

Kenya podcast: Peaceful protests – brutal state

Peaceful protests and often brutal state violence are plunging Kenya into a state of instability. Deep-seated frustration over economic conditions, corruption and police brutality characterise the mood, and not just among ‘Generation Z’.

The government's unwillingness to address the concerns of the population is exacerbating tensions. Added to this is the increasingly harsh rhetoric of the president. William Ruto has just instructed the police to ‘shoot people in the knees’ instead of killing them. This way, they can be transferred straight from the hospital to court.

It is no exaggeration to say that the country's political future rests on fragile foundations if the government does not moderate its stance.

The ongoing protests and state violence are undoubtedly having a significant impact on Kenya's domestic stability. The human rights situation is deteriorating, and the political landscape is changing ahead of future elections.

FAQs

What are the main causes of the unrest among the population? The demonstrations are driven by a variety of factors that go beyond specific laws and reflect deep frustration with the political system. Economic hardship and tax increases: Originally triggered by a controversial finance bill with numerous tax increases that made the cost of living unaffordable for many Kenyans. Although President Ruto withdrew the bill last year and dismissed his cabinet, many of the controversial taxes and fees were later reintroduced, leading to renewed criticism.

What role do corruption and mismanagement play? A widespread perception of corruption in government and the state, the waste of public funds and the seemingly extravagant lifestyles of politicians are further fuelling anger. President Ruto is accused of failing to deliver on his promises to fight corruption.

How do police brutality and impunity affect the population? Ongoing police brutality, including extrajudicial killings and violent crackdowns on protesters, is a central issue. The death of blogger Albert Ojwang in police custody and the shooting of a civilian at close range have particularly fuelled the protests and intensified calls for accountability. Despite charges against some police officers, there is widespread criticism of the lack of accountability. Many Kenyans, especially the younger generation, feel betrayed and disregarded by the government, and their concerns are not being heard.

How is the state responding to the peaceful and largely peaceful demonstrations? Dozens of people have been killed and hundreds injured in the protests. Estimates vary, but Amnesty International reported over 60 deaths in the ‘Gen Z protests’.

At least 16 people were killed in protests in June 2025. On 7 July 2025 alone, 31 people were killed, according to the state-funded Human Rights Commission, bringing the total death toll in the previous weeks to 50. Hundreds of protesters were injured and thousands arrested. Human rights

organisations also report dozens of missing and presumed abducted persons, some of whom remain missing to this day.

Harsh rhetoric from the government: President Ruto has taken a tougher line against the protesters and instructed the police to 'break their legs' or shoot those who destroy property or attack police stations. He has described the demonstrations as an 'attempted coup' and 'terrorism.'

How is the government responding to media freedom? The government has attempted to prevent live coverage of the protests by local media, which has led to increased use of social media by activists and citizens. A court has overturned this order and approach.

What impact does this have on the population's trust in the government? The population, especially 'Generation Z,' has lost trust in the government and large parts of the political establishment. Slogans such as 'Ruto wantam' ('Ruto one term') reflect the desire to replace the president in the next elections in 2027. Although President Ruto made concessions in response to protests, such as dismissing his cabinet, the reinstatement of many ministers quickly dashed hopes for real change. The dismissal of Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua in October 2024 highlights the internal instability and political manoeuvring within the ruling party.

How are young people mobilising the protests? There is a clear shift in the political dynamic. The protests are increasingly being led by the tech-savvy 'Generation Z,' which has no memory of authoritarian rule and organises itself independently of traditional opposition parties via social media. This poses a new challenge to the political establishment and could have a lasting impact on the 2027 parliamentary elections by potentially leading to the defeat of a large number of incumbent politicians.

How is the international community responding to the unrest in Kenya? International organisations such as the United Nations and UNICEF have expressed concern about the violence and called on the Kenyan government to exercise restraint and respect human rights. The repeated protests and the government's harsh response have shaken the confidence of many investors and disrupted economic activity. The destruction of property and looting during the protests – presumably by government-controlled so-called 'goons' (gangs of thugs) – are also causing considerable economic damage to businesses.