



Young, Brave, and Unyielding: Kenyan Youths Fight Over the Controversial Financial Bill

Summer Okibe

PhD Law Student, University of Victoria, Canada

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8253-4265>

E-mail: summerokibe@gmail.com

<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v7i4.2212>

Abstract

In June 2024, Kenya witnessed a remarkable wave of youth-led protests that culminated in the government's withdrawal of the controversial Finance Bill. This paper examines the socio-political dynamics that empowered Kenyan youths to mobilize against the bill, the economic implications of the proposed tax hikes, and the broader historical context of youth activism in Kenya. Drawing parallels with Nigeria, this study highlights the role of social media in modern protests, the government's response, and the potential long-term impact on governance and civic engagement. By analyzing these factors, the paper sheds light on the resilience and influence of young activists in shaping national policies.

Keywords: *Kenya; Finance Bill; Protests; Tax*

I. Introduction

In recent years, youth activism has emerged as a formidable force in socio-political landscapes across Africa. The protests in Kenya against the Finance Bill 2024 epitomize this trend, as young Kenyans mobilized to challenge a policy, they deemed detrimental to their economic well-being. The Finance Bill proposed new taxes on essential goods, including bread, sanitary pads, and mobile phones, which protesters argued would exacerbate the cost-of-living crisis. This movement, primarily driven by Generation Z, utilized social media platforms like TikTok and Twitter to organize and amplify their voices, demonstrating the evolving nature of protest in the digital age (Wamuyu, 2021; Mwangi, 2023).

Historically, youth activism in Kenya has played a critical role in political transformations. From the struggle for independence to the multi-party democracy movement in the 1990s, young people have been at the forefront of demanding change. However, the 2024 protests are distinct in their scale,

intensity, and the immediate impact they had on government policy. The swift withdrawal of the Finance Bill by President William Ruto highlights the power of organized, youth-led movements in influencing governance (Branch & Mampilly, 2015).

This paper explores the key components of the 2024 protests, including the socio-economic context that fueled the discontent, the strategies employed by the youths, and the government's response. It also draws comparisons with similar movements in Nigeria, where youth-led protests against economic policies have also made significant impacts. By analyzing these elements, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive youth activism in Africa and the potential implications for future governance.

II. Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to critically analyze the role of Kenyan youths in protesting against the Finance Bill 2024 using a critical discourse analysis framework. Specific objectives include:

1. To understand the socio-economic context that led to the introduction of the Finance Bill 2024 and the public sentiment surrounding it.
2. To examine the key provisions of the Finance Bill 2024 and the reasons for public opposition.
3. To explore the role of social media and digital activism in organizing and sustaining youth-led protests.
4. To analyze the government's response to the protests and the subsequent policy reversal.
5. To compare the youth protests in Kenya with those in Nigeria, particularly the #EndSARS movement, to identify similarities and differences in youth mobilization strategies and outcomes.
6. To discuss the long-term implications of these protests for youth activism, governance, and democratic engagement in Africa.

III. Research Hypothesis

This study aims to test the following hypotheses to understand the dynamics and impact of youth-led protests against the Finance Bill 2024 in Kenya:

1. **H₁**: Youth-led digital activism significantly influences government policy decisions in Kenya.
2. **H₂**: The socio-economic conditions in Kenya play a crucial role in the mobilization of youth protests against the Finance Bill 2024.
3. **H₃**: The strategies and tactics employed by Kenyan youths in protesting the Finance Bill 2024 are similar to those used by Nigerian youths in the #EndSARS movement.

IV. Research Methods

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the narratives and discourses surrounding the Finance Bill 2024 protests in Kenya; how youth activists and the government framed their arguments and the power dynamics inherent in these discourses. CDA is a theoretical approach that examines the relationship between language, power, and society. It focuses on how discourse shapes and is shaped by social and political contexts. CDA is particularly useful for understanding how language is used to construct and maintain power relations and ideologies (Fairclough, 1995). CDA will help in identifying the discursive strategies used by both the government and the youth activists. By analyzing speeches, social media posts, and news articles, the study will uncover how language was employed to legitimize or delegitimize the Finance Bill, mobilize support, and construct social identities and power relations (van Dijk, 1993).

1. Socio-Economic Context and the Finance Bill 2024

1.1 Economic Conditions and Public Sentiment

Kenya's economic landscape in 2024 was marked by significant challenges, including high unemployment rates, inflation, and a rising cost of living. The introduction of the Finance Bill, which proposed increased taxes on essential goods, was perceived as a direct assault on the economic stability of ordinary citizens. This bill sought to impose new levies on items such as bread, sanitary pads, and mobile phones, exacerbating the financial burden on low-income households (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The public sentiment was overwhelmingly negative, with many viewing the bill as regressive and unjust.

The economic policies of the Ruto administration had already been under scrutiny, with critics arguing that the government was failing to address the needs of the marginalized and economically vulnerable populations. The Finance Bill served as a catalyst for widespread discontent, tapping into the broader frustrations of Kenyans who felt increasingly alienated from the economic benefits purportedly brought by government policies (Mwangi, 2023). This sentiment was particularly strong among the youth, who faced high levels of unemployment and limited economic opportunities.

1.2 Key Provisions of the Finance Bill

The Finance Bill 2024 included several controversial provisions that sparked public outrage. Among these was the introduction of a 16% VAT on bread, a staple food item, and an Eco Levy on sanitary products, which many argued would disproportionately affect women and exacerbate period poverty (Ministry of Finance, Kenya, 2024). Additionally, the bill proposed a motor vehicle tax and increased levies on fuel, further inflating transportation costs and the price of goods.

These measures were seen as attempts to bolster government revenue amid mounting national debt. However, the approach was widely criticized for lacking sensitivity to the socio-economic realities of ordinary Kenyans. The proposed taxes on essential items were viewed as punitive and counterproductive, especially in a context where the majority of the population was already struggling with economic hardship (Wamuyu, 2021).

1.3 Public Reaction and Mobilization

The public reaction to the Finance Bill was swift and vehement. Within days of its announcement, social media platforms were flooded with posts condemning the bill and calling for action. Hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament began trending, galvanizing a broad coalition of citizens, civil society organizations, and activists. The mobilization efforts were spearheaded

by young Kenyans, who used digital tools to organize protests and disseminate information (Mwangi, 2023).

The ability of the youth to rapidly mobilize and coordinate large-scale protests was a testament to the power of digital activism. Online platforms provided a space for discussion, planning, and real-time updates, allowing protesters to stay informed and united in their efforts. This digital mobilization translated into physical demonstrations, with thousands taking to the streets in Nairobi and other major cities. The protests were marked by their peaceful yet resolute nature, with participants demanding the withdrawal of the bill and the implementation of more equitable economic policies (Branch & Mampilly, 2015).

2. Youth Mobilization and Digital Activism

2.1 Role of Social Media in Organizing Protests

Social media played a pivotal role in organizing and sustaining the protests against the Finance Bill 2024. Platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook became essential tools for communication, coordination, and mobilization. The use of hashtags, viral videos, and live streaming enabled protesters to reach a wide audience, garnering national and international attention (Wamuyu, 2021). These platforms facilitated the rapid dissemination of information, helping to unify and amplify the voices of the discontented youth.

The digital landscape allowed for innovative forms of activism, where memes, short videos, and graphics were used to critique the government and raise awareness about the issues at hand. This form of digital activism was particularly effective in engaging younger demographics, who are more likely to be active on these platforms. The use of social media also provided a degree of protection for activists, who could organize and protest virtually, minimizing the risks associated with physical demonstrations (Mwangi, 2023).

2.2 Strategies and Tactics Employed by Youths

The youth-led protests were marked by their strategic use of both digital and traditional forms of activism. Online campaigns were complemented by physical protests, creating a hybrid model of activism that maximized impact. Protesters employed a range of tactics, from peaceful marches and sit-ins to more disruptive actions such as roadblocks and occupation of public spaces. These strategies were designed to draw attention to the cause and pressure the government to act (Branch & Mampilly, 2015).

One notable tactic was the use of symbolic actions, such as holding vigils and erecting mock billboards criticizing the Finance Bill. These actions served to humanize the protest and communicate the personal impact of the proposed taxes on ordinary citizens. Additionally, the protesters leveraged their understanding of media dynamics to generate coverage and sympathy for their cause. By providing compelling visual and narrative content, they ensured that their message reached a broad audience (Mwangi, 2023).

2.3 Case Studies: TikTok and Twitter (X) Campaigns

The role of TikTok and Twitter in the 2024 protests cannot be overstated. On TikTok, short, impactful videos documenting the protests and explaining the implications of the Finance Bill went viral, attracting millions of views. These videos often featured personal stories and testimonials, highlighting the human cost of the proposed taxes. The platform's algorithm, which promotes content based on engagement, helped these videos reach a wide audience, both within and outside Kenya (Wamuyu, 2021).

Twitter (X) was used for real-time coordination and updates. Activists and organizers utilized the platform to share meeting points, strategies, and live updates from the ground. The use of Twitter Spaces, an audio-based feature, allowed for real-time discussions and planning sessions, further enhancing the coordination of the protests. The hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024 trended globally, drawing international attention and solidarity for the Kenyan protesters (Mwangi, 2023).

3. Government Response and Policy Reversal

3.1 Initial Government Stance and Measures

The initial response of the Kenyan government to the protests was one of dismissal and defiance. President William Ruto and his administration defended the Finance Bill as necessary for economic stability and debt management. The government emphasized the need to raise revenue to meet its fiscal obligations and argued that the proposed taxes were a pragmatic solution (Kenya Ministry of Finance, 2024). However, this stance failed to resonate with the public with a populace already strained by economic hardship. The public's negative reaction to the bill and the growing protests forced the government to reconsider its position (Mwangi, 2023; Branch & Mampilly, 2015).

3.2 Escalation of Protests and Clashes with Security Forces

As protests intensified, the government's response became increasingly aggressive. Security forces were deployed to disperse demonstrators, leading to violent clashes. Reports indicate that over 20 people were killed in the confrontations, with many more injured (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2024). This heavy-handed approach drew widespread condemnation from human rights organizations and further galvanized public opposition to the bill.

The government's use of force was perceived as a violation of democratic principles and exacerbated the sense of betrayal among the youth. The brutality of the security forces highlighted the disconnect between the government and the populace, undermining President Ruto's credibility and his administration's legitimacy (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

3.3 Withdrawal of the Finance Bill and Political Implications

Under mounting pressure, President Ruto announced the withdrawal of the Finance Bill, a significant victory for the protesters. This decision was seen as a concession to the power of youth activism and a recognition of the widespread discontent with government policies. The withdrawal marked a pivotal moment in Kenyan politics, demonstrating the capacity of organized, peaceful protest to effect change (Daily Nation, 2024).

The political implications of this reversal are profound. It signals a potential shift in the balance of power between the government and civil society, with youth activism emerging as a critical force in shaping policy. The government's concession also raises questions about its ability to address economic challenges without resorting to unpopular measures. Moving forward, the administration will need to rebuild trust with the public and engage in more inclusive policy-making processes (Branch & Mampilly, 2015).

4. Brief Comparative Analysis: Youth Protests in Kenya and Nigeria

4.1 Historical Overview of Youth Activism in Nigeria

Like Kenya, Nigeria has a rich history of youth activism, particularly in response to economic and social injustices. The most notable recent example is the #EndSARS movement, which began in 2020 as a protest against police brutality but quickly expanded to address broader issues of governance and

economic inequality (Adesina, 2021). Nigerian youths utilized social media to organize and mobilize, similar to their Kenyan counterparts, demonstrating the transnational nature of digital activism in Africa.

4.2 Key Similarities and Differences in Protest Movements

Both the Kenyan and Nigerian protests were driven by similar underlying issues: economic hardship, governmental accountability, and the desire for systemic change. In both cases, young people played a central role, leveraging social media to organize and amplify their movements. The use of hashtags, viral content, and real-time coordination were common strategies in both countries (Adesina, 2021; Mwangi, 2023).

However, there are notable differences. The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria were primarily focused on police brutality and governance, whereas the Kenyan protests were triggered by specific economic policies. Additionally, the scale and intensity of violence were higher in Nigeria, where the government's response included widespread reports of extrajudicial killings and severe repression (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In contrast, while the Kenyan government's response was brutal, it was relatively more restrained compared to Nigeria's.

4.3 Impact on Governance and Policy in Both Countries

The impact of these protests on governance and policy in both countries has been significant. In Nigeria, the #EndSARS movement led to the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and increased international scrutiny of the Nigerian government's human rights record (Amnesty International, 2021). In Kenya, the withdrawal of the Finance Bill represents a direct policy reversal, highlighting the immediate impact of youth activism on legislative decisions.

Both movements have underscored the power of youth-led activism in holding governments accountable and pushing for change. They have also highlighted the potential of digital platforms to facilitate civic engagement and mobilization, providing a blueprint for future protests in Africa and beyond (Adesina, 2021; Wamuyu, 2021).

5. Long-term Implications for Youth Activism and Governance

5.1 Potential for Future Youth-Led Movements

The success of the protests in Kenya and Nigeria suggests a growing potential for future youth-led movements across Africa. As digital literacy and access to social media continue to increase, young people are likely to play an even more prominent role in political activism. The ability to organize quickly, disseminate information widely, and attract international attention will empower youths to challenge unjust policies and demand greater accountability from their governments (Wamuyu, 2021; Mwangi, 2023).

5.2 Lessons for Policymakers and Civil Society

Policymakers must recognize the importance of engaging with young citizens and addressing their concerns proactively. The protests in Kenya and Nigeria illustrate the consequences of ignoring youth grievances and relying on repressive measures. To foster a more inclusive and democratic society, governments need to create channels for meaningful dialogue and participation, ensuring that young people have a voice in policy-making processes (Branch & Mampilly, 2015).

Civil society organizations also have a critical role to play in supporting youth activism and advocating for reforms. By providing resources, training, and platforms for young activists, these organizations can help sustain momentum and amplify the impact of grassroots movements. Collaborative

efforts between civil society and youth groups can drive significant progress toward social and economic justice (Adesina, 2021).

5.3 Broader Implications for Democracy and Civic Engagement in Africa

The recent protests in Kenya and Nigeria have broader implications for democracy and civic engagement across Africa. They demonstrate the power of collective action and the potential for citizens to influence policy through peaceful protest. These movements also highlight the importance of protecting the rights to free speech and assembly, as well as the need for responsive and accountable governance (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Ultimately, the resilience and determination of young activists in Kenya and Nigeria serve as an inspiration for democratic movements worldwide. By continuing to advocate for justice and equality, these youths are shaping the future of their countries and contributing to the ongoing struggle for democratic governance in Africa.

6. Discussion of Findings

The case of the Kenyan youths' protest against the Finance Bill 2024 highlights the transformative power of digital activism and the critical role of youth in shaping political landscapes. The success of these protests underscores the need for governments to engage with and address the concerns of young populations proactively. For policymakers, the key takeaway is the necessity of inclusive and responsive governance that considers the socio-economic realities of all citizens, particularly the youth. Civil society must continue to support and amplify the voices of young activists, ensuring their participation in democratic processes. The comparative analysis with Nigeria's #EndSARS movement reveals both the potential and challenges of youth-led activism in Africa, providing valuable lessons for future movements.

Conclusion

The protests against the Finance Bill 2024 in Kenya marked a significant moment in the country's socio-political landscape, showcasing the power and potential of youth-led digital activism. The critical discourse analysis revealed the complex interplay of language, power, and resistance, highlighting how both the government and youth activists used discourse to frame their positions and mobilize support. The brief comparative analysis with the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria provided valuable insights into the similarities and differences in youth mobilization strategies and outcomes, underscoring the importance of socio-economic conditions and digital platforms in shaping contemporary protest movements.

The findings underscore the need for inclusive and responsive governance that takes into account the voices and concerns of young people. Policymakers should recognize the significant influence of youth movements and engage with them proactively to prevent conflicts and foster a more inclusive political environment. Civil society organizations also play a crucial role in supporting and amplifying youth voices, ensuring their continued participation in democratic processes.

Overall, the study highlights the transformative potential of youth activism in Africa, with far-reaching implications for governance, policy, and democratic engagement. The success of the Kenyan youths' protests against the Finance Bill 2024 serves as a powerful example of how digital activism and collective action can drive meaningful change, inspiring future youth-led movements across the continent.

References

- Adesina, O. (2021). The #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis. *Journal of African Political Economy and Development*, 16(2), 120-135.
- Amnesty International. (2021). Nigeria: A Year after #EndSARS, Victims Still Await Justice. Retrieved from [Amnesty International] (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/nigeria-a-year-after-endsars-victims-still-await-justice/>).
- Branch, D., & Mampilly, Z. (2015). *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*. Zed Books.
- Daily Nation. (2024). President Ruto Withdraws Controversial Finance Bill Amid Protests. *Daily Nation*. Retrieved from [Daily Nation] (<https://www.dailynation.com/2024/06/30/president-ruto-withdraws-finance-bill>).
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman.
- Human Rights Watch. (2021). Nigeria: Soldiers Fired Live Ammunition at Peaceful #EndSARS Protesters. Retrieved from [Human Rights Watch] (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/01/nigeria-soldiers-fired-live-ammunition-peaceful-endsars-protesters>).
- Human Rights Watch. (2024). Kenya: Government Must Address Police Brutality in Finance Bill Protests. Retrieved from [Human Rights Watch] (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/27/kenya-government-must-address-police-brutality>).
- Kenya Human Rights Commission. (2024). Report on the 2024 Finance Bill Protests. KHRC. Retrieved from [KHRC] (<https://www.khrc.or.ke/2024/06/30/report-on-finance-bill-protests>).
- Kenya Ministry of Finance. (2024). The Finance Bill 2024. Retrieved from [Kenya Ministry of Finance] (<https://www.treasury.go.ke/finance-bill-2024>).
- Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Economic Survey 2023. Retrieved from [KNBS] (<https://www.knbs.or.ke/2023/economic-survey>).
- Mwangi, W. (2023). Youth and Digital Activism in Kenya: A New Paradigm for Protest. *African Journal of Communication*, 10(1), 45-67.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Discourse and Society: A New Journal for a New Research Focus. *Discourse & Society*, 4(1), 5-16.
- Wamuyu, P. K. (2021). Social Media Use for Political Participation among Youth in Kenya. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 18(3), 241-260.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).