable young activists from within and without parliament include Abuya Abuya, Mwashengu Mwachofi, Gitobu Imanyara, Koigi

Wamwere, Anyang Nyong'o, James Orenge, George Anyona, Wangari Maathai, Micere Mugo, Kivutha Kibwana and Okiya Omtatah (Bwire, 2023).

The youth of this period also risked arrest, torture, assassination and police brutality for the sake of a just and democratic Kenya. The bravery of university students against the tyrannical rule of President Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi led to the emergence of young political leaders who currently control the Kenyan political landscape (Ibid). The youth also formed pro-democracy civil society groups such as National Convention Executive Council (NCEC) which played a critical role in constitution review process, agitation for the release of political prisoners' movement and student movements across all the public universities in Kenya (Katumanga, 2004).

Throughout the reign of Daniel Arap Moi, students continued to demand for accountability from the government despite the state crackdown and infiltration of the Universities lecture halls by the dreaded police unit, the Special Branch. When Dr. Robert Ouko was assassinated, university students held protests in major towns of Kenya calling the government to give answers on the cause of Dr. Ouko's death. Notable student leaders during this era are Mwandawiro Mghanga, Kepta Ombati, Odhiambo Oyoko, Titus 'Tito' Adongusi, Oginga Ogego, Wanyiri Kihoro, Maina Kiranga, Onyango Oloo, Wafula Buke, Churchill Suba, Tirop Kitur, Kangethe Mungai, Odour Ongwen and Gacheche Miano (*The Standard*, December 4, 2013 and Amutabi, 2002). Thus, these youth protests can be best described as social deviance against the Moi state with the major aim of causing policy change in governance systems.

In 1991 the youth actively participated in the Saba Saba rallies alongside the opposition leaders and this birthed pro-democracy activism in Kenya. More youth were killed between 1990 and 1997 as they participated in opposition's pro-democracy reform rallies in Nairobi and elsewhere in Kenya (Muigai, 1993 and Muhula, 2007).

5.4 The Mwai Kibaki State (2003-2013)

The ascension of Mwai Kibaki to power was characterized by enthusiasm over the creation of a new Kenya. Within two years since ascending to power, the euphoria that accompanied President Kibaki's election dissipated into disappointment and despair more so with his failure to abide by the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that was considered a remedy against Kenya's negative ethnicity. His government abetted corruption characterized by so many corruptions related scandals like Anglo-leasing projects consummated by the KANU government but paid by the Kibaki regime, De la Rue Saga and Triton scandals (*Daily Nation*, May 1, 2022).

President Kibaki's reign was also characterized by violation of basic human rights like the freedom of the media. The police invaded the Standard Media Group for planning to publish and broadcast a series of stories which were termed as damaging to the government and compromising to the state of national security (*Daily Nation*, Sunday 24, 2013). The University of Nairobi students once again took the lead in going to the streets to protest the killing of human right activists Oscar King'ara and Paul Oulu, an execution style outside the precincts of the University of Nairobi (*Standard Digital*, March 8, 2009 and *Sunday Nation*, March 8, 2009).

It is worth noting that President Mwai Kibaki was put to power majorly by the youth who were tired of Moi's tyrannical rule.

Secondly, President Kibaki's promise to deliver a new constitution within 100 days of taking office appealed to the youth who wanted the conclusion of the constitutional review process (*BBC News*, August 27, 2010). When he meddled with the constitutional review process, the youth alongside the other Kenyans punished him by rejecting his proposed Constitutional Draft in the 2005 referendum. The anti-climax of his reign occurred in December 2007 when he allegedly rigged 2007 presidential elections and his subsequent taking of oath of office in the night.

Finally, the youth advocacy to cause policy change under Kibaki's reign cannot be discussed without highlighting the role of the youth in 2007/2008 post-election violence. The main actors in the violence were the youth who protested President Mwai Kibaki's alleged electoral fraud. Eventually this culminated in a contested presidential election of 2007/2008 which led to post-election violence, where many people lost their lives and properties worth hundreds of millions destroyed. The majority of the people who died were the youth, felled down by the police bullets. Thus, these youthful protests were a form of social deviance aimed at agitating for electoral justice in Kenya. The notable young parliamentarians like Ababu Namwamba expressed their disaffection against President Mwai Kibaki for messing up with the presidential election results where he had outrightly lost. For instance Hon. Ababu Namwamba refused to take an oath in President Mwai Kibaki's name (*Daily Nation*, April 29, 2022).

Following the formation of the Government of the National Unity in lieu of the contested presidential elections of 2007/2008, the youth through their grassroot mobilisation also formed organisations like Youth Agenda and Kenya Youth Network which campaigned for the Constitution of Kenya, 2010. Because of the youth agitation, the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 was enacted (Omweri, 2024). The enactment of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 did not only provide for the rights of the youth, but also ring-fenced so many rights that the youth had been agitating for (Government of Kenya, 2010).

5.5 The Uhuru Kenyatta State (2013-2022)

President Uhuru Kenyatta surmounted so many hurdles to win the 2013 presidency. These hurdles were; indictment at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague on charges of crimes against humanity following the post-election violence of 2007/2008, tense political climate following the post-election violence of 2007/2008 and the clarion call that Kenyans were not ready to elect another Kikuyu as the President after Mwai Kibaki (*The Guardian*, Sunday March 3, 2013 and *Daily Nation*, November 22, 2014).

However, his presidential campaign machinery organised around a metaphor, *digital* (Jubilee) versus *analogue* – Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD) ideology managed to hand him a presidential victory (Nakiboli et al, 2017). The reason why President Uhuru Kenyatta used this metaphor because he wanted to connect with the youth constituents. The *digital* versus *analogue* campaign presented Uhuru Kenyatta and his Jubilee party as youth-oriented and tech-savvy against CORD who were considered old and thus not capable of addressing socio-economic issues that were affecting the youth.

However, President Uhuru Kenyatta presided over a borrowing spree that overburdened Kenyans with debts attracting the attention of the youths who condemned the debt burden. One of the notable youth who condemned the debt burden is Ephraim Njega who used

his Facebook and X social media handles to analyse how the Kenyan government was sinking into debt burden through an uncontrolled borrowing spree. For instance, when President Uhuru Kenyatta took the reins of power in 2013, the Kenyan national debt stood at KES 1.79 Trillion and by the time of his exit in 2022, the national debt had grown to KES 8.7 Trillion (*The Elephant*, April 24, 2023).

The government of Uhuru Kenyatta also experienced massive industrial unrests by Doctors, Teachers and University workers majority of whom were the youth over increased cost of living, shrinking household incomes and widespread corruption (*Daily Nation*, March 10, 2017). These industrial unrests as social deviance by the youthful workforce in the public service were meant to make the state address increased cost of living, shrinking household incomes and widespread corruption.

President Uhuru Kenyatta also faced the wrath of the youth aligned to the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD) who were calling for electoral reforms. The youth stormed the streets of Nairobi in 2014 to agitate in what they called failure by the government of Uhuru Kenyatta to address corruption, increased cost of living and rising insecurity (*Aljazeera News*, July 7, 2014). Other issues that the youth complained about were Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC)'s biasness in favour of the government led by Uhuru Kenyatta and therefore they called for creation of a neutral electoral body (*BBC News*, May 24, 2016). Eventually, President Uhuru Kenyatta acceded to CORD's demands for electoral reforms after the IEBC commissioners and their Chairman Issack Hassan agreed to the exit plan negotiated by Senator Kiraitu Murungi and James Orengo who co-chaired a Select Committee on IEBC reforms (*Daily Nation*, July 17, 2016).

In 2017, the youth aligned to the National Super Alliance (NASA) stormed the streets across the major towns in Kenya to protest in what they called rigging of 2017 presidential elections. Despite the insistence of the Chief Electoral Officer Ezra Chiloba that the presidential elections had not been manipulated, the opposition presidential candidate, Raila Odinga stated that the electoral system had been compromised by hacking (*BBC News*, August 10, 2017). After successful presidential petition at the Supreme Court of Kenya, which declared that 2017 presidential elections were marred with irregularities and illegalities, Raila Odinga withdrew from the repeat presidential elections in what he said as the failure by the IEBC to institute the necessary electoral reforms before the repeat elections (*Aljazeera News*, August 10, 2017). The country was so divided that the youth aligned to NASA were calling for secession of Kenya. It is this threat of dismembering the Kenyan state that most likely influenced a handshake between Raila Odinga and President Uhuru Kenyatta (Nyangaka, 2025).

The youthful human rights activists also became a thorn in the side of the government of Uhuru Kenyatta. Siasa place Director, Nerima Wako and her colleagues, Bonface Mwangi and his wife Njeri Mwangi, Hussein Khalid requires a special mention for being the voices that mobilised the youth to protest against rampant corruption in the government and the failure by the government to address unemployment, high cost of living, forced disappearances, extra judicial killings and disrespect of the rule of law. Albert Wambugu, Robert Otieno, Pablo Chacha, Erot Franco and Bonface Mwangi also became the leading voices that amplified the need for transparency and accountability in the government of Uhuru Kenyatta (*Daily Nation*, July 2, 2020). Grace Maingi, the Chief Executive Officer of *Uraia* Civil Society was also in the forefront

championing women's rights and social justice for the ordinary Kenyan citizens (*Daily Nation*, May 9, 2014). The National Youth Bunge Association (NYBA), a registered youth lobby group also took up the role of capacity building for the youth to enable them to amplify their voices in the Building Bridges Initiative (BBi) (Wafula, 2021).

6. Gen Z Protests in Africa at a Glance.

Even though it is right to argue that the youth have been involved in advocacy to cause policy change in the continent since the colonial and post-colonial era, the rise of the internet and social media platforms dramatically transformed youth activism in post-colonial Africa, enabling faster mobilisation and more significant impact in policy change (Twinomurinzi, 2024). The use of digital platforms emerged as powerful tools that could be used to challenge bad governance, over-taxation, extra-judicial killings, entrenched systems of oppression and facilitation of grassroots mobilisation (ibid).

In Nigeria, the youth organised street protests to push for disbandment of a notorious police unit called Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) through the hashtag #EndSARS. Protests against SARS were sparked by a video of a man allegedly killed by the Nigerian police. In a quick turn of events, the Nigerian government through a special presidential directive ordered the immediate dissolution of the police unit (*BBC News*, October 11, 2020). Subsequently, the youth continued to use social platforms to push for good leadership, transparency, accountability and an end to extra-judicial killings through hashtags #Endhunger, #EndBadGovernance (Twinomurinzi, 2024 and Engels, 2024).

The Ghanaian youths also mobilised using digital platforms to agitate for social and economic reforms. They organised peaceful demonstrations to push the government of President Nana Akufo-Addo to address rampant corruption in his government, the debt crisis and high inflation that had triggered the worst economic crisis in Ghana since independence. Waving placards written "Akufo-Addo must go" the protesters implored the International Monetary Fund (IMF) not to give Akufo's government the loan they were negotiating for to prop up the economy (*Aljazeera*, November 22, 2022).

In South Africa, university students started online agitation against the government to lower school fees through hashtags like #FeesMustFall. The mobilization gained widespread support among university students across the country culminating in the shutdown of learning institutions. Inside South African parliament, the members of Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) forced the South African Finance Minister Nhlanhla to halt the budget speech as the opposition chanted 'Fees Must Fall' a slogan that had been borrowed from the students (*BBC News*, October 21, 2015).

In Mozambique, the youths poured into the streets to protest in what they called electoral fraud following the disputed presidential elections that saw Daniel Chapo of Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) party sweep polls over Venancio Mondlane of Optimistic People for the Development of Mozambique (Podemos) party. Youth in their thousands defied government crackdown and brought the Capital Maputo to a standstill. The police dispersed the protesters with tear gas and gunfire (*The Guardian*, February 6, 2025).

In 2021 the Ugandan election crisis witnessed the youth use the social media platforms to condemn state excesses and took the

opportunity to push for political reforms. At the heart of these youth-led advocacy was Bob Wine, a Ugandan youthful Member of Parliament (Omweri, 2024). In 2024 the Ugandan youths once again staged protests in Kampala and other major towns albeit with state repression. Consequently, these anti-corruption protests witnessed dozens of Ugandan people get arrested. President Museveni took the opportunity to warn the youths that they were playing with fire. (*BBC News*, July 24, 2024 and Twinomurinzi 2024).

In Sudan, the Sudanese Revolution witnessed mass protests led by the youth against the government of President Omar al-Bashir. Despite the state repression of the youthful protesters, Omar al-Bashir was eventually ousted in 2019. The youth were discontented with rampant corruption in the government, human rights violations and economic recession (Omweri, 2024). Even after the military took over power through a coup, the youth continued to protest, dismissing the deal signed by the military and the civilian leaders saying it was vague (*BBC News*, December 19, 2022).

7. Gen Z Protests and the William Ruto State.

7.1 Background to William Ruto's Presidential Bid.

William Ruto's journey to State House began when he first sought nomination as a presidential candidate for the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) ticket in 2007 presidential elections but lost the party's delegate vote to Raila Odinga (*The East African*, September 13, 2022).

Following a disputed presidential election results in 2007/2008 where Raila Odinga accused President Mwai Kibaki of stealing his victory as the country descended into a spate of deadly ethnic clashes, the international community led by Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General led mediation efforts that brought Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga and their stalwarts alike together into forming a Government of National Unity. One of the ODM stalwarts who got a Cabinet job following the formation of the Government of National Unity was William Ruto. He was appointed as the Minister for Agriculture by President Mwai Kibaki (*The Star*, January 22, 2019).

However, William Ruto's stay in the Cabinet was short-lived as cracks starting emerging in the ODM wing of the government over the Mau forest evictions, International Criminal Court (ICC) indictment of William Ruto and his subsequent suspension from the Cabinet over a maize scandal, a suspension later rescinded by President Mwai Kibaki. As a result, William Ruto broke ranks with Raila Odinga and his ODM party and subsequently founded his political party, the United Republican Party (URP), a party which he used to form a coalition with Uhuru Kenyatta's The National Alliance (TNA) and they won the 2013 general elections (*The Guardian*, March 9, 2013). Having mended fences with his political nemesis, President Uhuru Kenyatta entered into a handshake with Raila Odinga, displacing William Ruto as the establishment candidate to succeed Uhuru Kenyatta in 2022 general elections (Nyagaka, 2025).

Just like his predecessor, William Ruto also surmounted so many challenges to rise to power. First, he had many alleged cases of corruption and more damaging was the High Court ruling against him over land grabbing (*The Standard*, June 28, 2013). William Ruto also alleged that the Deep State (powerful political elite) in

the government was determined to subvert the will of the people (*Al Jazeera*, August 6, 2022).

Following the expiration of two term limits of President Uhuru Kenyatta in 2022, William Ruto declared his interest to succeed Uhuru Kenyatta. William Ruto's campaign machinery presented him as a hustler – a son of a peasant who hawked chicken and peanuts on the streets while projecting the détente between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga families as dynasties who had done little to uplift the lives of Kenyans and people who did not have a track record (*Aljazeera*, August 17, 2022).

During the campaign trail leading to 2022 presidential elections, Raila Odinga packaged his campaign policies around revival of the economy, war on corruption, lowering of the cost of living, provision of universal healthcare and free education up to the university (*The Star*, 6 June 2022) while William Ruto campaigned on creation of jobs for millions of unemployed youth, fixing of the cost of living and the economy, entrenching good governance, fighting ethnic politics, addressing debt burden and upholding constitutionalism (*Reuters*, July, 20, 2022). In a nutshell, William Ruto summed his campaign promises as a bottom-up approach to the growth of the Kenyan economy.

7.2 The Youth and the Anti-Finance Bill 2023/2024 Protests.

Following the disputed 2022 presidential elections and the confirmation of William Ruto's victory by the Supreme Court of Kenya and his subsequent inauguration, four petitions were lodged in the legislature for the ouster of the 4 Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) commissioners who had rejected presidential election results as announced by the IEBC chairman Wafula Chebukati on the account of gross misconduct, incompetence and violation of the constitution (*The Standard*, November 24, 2022 and Nyagaka, 2025).

While in Kisumu Raila Odinga told the press that he would start mega rallies across the country to protest the ouster of the 4 IEBC commissioners. He stated that the ouster was politically motivated, yet the 4 commissioners had chosen to stand for the truth (*The Star*, November 27, 2022). In response, President William Ruto, rubbished Raila Odinga's planned demonstrations over the ouster of the 4 IEBC commissioners (*Daily Nation*, November 29, 2022) and warned Raila Odinga against inciting the Kenyan youth to violence and stated that Kenya is a country of law and order and he cannot allow Kenya to slide into anarchy because of few individuals (*Daily Nation*, March 20, 2023 and *Citizen Digital*, March 15, 2023). Consequently, the Azimio la Umoja youth led by their Bunge la Mwananchi President Calvin Okoth Otieno announced that they will hold daily protests in support of the 4 ousted IEBC commissioners (*The Star*, November 29, 2022). And for sure the Azimio la Umoja youth-led demonstrations took place in the areas that Azimio la Umoja enjoyed immense support. In response the state used the police to suppress the opposition-led protests. These youth protests were therefore a social deviance to agitate for electoral justice.

Owing to the immense destruction of property, injuries and death of demonstrators in Nairobi and Kisumu, the church appealed to President William Ruto and Raila Odinga to consider giving peace a chance. Throughout 2023, Azimio la Umoja organised multiple waves of demonstrations to voice grievances over high cost of living, electoral injustice and tax hikes as contained in the 2023/2024 finance bill.

During the finance bill's public participation, Kenyans had rejected the tax proposals as contained in the finance bill of 2023/2024. When it became apparently clear that Ruto's government was determined to have the bill passed by the National Assembly, Raila Odinga called on the youth to come out in large numbers on 14th June, 2023 to protest against the finance bill that President William Ruto was bulldozing in the National Assembly in total disregard of public resistance to the bill (*Aljazeera*, July 18, 2023).

On 26th June, 2023, President William Ruto assented the finance bill into law. The finance bill had proposed increased taxes on various essential items that threatened to exacerbate the already high cost of living. For instance, the bill had introduced digital asset tax at 3%, petroleum products at 16%, Value Added Tax at 16% and Affordable Housing Levy at 1.5%. Subsequently, the civil society groups lodged suits at the Kenyan High Court, suits that succeeded in over-turning the finance bill by declaring some sections of the finance bill unconstitutional. The Court of Appeal later declared the entire Finance act unconstitutional but the finance law was later re-instated by the Supreme Court (*Daily Nation*, June 6, 2023 and *Reuters*, October 29, 2024).

As protests intensified, President Ruto posited in his X social media handle that he was ready to meet Raila Odinga anytime for the sake of the nation (*The Star*, April 2, 2023 and *Aljazeera*, July 25, 2023). In a rejoinder, Raila Odinga acknowledged the olive branch extended by President Ruto. While addressing the press from his Capitol Hill office in Nairobi, Raila Odinga called off the bi-weekly anti-government protests. He stated that the Azimio-One Kenya alliance was ready for dialogue with President Ruto's government as long as the dialogue would address the key issues they had initially raised among them reconstitution of IEBC, address to increased cost of living and over-taxation of Kenyans. In the meantime, he called for the release of all protesters and termination of protest-related prosecutions (*Citizen Digital*, April 2, 2023).

7.3 Gen Z Uprising and the Anti-Finance Bill 2024/2025.

For a while the country remained stable in the late 2023 and early 2024. It appears that President Ruto did not learn from the anger Kenyans had expressed over the enactment of 2023 Finance Act (Nyagaka, 2025). In the 2024 financial year, the government once again scaled up the taxation measures in a bid to increase government revenue. The signs were there for anyone willing to read that Kenyans were not ready for another increase in taxation. Through the use of social media platforms, the youth had urged the lawmakers to reject the Finance Bill 2024 in totality.

When it became apparent that the lawmakers were determined to enact the 2024 Finance bill in mid-June, 2024, hundreds of thousands of youth started organising protests across the country to urge the lawmakers to reject the 2024 Finance bill (Gichuki, 2024). On the D-day when the Finance bill was supposed to be enacted in the National Assembly, the youth organised the mother of all protests across the country. Nevertheless, the lawmakers voted to enact the contentious 2024 finance bill amidst immense protests from the Kenyan youth against the bill (*The Star*, 4 July, 2024). In the afternoon of the enactment day, the youthful protesters overwhelmed the police and stormed parliament and subsequently set some sections of parliament a blaze to teach lawmakers a lesson for ignoring the voices of Kenyans to reject the 2024 Finance bill. Thus, the protests of 25th June, 2024 and the invasion of parliament by the Gen Zs was social deviance to make legislators reject the controversial finance bill. The following day President William

Ruto called a presser in Kenya's State House and declared that he had conceded and therefore, he will not assent to the controversial 2024 finance bill.

Young members of Parliament also actively supported the youths in rejecting the 2024/2025 finance bill. Gen Z protests cannot be mentioned without epitomizing the role played by Hon. Paul Ongili alias Babu Owino and Hon. Edwin Sifuna, the Secretary General of Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Babu Owino rebuked President William Ruto over his failure to take responsibility for the death of Gen Zs during the anti-finance protests (*Citizen Digital*, July 6, 2024). Hon. Edwin Sifuna also boldly stepped in to try to prevent the police from shooting the protesters. He also used his X social media handle to condemn roughing up and shooting of the protesters by the police (*The Standard*, April 29, 2025).

8. The Tactics and Strategies used by the Gen Zs to Advocate for Policy Change in Kenya.

In order to amplify their voices on the perceived injustices, the Gen Zs leveraged on digital technologies and platforms such as X platform formerly Twitter, Facebook, Tiktok and Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) to mobilise support, organise protests and amplify their dissent against the perceived injustices committed by the government of President William Ruto (Twinomurinzi, 2024). For instance, through the use of hashtags such as *#RejectFinanceBill2024*, *#OccupyCBD*, *#RutoMustGo*, *#OccupyStatehouse*, *#AngukaNayo*, *#GenZAgainstTaxes*, *#Fixthecountry*, *#Tumechoka*, *#TotalShutdown* and *#OccupyParliament*, the Gen Zs were able to mobilise and disseminate real-time communications about demonstration locations and activities. The Gen Zs also created and disseminated powerful digital narratives through videos, info-graphics and silhouettes to air their social and economic realities as they shaped the public opinion against the finance bill in a bid to bolster the protest's legitimacy (*Business Daily*, July 15, 2024).

Digital activists and Gen Zs also hosted audio X spaces where they amplified their voices as they took stock of the protests. The audio X space also allowed for rapid sharing of information and real-time protest coordination. The X platform was also used to share demonstration related content to keep the other Gen Z protesters up to speed on the protests across the country. The X space was so popular that it attracted senior government officials like Hon. Kipchumba Murkomen, the current Cabinet Secretary for Interior, formerly Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Roads and Public Works and also for Youth Affairs, Creative Economy and Sports and Senate Majority Leader Aaron Cheruiyot (*Citizen Digital*, June 22, 2024) and their efforts to talk were rebuffed. It is only the Principal Secretary for Higher Education, Dr. Beatrice Inyangala, who got an opportunity to answer questions in a different audio-X space in regard to the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) and the New University Funding Model. X platform further helped in building solidarity and support for the Gen Zs from the Kenyans in diaspora and the international community (Twinomurinzi, 2024).

The X spaces also provided robust platforms where the Kenyan youth mobilised, shared strategic communication and coordinated the protests. Some of the topics that were discussed during the X space included the broader discussion about the Finance Bill 2024/2025, the role of the youth in the Kenyan political discourse, the ongoing anti-Finance bill protests and the arrest of renowned

digital activists (*Daily Nation*, June 23, 2024). Gen Zs also used Instagram and TikTok social media platforms to create protest-related content where they shared their personal stories that underscored their perceived grievances against the government of President William Ruto.

The widespread creation and sharing of memes, videos, silhouettes, and info-graphics helped amplify the Gen Zs' compelling grievances against the 2024/2025 finance bill. In order to share confidential messages as the state apparatus started to arrest the digital activists, the Gen Zs turned to more secure messaging applications like Telegram and Signal platforms which are known to be secure in disseminating private communications (Twinomurinzi, 2024).

X space was also used to raise finances to cover funeral and medical expenses for the injured and deceased protesters respectively. This demonstrated the solidarity of the Gen Zs in supporting their fellow protestors. As the government threatened to impose restrictions on X use, the Gen Zs encouraged the youth to download a Virtual Private Network (VPN) through the hashtags *#TumieniVPN* and *#DownloadVPN* in order for the Gen Z protestors to maintain internet access (Media Council of Kenya, July 18, 2024).

The Gen Zs also created Facebook public groups such as Gen Z Revolution and Gen Zs' Association of Kenya, running on the hashtag *#rutomustbestopped*, *#rutomustgo*, *#occupyCBD*, *#youthsareaware* to facilitate wide public engagement through comments, shares and reactions as the youth organised and disseminated information about the anti-finance bill (ibid).

As the government limited access to the Internet, the Gen Zs turned to Zello, an application capable of transforming a smartphone into a walkie-talkie radio that could be logged into a group call. Zello platform enabled protesters to efficiently coordinate demonstrations and rapid dissemination of information on protests (Media Council of Kenya, July 18, 2024).

The Gen Zs also used TikTok to stream live protests. This allowed the protesters to capture authentic moments as demonstrations unfolded. Live streaming of protests encouraged more youth to get out into the streets. Live streaming also helped in countering misinformation and disinformation about the protests (Omweri, 2024). Live broadcasts using TikTok also enabled protestors to monitor the movement of security agencies by giving live updates. For instance, when the military was deployed to help the police to protect parliament after it was overrun by the Gen Zs, the Gen Zs used TikTok to share videos and pictures of military vehicles and tanks leaving the military barracks where they urged the youth to retreat from Nairobi CBD.

The WhatsApp was also used by the Gen Zs to mobilise protestors. The Gen Zs formed WhatsApp groups to coordinate protests and to share critical updates such as protest schedules, Gen Z leaders who will address the protestors, strategies for peaceful protests, legitimacy of Gen Z protests and instructions for effective participation in the protests.

The Gen Zs also developed memes, jokes, and shared the Members of Parliament's contacts using online platforms where they urged the youths to '*Salimia mbunge wako*' –loosely translated to mean 'send greetings to your member of parliament'. This expression simply meant asking or sending a short message to one's Member of Parliament to reject the finance bill or rebuke him or her for

supporting the controversial finance bill. Sharing the contacts of Members of Parliament helped amplify the voice of the youth and this became a powerful tactic to fight for accountability, transparency and social justice (*Daily Nation*, June 22, 2024). Thus, the use of the social media platforms offered a counter-narrative to the mainstream media which often acted as gate keepers to the status quo and often over-looked bottom-up protests.

This tactic of sending short messages to law makers, spammed the MPs cellphones with messages that asked them to reject the finance bill. This kind of tactic made MPs cellphones practically unusable because of the number of short messages they were receiving (*BBC News*, June 20, 2024).

The Gen Zs also embraced cultural and artistic expression in the form of cartoons and silhouettes to advance the need for policy change and identity assertion. Through music, visual arts, poetry, and other creative mediums, the youth were able to amplify their voices, express their socio-political views and challenged societal norms (Githui, 2024).

9. The Impacts of Gen Z protests on Accountability, Policy Formulation, Transparency and Political Change in Kenya.

The June 25, 2024 parliament invasion by the Gen Zs marked a significant shift of protests from online and the streets to the corridors of power. The occupation of parliament by the Gen Zs symbolized deep-rooted anger on bad governance, corruption, debt burden and unemployment Kenyans had with the political class.

The day of parliament invasion was a turning point for the protestors as it coincided with the second reading of the controversial financial bill in the National Assembly which legislators aligned to the government were determined to pass. Technically, once a bill gets approval of legislators in the second reading, it is as well as a law in-waiting. This therefore escalated tensions that had been building up over the weeks culminating to forced entry of protestors to parliament to stop legislators from passing the controversial finance bill (Gichuki, 2024).

The immediate response by President William Ruto to this crisis was to announce from a televised address to the nation from State House that he had conceded to the voices of Kenyans and that he will not assent the controversial financial bill into law. Secondly, he promised that he will be engaging the Kenyan youth in the days that were to follow, including through the use of digital platforms (ibid). While attending a church service in Nyahururu, Laikipia County, President William Ruto acknowledged the protests by expressing pride in the Gen Zs' democratic engagement while promising dialogue and reforms (*The Star*, June 23, 2024).

Despite the fact that President William Ruto had refrained assenting the controversial finance bill, protests continued up to the better part of August 2024. Thus it is right to argue that the controversial financial bill was just a trigger to a broader struggle for social, economic and political reforms. The Kenyan youth were demanding accountability, transparency and responsive leadership.

As part of his civic engagement duty, President William Ruto eventually engaged the Kenyan youth in a live audio discussion hosted by a Kenyan Youth called Osama Otero in X space. The youth challenged President William Ruto on the extra-judicial killings perpetrated by the Kenya Police, his appointment of

incompetent Cabinet Secretaries and obnoxious opulence displayed by senior government officials. Unlike the mainstream media which has gate-keepers, the X-space provided Kenyan youth with an opportunity to speak truth to power directly (*Daily Nation*, July 5, 2024).

Before his audio X Space session began, President Ruto had delivered a national address to the nation from the State House, promising a raft of spending cuts, saying they were needed because the planned tax hikes had been scrapped. These raft measures included dissolution of 47 state corporations with overlapping functions, suspension of the purchase of new vehicles for state officials for 6 months, suspension of all non-essential travel for state officials, reduction of government advisers by 50%, scrapping of the budget for the first lady and spouses of deputy president and the prime cabinet secretary and enforcement of the retirement of public servants at the age of 60 (*BBC News*, July 5, 2024).

The youth were particularly bitter with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport Kipchumba Murkomen, now Cabinet Secretary for Interior who was reported to have said during an on-line television interview hosted by Obinna that his Rolex wristwatch was worth KES. 900,000 and his belt was worth KES 50,000. This is what Citizen Digital captured about the cost of Kipchumba Murkomen's attire.

"During an interview on the Obinna TV show, Murkomen revealed that he owns a Ksh. 900,000 watch while the most expensive shoe is Ksh. 80,000. Further, he also owns a Ksh. 50,000 belt and a Ksh. 20,000 tie. In total, his attire amounted to an average of Ksh 1.1 million." (*Citizen Digital*, July 9, 2024).

They also pointed out that the Majority Senate Leader Aaron Cheruiyot was flaunting Paul Parkman's designer shoes he had bought for KES 116,000. They argued the government officials were living in opulence through proceeds of corruption yet millions of Kenyans were living in abject poverty. The Gen Zs called for an end to rampant corruption in the government and implementation of bottom-up policies as promised by President Ruto during his campaign trail in 2022.

In response to this demand, President Ruto dissolved his cabinet in a bid to quell the anger of the youth who accused his cabinet of corruption and ineptitude. In order to address the grievances of the youth, President Ruto formed a 150 multi-sectoral stakeholder's engagement with the youth. However, the youth declined the invitation and instead demanded accountability from the government of President Ruto (*Daily Nation*, June 29, 2024). President William Ruto also stated that he will immediately start engaging in an extensive consultation across different sectors and political formations and other Kenyans, both in public and private, with the aim of setting up a broad-based government (*Al Jazeera*, July 11, 2024).

Gen Z's mobilization efforts also immensely impacted social justice. Through digital activism, the police have received higher levels of scrutiny in regard to extra-judicial killings than ever before. For instance, the killing of Albert Ojwang, a digital activist and teacher while in the police custody enraged the public leading to youth protests to demand justice for Albert Ojwang, an end to extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances and demand for systematic reforms in the National Police Service (*Capital FM News*, June 12, 2025).

In regard to compassion to the victims of police brutality, former Senate Majority Leader Samuel Poghiso acknowledged the spirit of compassion demonstrated by the Gen Zs, more so, how they rallied behind the families of the victims of police brutality through mobilisation of resources, showing of empathy and civic responsibility. While appearing on K24 morning television show, he stated that the government of President William Ruto should learn compassion from the Gen Zs. He observed that the Kenyan young people understood compassion more than the government of Kenya, yet compassion was the basic tenet of humanity in governance (*K24 Digital*, June 12, 2025).

Through sustained digital activism and street protests, the Gen Zs have managed to challenge the political status quo, entrenched patronage, corruption, tribalism and nepotism through demanding greater responsiveness from the political class. The Gen Zs' demand for openness in decision-making processes and public governance have forced the political class to justify their actions and to address longstanding issues of social-economic inequality and political exclusion (Githui, 2024). Gen Z protests have also awakened the youth of Kenya to have a renewed interest and desire to participate in Kenya's electoral processes. Using digital platforms, the Gen Zs are encouraging their peers to register as voters once the exercise is rolled out by the IEBC.

The Gen Zs have also been in the forefront demanding for the reconstitution of the IEBC following the resignation for the four IEBC commissioners and the expiry of the tenure of Wafula Chebukati, the Chairman of IEBC and the other two commissioners who were in the office after 2022 general elections (*Daily Nation*, January 8, 2023). The National Youth Leaders Caucus led by Alex Matere and Kidi Mwaga of Inter-Party Youth Forum have also been pushing for reconstitution of IEBC, more so the inclusion of the youth in the recruitment as the IEBC commissioners (*The Standard*, March 20, 2025).

In order to engage effectively on social media platforms, the political class has been forced to open social media platforms in order to connect with the Gen Zs. Given that Gen Zs heavily rely on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok for information and communication, the government and the elected leaders have been actively using these channels to share government policies, to conduct political participation and showcase progress in the implementation of government development projects.

As Kenyans prepare to go to the ballot in 2027, the Gen Zs will have far-reaching influence in the 2027 polls, not only through their input in social media campaigns but also in the voting trends and preferences (*The Star*, January 13, 2025). The aspiring politicians have no choice but to relate with the Gen Zs issues and be seen to walk, talk and be associated with the Gen Zs (*The Star*, January 13, 2025).

10. The Role of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 in Emboldening Gen Z's Advocacy for Social Justice in Kenya.

Beyond the loud voices for accountability, transparency and reforms, Kenyans cannot hesitate to appreciate the enactment of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 which gives every Kenyan the right to assemble, demonstrate, picket and present petitions to government institutions while being unharmed. Despite the fact

that the people of Kenya have been through many challenges emanating from bad governance, rampant corruption, disregard of the rule of law, state excesses among many other contemporary impediments that undermines Kenya as a liberal democracy, Kenyans can only appreciate adopting a progressive constitution. For instance, had the government of President William Ruto managed public funds according to the principles of public finance as espoused in the constitution of Kenya 2010, the Gen Zs would not have gone to the streets.

Article 37 of the Constitution of Kenya affirms that the right to protest is inalienable. Since protests are anchored in the Kenyan Constitution, they are therefore a form of direct democracy through which Kenyans express their sovereignty when the government turns rogue and refuses to listen to the voices of the Kenyan people.

Article 55, sub-article (b) of the Constitution of Kenya requires that the Kenyan youth should have opportunities to associate, be represented and participate in political, social, economic and other spheres of life (The Government of Kenya, 2010). As argued by Odhiambo (2024), this provision acknowledges the invaluable role of the Kenyan youth in nation building. Therefore, the political class cannot purport to represent effectively without getting the views of the youth in the political, social, economic and other spheres of their life.

Article 1 of the Constitution of Kenya further states that 'All sovereign power belongs to the people of Kenya and shall be exercised only in accordance with this Constitution'. The political activism of youths of Kenya therefore reminds and asks the political class to follow and adhere to the Kenyan Constitution. Whereas the Constitution of Kenya espouses adherence to the principles of public participation, as addressed in article 10 and article 118 of the Constitution of Kenya, the recent Gen Z protests highlight the nexus between observing constitutional principles of public participation in legislation and the actual practice particularly in regard to 2023 and 2024 finance bills. Gen Z protests demonstrated lack of meaningful civic engagement in the law making process despite the fact that the Constitution of Kenya emphasizes public participation. Through digital and street protests the Gen Zs told the powers-that-be that Kenyans want real public participation, a genuine process of public consultation rather than public consultation as a procedural formality.

Therefore, it is right to argue that the Gen Zs have demonstrated a serious commitment in upholding the basic tenets of the Kenyan Constitution, especially as outlined in chapter 1, Article 3 of the Constitution of Kenya which states that every person has an obligation to respect, uphold and defend the Constitution. The collective voice of the youth have reminded the political class that they are not above the law and that constitutionalism must be upheld, if Kenya is to be a just, responsive and democratic society. The youth have also reminded the political class that they are not just passive observers in political, economic and social matters affecting their lives, but they are very active participants in shaping the future of the nation.

11. Conclusion

This paper sought to historicize the youth activism in Kenya; to examine the tactics and strategies used by the Gen Zs to advocate for policy change in Kenya and to discuss the impacts of the Gen Z protests on accountability, policy formulation, transparency and political change in Kenya and assessing the role of the Constitution

of Kenya 2010 in emboldening the Gen Z's advocacy for social justice in Kenya. The paper established that the smartphone became a powerful tool for the disgruntled Kenyan youth against the government. The youth armed with their smartphones used the social media platforms to hold the government of William Ruto accountable, raised awareness on social injustices committed by the government, raised an alarm over rampant corruption in the government, satirized the political class, and resisted police brutality. The paper argues that the Ruto state cannot forever depend on the police brutal force as a way of quelling simmering discontent among the Kenyan youth. The Kenyan youth are communicating to the power but the power is either in slumber or pretending not to listen to the voices of the Kenyan youth. If the government is not keen, the protests can easily be triggered by a small spark and no sooner than later the protests could easily spiral out of hand and result in the collapse of the Kenyan state. The paper also acknowledges the critical role played by the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 in thwarting the efforts aimed at circumventing the Constitution by the Kenyan political class. The paper also established that the young people of Kenya are taking an active role in citizenship and for sure they are likely to disrupt the voting patterns in 2027 general elections. The paper concludes by observing that these youth-led advocacies will strengthen constitutionalism and creation of a just, responsive and democratic Kenyan society.

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