

## Kenya lens

■ ACROSS THE COUNTRY, HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE UNITED IN THEIR OUTRAGE

# GEN-Z AND THE YOUTH REVOLT THAT CHANGED KENYA, RUTO

The June protests, that placed the youth at the centre of national politics, were a wake-up call for the entire country—that all sovereign power belongs to the people

BY MILLICENT MWOLOLO AND DAN OGETTA

“Mr Speaker Sir!”

This powerful declaration rang out in Kenya's Parliament on June 25, 2024, setting the stage for the unprecedented withdrawal of an ambitious tax plan and the dissolution of the Cabinet.

The pronouncement with far reaching political implications was not made by a veteran politician, but by a Gen-Z hero, who boldly took the Speaker's seat, representing the frustrations and hopes of a generation tired of corruption, poor leadership, and political manipulation.

It marked the culmination of Kenya's largest-ever youth-led protest against the controversial Finance Bill 2024, and preceded a series of actions by President William Ruto that have since radically altered the country's political landscape and are likely to have a bearing in the 2027 polls.

Apart from the withdrawal of the Finance Bill, 2024 and the dissolution of the Cabinet, it led to the creation of the broad-based government that saw five ODM politicians co-opted in the Cabinet.

Although the impeachment of former Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua has no direct link with the Gen-Z protests, it was facilitated by the incorporation of ODM in Kenya Kwanza administration. ODM numbers in Parliament guaranteed his ouster.

The protests have changed Kenya's social fabric, the place of politicians in organising protests, the profile of a protester and street demonstrations, the idea of governance and social activism, but most importantly, the place of the economy, taxation and public debt in public discourse, in what experts now say is the beginning of a renaissance at the level - or higher - of the independence struggle and the second liberation movement that ushered in multi-partyism and a new constitution.

Across the country, hundreds of thousands of young people united in their outrage, with the epicentre of the movement erupting in Nairobi—and going as big as in 38 of Kenya's 47 counties.

Human rights activist Boniface Mwangi, who was repeatedly arrested during the protests, believes the movement left a profound mark.

“One of the things that Kenyans realised is that they have the power,” he says. “The June protests were a wake-up call for the entire country—that all sovereign power belongs to the people.”

Mr Mwangi sees an awakening.



A number of youthful protestors in a sit down along Kimathi Street in Nairobi during the Occupy Parliament Protest on June 20, 2024. FILE | NATION

The appetite for civic engagement, he notes, has grown. Kenyans have turned social media platforms into tools for civic education, breaking down complex issues like the Finance Bill into local languages and mobilising communities.

“Every Kenyan with access to information has become a civic educator,” he says. But there are red flags.

Activist Mwangi highlights the government's suppression of social media, including the shutdown of Telegram during the recent national examinations. He views it as an attempt to stifle information flow, an ominous sign for freedoms hard-won.

“Kenya has changed forever,” he adds, optimistic that the seeds sown by the June protests will bear fruit in time.

There is also the abductions nightmare—82 people snatched by armed, hooded men, seven just in December, and 29 still missing—with a furore across the country for action.

Inspector General of Police Douglas Kanja and Directorate of Criminal Investigations boss Mohamed Amin have both denied their officers' involvement in the abductions—to the chagrin of the Law Society of Kenya President Faith Odhiambo, Narc Kenya leader Martha Karua, and civil society activists, who have all demanded the duo's resignations.

Political analyst Javas Bigambo echoes

Mr Mwangi's sentiment, describing the protests as an “uninvited political phenomenon” that placed the youth at the centre of national politics.

“The younger generation intruded into the political space with an intensity previously unseen,” he explains. “This was a political accident with long-term consequences for governance in Kenya.”

Mr Bigambo predicts that the youth, emboldened and engaged, will play a pivotal role in the 2027 General Election, breaking away from traditional voting patterns.

“Ignoring the youth will come at a great cost,” he warns.

Human rights activist Bob Njagi calls it “a first in Kenya's history and a significant win for the people.” “The protests have re-defined activism.”

“Activists have become the new opposition, holding the government accountable and demanding transparency.”

However, he warns that public participation in governance remains flawed due to unclear thresholds in the constitution.

Civil society groups like the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) highlight the lack of accountability for rights violations during the protests.

Executive Director Davis Malombe notes: “Justice remains elusive for the victims and their families. This pattern of systemic injustices has perpetuated a culture of impunity.”

Despite the repression, Mr Malombe finds hope in the renewed spirit of resistance: “Kenyans have claimed their sovereign power. The protests reignited our political spirit, and we will continue to push for the upholding of constitutional rights without fear or favour. Aluta continua.”

Back to June 25.

On this day, just after 2pm, protesters stormed Parliament in a historic act of defiance.

While lives were lost in the violent clashes, the youth of Kenya made their voices heard in a way that couldn't be ignored.

Hardly anyone predicted that 2024 would be the year of accountability in Kenya's political space, sometimes using methods that could be considered unusual. Through means that are legal and others that the authorities say border on harassment; mobile phone numbers of those in authority were shared publicly, leaders are being booed or walked out on, with online tools being created to hold those in authority accountable.

Budget documents, government expenditures and lifestyle of those in power have become under sharp scrutiny more than ever before, with the public questioning sources of income of those displaying flashy lifestyles.

Raphael Obonyo, a public policy analyst and convener of The Youth Congress (TYC), remarked: “June 25, 2024, was a turning point—it showed that true power rests with the people.”

The uprising was more than a protest—it was a bold statement of the youth's power to redefine the nation's political and economic future.

Mr Obonyo highlighted that the Gen Z movement demonstrated the youth, as the largest voting bloc, are not passive observers but key agents of change.

Judy Oricho, a human rights advocate and regional director at the US Institute for Diplomacy and Human Rights, highlights the transformative impact of Gen Z protests in Kenya.

“Kenya should be ready for the emergence of a new generation of educated, tech-savvy leaders committed to inclusivity and unity, breaking away from traditional ethnic, gender, and religious divides,” said Ms Oricho.

In his 2015 book, *Conversations About Youth in Kenya*, Mr Obonyo recognises the vast potential of the youth, urging national and county governments to prioritise them as Kenya's greatest asset.

Founded in 2007 to support youth-focused political campaigns, TYC - a national NGO - has worked to increase youth in-

volvement in governance and development.

He stressed: “Excluding young people from leadership deprives society of their ideas, energy, and talent—vital for progress. The 2024 Gen Z protests showed that Kenya can no longer overlook its youth.”

Daniel Adikha, a youth leader from Likuyani, Kakamega County pointed out that past governments have treated youth issues with shallow, reactive solutions instead of enacting real, lasting change.

Mr Adikha explained: “Successive regimes have merely patched up youth issues with quick fixes instead of real solutions.”

The recent Gen Z protests acted as a wake-up call, urging the government, counties, parastatals, and private institutions to reconsider their approach to young people and create genuine platforms for their voices.

Before the protests, youth were excluded from political and economic discussions, Mr Adikha stated. He pointed out that they were only taken seriously during elections, they were seen as the swing vote.

The National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) reports that over 80 per cent of Kenya's population is under the age of 35, reflecting a global trend of a youthful population. In Kenya, youth are defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 34.

Madzao Rocha Ndegwa, a fifth-year civil engineering student at the University of Nairobi and president of the University of Nairobi Students Association, likened the situation of Kenyan youth before the Gen Z protests to a boiling bubble that has been building over the years.

Rising unemployment and escalating corruption have worsened the already tough socio-economic conditions, becoming unbearable for the public, Mr Ndegwa, 24, explained.

“The agitation remains. That it is time for the government to listen,” he said.

The protests, which were organic and issue-driven, underscored Kenyans' demand for good governance, accountability, and respect for human rights, noted Ms Oricho.

Similarly, Wanjira Wanjiru, co-founder of the Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC), underscored the youth's rejection of deceitful, ethnic-based politics, highlighting that the struggles of young Kenyans transcend tribal boundaries.

Ms Wanjiru emphasised the resilience and determination of oppressed Kenyans, particularly the youth, who came together during the Gen Z protests to defend their



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■ SHE WAS A DETERMINED FACE WHO BECAME A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE

# SHAKIRA WAFULA: GEN Z PROTESTER SPEAKS OUT

Her determination was one marked by sacrifice, resilience and an unshakable belief in the power of collective action

BY MERCY SIMIYU

On June 18, 2024, the streets of Nairobi erupted as young Kenyans, electrified by frustration and fuelled by a relentless pursuit of justice, took a bold stand against the controversial Finance Bill.

What began as a reaction to rising taxes and worsening economic conditions, quickly evolved into a nationwide movement demanding accountability, equality, and a voice for the youth.

Among the determined faces was a Gen Z protester who became a symbol of resistance—seen raising her hand, a flag in hand and unmoved by heavily armed officers—embodying the courage and defiance of a generation unwilling to accept the status quo. “I am here for Kenya, I am here for my people. I am here for your rights!” she said.

In this interview, Shakira Wafula who was at the forefront of the Gen-Z protests shared her experience—one marked by sacrifice, resilience, and an unshakable belief in the power of collective action.

## 1. What inspired you to join the protests?

The main force behind my decision was the growing frustration with the state of the economy and the lack of opportunities for young people like myself. The cost of living was rising, and it felt like the government was indifferent to the struggles of ordinary citizens. It was clear that the government was not serving the people. I couldn't stand by and watch anymore. The protests were a way for me to express my anger and disappointment.

I also felt that the youth were being sidelined in political conversations. Many of us are educated, but we can't find jobs. It was a collective effort, but it was also about my own sense of justice and the need to make my voice heard.

## 2. How has your life changed since the protests?

Since I joined the protests, my life has completely changed. It's like stepping into a different world where you can no longer live as you did before. Initially, I was excited to stand up for what I believed in, but I soon realised that this would come with serious consequenc-



Missing Voices Network member Odhiambo Giro (centre) flanked by Kikao chairperson Lavani Mila and Kikao vice-chair Shakira Wafula during a press briefing at YWCA, Nairobi on Friday. They promised to hold protests in all counties starting December 30, 2024 until all those missing are found. LUCY WANJIRU | NATION

es. My life became more public, and I couldn't go about my daily activities without being noticed.

I even had to change my routine. At one point, I stayed in an Airbnb for a while to avoid being targeted. The government had made it clear that they were willing to use force to suppress dissent, and that fear was very real. But despite the challenges, I became more involved in activism. I started connecting with human rights organisations and other activists. I realised that this wasn't just about one protest—it was about an ongoing struggle for justice.

## 3. Do you have any regrets or would you do anything differently?

Looking back, I have no regrets about joining the protests. In fact, I believe it was one of the best decisions I've made. However, I do wish we had been better organised. The protests were powerful, but at times, they felt chaotic and disjointed. If we had better leadership and clearer goals, I think we could have achieved more. We lacked a unified strategy, and that made it harder to maintain momentum.

There were moments when I felt frustrated with the direction things were going, especially when there was no clear outcome. We were protesting, but the government didn't seem to be listening. The lack of communication from our leaders also added to the confusion. Sometimes, the most important

thing is just showing up and being part of the movement.

## 4. How did you deal with the fear and anxiety during the protests?

In the beginning, I was terrified. The government's response to the protests was violent, and people were being abducted, beaten, and even killed. It was a very stressful time. But I also realised that I couldn't let fear control me.

What helped me deal with the fear was the support from other protesters and human rights organisations. We looked out for each other, and knowing that I wasn't alone gave me strength. Over time, I also started seeking therapy to help manage the emotional toll. It wasn't easy.

## 5. What was the defining moment in your life that made you stand up and join the protests?

The defining moment for me was when the government passed the Finance Bill. That bill, with its increased taxes and lack of consideration for the people, was the final straw. I had been watching the political landscape for a long time, and I realised that the government wasn't going to change unless we made our voices heard. The viral video I was part of, where I shared my frustration, was a pivotal moment. It wasn't just about me anymore—it was about the collective anger of the people.

That moment solidified my commit-

ment to the cause. I realised that my voice mattered, and that by joining the protests, I was contributing to a larger movement for justice.

## 6. Did the protests affect you emotionally?

The anger and frustration were constant, but there was also a deep sense of grief. The government's response to the protests was brutal, and many innocent people were hurt or killed. I couldn't help but feel the weight of that, especially when I saw young people like myself being targeted. It was hard to watch, and it affected me deeply.

There were also moments of guilt. I wondered if I was doing enough or if I was putting myself and others in harm's way for a cause that might not lead to any change. The emotional healing process is ongoing, but I'm learning to cope with the pain.

## 7. Have you ever thought about giving up?

There were times when it felt like the protests weren't making a difference, and the government's response was only getting harsher. It was easy to feel defeated, especially when it seemed like we were up against a powerful and unyielding system. But in those moments, I reminded myself of why I joined in the first place.

sovereignty against corruption and exploitative policies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

“A key lesson for the country is to never underestimate the power of a people who have been oppressed when they come together to defend their sovereignty. Prior to the Gen Z protests, the political class had become extremely corrupt—they still are.”

Both former President Uhuru Kenyatta and President William Ruto have acknowledged the scale of the problem, with Kenya reportedly losing billions of shillings daily to graft.

In particular, Ms Wanjiru called for people-centric leadership to replace the current political class, whom she criticised for perpetuating poverty, poor governance, and human rights violations, including police brutality during the protests.

The Gen Z movement also pushed for greater accountability, with young people analysing government operations and demanding transparency in matters of public interest, such as procurements, appointments, and governance processes.

A central demand of the movement was economic inclusion. In the protests against the #FinanceBill2024, the youth were clear that Parliament should listen to the people, not the Executive, Adikha said.

Stephen Irungu, a coordinator of the TYC youth league in Mt Kenya, voiced concerns over the government's taxation and youth empowerment policies.

While the suspension of the Finance Bill 2024 after widespread Gen Z protests was seen as a temporary win, Mr Irungu cautioned that other taxes have been quietly implemented, fueling frustration among young people.

Looking toward the 2027 elections, Mr Irungu stressed that the youth will no longer remain passive. “It won't be business as usual. Young people will support any political formation or leader who shares their values of good governance and economic growth.”

Mr Irungu stressed that youth want an economy that offers them job opportunities and fair wages, not empty promises or high taxes. He criticised the government's approach to youth unemployment, particularly the “questionable job opportunities abroad,” stating that Kenya's educated youth should build their own country.

MSJC has been raising political awareness through community dialogues and reggae sessions to engage youth in informal settlements.

Ms Wanjiru highlighted the importance of unity and organisation in strengthening youth constituencies to form a powerful force for the 2027 elections, ensuring leadership that prioritises Kenya's sovereignty and the welfare of its people.

Ms Wanjiru explained that Gen Z's hesitation to return to the streets after June 25 was largely due to a lack of organisation and leadership.

“While the approach was effective at the time, we are now learning the importance of uniting youth constituencies in informal settlements like Kibra, Mathare, Dandora, Mukuru, and Kayole. Once united, we must make collective decisions on the future direction of Kenya.”

She emphasised: “We reject neo-colonialism, US-backed puppet leadership, and retrogressive policies in sectors like agriculture. We want a fully sovereign, patriotic Kenyan state, and we are ready to be on the frontlines.”

The era of political complacency is over.

“To the political class: It is no longer business as usual. Parliament must uphold its representative mandate and stop being a rubber stamp for the executive. Elected leaders must deliver or be sent packing,” cautioned Mr Irungu.

Kenya should anticipate a significant shift in the 2027 elections, with more young people obtaining IDs, registering as voters, and running for leadership roles, Ms Oricho noted.

She emphasised Gen Z's ability to mobilise effectively using technology, bypassing the need for heavily-funded political campaigns, which have historically dominated Kenyan politics.

Similarly, Thalma Marita, a policy and governance expert and executive director at the Youth Leaders Stakeholders organisation in Kakamega County, anticipates heightened political awareness among youth leading up to the 2027 elections.