

The GLOCEPS

Policy Brief

Research Focus: Governance and Ethics

From Protest to Reform: Reimagining Youth Inclusion in Kenya's Governance

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Executive Summary

The recurring Generation Z (Gen Z) protests in Kenya, driven by demands for governance reforms, transparency, and political accountability, reflect both a warning signal and a potential catalyst for democratic renewal. If the state responds constructively to these protests, they offer an opportunity to deepen participatory democracy, enhance institutional responsiveness, and better align governance with the values and aspirations of the youth. Conversely, if mishandled, especially through excessive force or dismissiveness, these protests could heighten national tensions, erode public trust in institutions, and destabilize the country. Worse still, political entrepreneurs may exploit the unrest for narrow interests, stoking

ethnic animosities or violent conflict in the run-up to the 2027 general elections.

This paper argues that six interlinked factors drive this Gen Z unrest: socioeconomic exclusion, erosion of trust in democratic institutions, incoherent government communication strategies, systemic political marginalization, adverse childhood experiences, and a rapidly evolving protest culture. Tackling these root causes through holistic and youth-centered reforms is essential.

Key recommendations include: amending the Constitution and electoral laws to create youth-specific parliamentary seats modeled on the Women's Representative framework; mandatory



enforcement of youth quotas within political parties; increased and ring-fenced funding for the National Youth Council (NYC); building soft-power competencies among security forces; standardized protest management protocols grounded in human rights law; youth-targeted economic programs such as tax holidays for cooperatives and access to government procurement; and investment in youth-centered civic engagement platforms including arts, music, and sports festivals. Additionally, mechanisms for youth participation in budgeting and governance, such as oversight boards and participatory budgeting forums, are critical to rebuilding trust and legitimacy.



Context

Kenya's demographic transition is one of its most defining features. With nearly 75% of the population under the age of 35, the country finds itself at a demographic crossroads. A youth bulge that can either fuel socio-political transformation or descend into sustained instability. The national context is marked by prolonged youth unemployment, social inequality, declining public trust, and weakening democratic institutions. The Gen Z cohort, which is tech savvy, globally aware, and highly educated, has emerged as the main actor in recent civic unrest.

The events of June 25, 2025, exposed the urgency of this demographic challenge. What began as a peaceful protest to commemorate the anti-tax demonstrations of June 2024 quickly escalated into some of the most violent urban riots in recent

times. Looting, arson, and destruction of public infrastructure swept across major cities, including Nairobi, Nakuru, and Kisumu. Businesses were destroyed, police stations torched, firearms stolen, and critical government facilities like county offices and courtrooms attacked. The economic toll was estimated in billions of shillings, and public confidence in law enforcement and government legitimacy was shaken.

These developments occurred against a backdrop of previous grievances such as police killings, unresolved corruption scandals, the unpopular 2023 Finance Bill, and exclusion from key decision-making platforms. The protests demonstrated a generational verdict that the status quo is broken, and gradual change will no longer suffice. Without swift reforms and inclusive governance, Kenya risks turning its demographic dividend into a generational time bomb.

Key Issues

Political Marginalization

Despite their demographic dominance, youth remain structurally excluded from formal political processes. Kenya's Constitution provides affirmative action for women and persons with disabilities, but lacks binding mechanisms to ensure youth representation. Tokenistic approaches such as ceremonial youth appointments, ad-hoc advisory councils, and symbolic youth forums have failed to translate into substantive policy influence. This exclusion is particularly glaring in legislative bodies, where young leaders remain a marginal presence, leaving youth concerns largely unaddressed in



critical debates on employment, education, and public service reform.

At county levels, youth affairs departments are chronically underfunded and understaffed. While devolution was meant to bring governance closer to the people, youth voices remain peripheral in county assemblies and executive committees. Nationally, the NYC operates with limited resources and faces political interference. This political marginalization has deepened youth disillusionment. Many perceive that political engagement with them is largely confined to electoral campaigns, after which their interests are marginalized. Unless this pattern is disrupted, youth are likely to increasingly regard democratic politics as an exclusive domain of the political elite.



Socio-Economic Youth Grievances

Kenya's Gen Z protests are fundamentally driven by structural economic disenfranchisement. Despite being the most educated generation in Kenyan history, Gen Z remains excluded from formal economic systems. The June 2025 protests underscored how economic disenfranchisement can quickly translate into mass unrest. When young people perceive that formal avenues for upward mobility are closed off, whether due to corruption in job recruitment, nepotism, or a lack of industrial policies that create employment, their frustration can turn into violent resistance. Many youths feel betrayed by the political elite, who are perceived to be unresponsive, corrupt, and self-serving.

Government programs such as the Youth Enterprise Development Fund, Ajira Digital Program, and the Hustler Fund have had limited impact due to poor targeting, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and allegations of corruption. Many young people see them as tokenistic rather than transformative. The frustration is deepened by the daily disgraces faced by informal workers' harassment by police, lack of health coverage, and exclusion from credit markets.

The 2025 protests were not merely about politics. They were an instinctive reaction to economic hopelessness. Kenya's informal sector, where many youths make a living, offers little stability or protection. Street vendors, motorcycle taxi operators, and small-scale traders frequently face harassment from authorities, further alienating them from state institutions. Without deliberate policies for socio-economic empowerment of the young people through job creation, skills development, and support for innovation, Kenya risks recurring cycles of unrest, where economic despair fuels political instability.

Trust in Democratic Institutions

Kenya's democratic institutions are facing a legitimacy crisis. Many young Kenyans no longer view elections, courts, or legislative processes as effective avenues for justice or reform. The brutality witnessed during protests, lack of accountability for police misconduct, and the slow pace of judicial redress have contributed to a growing disillusionment. The IEBC's credibility remains in question following contested past



elections. Parliament is seen as a rubber-stamp institution dominated by partisan interests, while the judiciary, despite some progressive rulings, is often perceived as slow, compromised, or elitist. Attacks on public institutions during the June 2025 protests were not random acts of violence but symbolic expressions of rejection.

This institutional disconnect is also evident in civic participation trends. Voter apathy among first-time voters is rising, and youth engagement in formal political parties remains low. Rather than addressing systemic issues like corruption and unemployment, political elites often resort to divisive rhetoric or empty promises. The fact that protests erupted just a year after the deadly anti-tax demonstrations, with little meaningful reform in between, demonstrates governance failures. Without structural reforms and deliberate intergenerational engagement, democratic participation will continue to decline, replaced by street politics and digital dissent. Restoring institutional trust will require prosecuting those responsible for protest-related abuses, increasing transparency in government procurement and appointments, and creating formal mechanisms for youth policy input.



Public Communication

The state's failure to construct a coherent, compelling, and youth-sensitive public communication strategy is also a driver of the unrest. In a fast-paced information ecosystem dominated by memes, influencers, and short-form video content, traditional government communication appears

outdated, unrelatable, and out of touch. Social media platforms like TikTok, X, and Facebook have become not just channels of entertainment but sites of political contestation. Activists and digital content creators shape public opinion more effectively than formal news bulletins. Government narratives are often drowned out by more relatable, humorous, or emotionally charged critiques. The result is that even genuine public sector achievements are either misunderstood or ignored. Since the government came into power, efforts to reverse the narrative have failed due to poor messaging and inadequate broadcasting of government projects' accomplishments. This is attributed to the absence of strategic publicity communication initiatives. Consequently, the populace remains unaware and less connected to the government.

This vacuum is exacerbated by insensitive or provocative statements from high-ranking officials. Remarks like "wapende wasipende" (whether they like it or not), or referring to Kenya as having "shareholders," fuel perceptions of arrogance and exclusion. These rhetorical missteps have galvanized youth distrust and amplified the belief that the government is elitist, disconnected, and adversarial. For meaningful reform, the government should adopt a communication model that resonates with the youth's digital behavior.

Protest Culture

Kenya's protest landscape is undergoing a fundamental shift. While earlier protests were often orchestrated by trade unions or opposition parties, Gen Z-led demonstrations are largely decentralized, digital-first, and horizontally organized. This new protest culture is spontaneous, leaderless, and difficult to mediate. It is also more susceptible to infiltration by criminal or extremist elements. The 2025 protests revealed how easily such movements can spiral into chaos. With no clear leaders to negotiate with, no manifesto to address, and no structured demands, government responses often default to force. This, in turn, reinforces perceptions of state repression and invites further resistance.





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The growing use of social media to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories, often driven by political actors, adds another layer of complexity. As the 2027 elections approach, the risk of digital radicalization and youth mobilization for electoral violence cannot be ignored. Already, some political actors are exploiting online platforms to sow ethnic division, attack institutions, and co-opt youth grievances. Mitigating these risks will require youth inclusion in national security dialogues, investment in digital literacy programs, and the institutionalization of safe, creative protest spaces where grievances can be expressed without fear of repression.

Childhood Experiences

Traditional governance models, including traditional policing approaches, are not fit for purpose in managing the current Gen Z crisis in Kenya. The population born between 1997 and 2012 is resistant to any force applied to counter them due to unique characteristics that have shaped their growth and development. Born in the aftermath of the structural adjustment era and raised during periods of economic uncertainty, social unrest, and digital exposure to global injustices, this cohort has experienced high rates of trauma, including poverty, domestic violence, early school dropout, and exposure to community crime. A 2025 study by the Brain and Mind Institute found that 1 in 5 adolescents in Kenya report four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) conditions linked to increased rates of mental health issues, aggression, and substance abuse.

Such backgrounds have led to a defiant resilience in many young people. Rather than adopting the passivity of older generations, Gen Z has developed a combative posture toward perceived oppression. This has been amplified by digital access to alternative narratives, global solidarity movements, and platforms that enable real-time organization. Unlike their parents, who often accepted systemic failures as inevitable, today's youth challenge every instance of corruption, police brutality, or governmental opacity with digital resistance and street mobilization. The 2024 protests against the Finance Bill, for instance, mobilized tens of thousands within hours using digital platforms like TikTok, X, and WhatsApp. Hashtags like #OccupyParliament and #RejectFinanceBill catalyzed nationwide action. This digitally-activated activism is closely tied to feelings of abandonment and long-standing systemic neglect.



Photo Credit: institute.aljazeera.net

Moreover, rising levels of drug and substance abuse, particularly in informal urban settlements, compound the psychosocial vulnerability of Gen Z. NACADA's 2022 report highlights that Kenyan youth are increasingly engaging in polysubstance abuse, including new psychoactive substances. These adverse experiences fuel a volatile emotional climate, which, when triggered by injustice or misgovernance, leads to explosive protest behavior.

Conclusion

Kenya's future hinges on its ability to transform its youth bulge from a potential crisis into an opportunity for inclusive growth and democratic



renewal. The violent 2025 protests exposed deep-seated grievances of economic exclusion, political marginalization, and institutional distrust that demand urgent and systemic reforms. Meaningful youth representation in governance, equitable economic policies, and accountable security institutions are critical to breaking the cycle of unrest. The trajectory of youth-led protests will likely grow more confrontational if socio-economic grievances remain unaddressed and state responses continue to be violent and dismissive. The potential for political manipulation by opportunistic actors is real, and unless mitigated, could lead to organized chaos around the 2027 elections. Without decisive action to integrate young people as partners in development, Kenya risks further instability. The country

can harness its demographic dividend to build a more just and prosperous society. Therefore, a proactive, inclusive, and youth-centered national response is urgently required.



Recommendations

1. The National Assembly should amend the Constitution and electoral laws to introduce youth-specific parliamentary seats, modeled on the Women's Representative framework.
2. Political parties should implement quotas within political parties, requiring a percentage of candidates for MCA, MP, and Senate positions to be under 35.
3. The Ministry of Youth Affairs, Creative Economy and Sports should expand and adequately fund the National Youth Council (NYC) to become a statutory policy advisory body with representation across all counties.
4. Ministry of Interior and National Coordination should;
 - a) institute mandatory de-escalation and upscale civic engagement training for law enforcement officers involved in crowd control;
 - b) fastrack the implementation of Maraga taskforce reforms;
 - c) create joint coordination units involving local youth leaders, community elders, and security officers to anticipate and manage potential flashpoints before they escalate;
 - d) strengthen the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) to prosecute officers implicated in human rights violations during protests;
 - e) centralize government communication to improve on the political counter-messaging and explanations of the government's policies; and



- f) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, upscale the integration of mental health support in schools to harness youths' resilience constructively.
5. Ministry of Information, Communications & The Digital Economy, in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth Affairs, Creative Economy and Sports, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, should;
- a) launch a National Youth Employment Guarantee Scheme, linking unemployed youth to public infrastructure projects, environmental conservation, and digital services;
 - b) strengthen the Ajira Digital and Kenya Youth Employment and Opportunities Project (KYEOP) by increasing budget allocation and extending them to rural and marginalized areas;
 - c) promote youth cooperatives and start-up incubators with tax holidays and access to government procurement opportunities under the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) program;
 - d) use music, art, sports, and digital platforms to engage youth on governance and civic education;
 - e) develop a digital civic learning portal where youth can interact with policymakers, propose bills, and follow up on government commitments to youth; and
 - f) partner with influencers and artists to run campaigns promoting non-violent protest, community development, and democratic participation.
6. The Judiciary and the IEBC should carry out reforms that rebuild trust, such as youth inclusion in oversight boards and participatory budgeting forums.



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