16. Viral Dissent and Security Dilemmas in East Africa: Youth-Led Political Disruption and the Case of Kenya's 2024 Gen Z Uprising

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Abstract

June 2024 marked a defining moment in the Kenya's socio-political and security landscape. A wave of youth led protests swept across the country demonstrating the power of digitally networked youth to organize, mobilize, challenge State power to an unprecedented level and scale. This new crop of young people calling themselves 'Leaderless, Tribeless and Partyless' leveraged digital platforms to effectively mobilize and sustain protests across the country to great effect. This study interrogates this phenomenon of a viral, leaderless, but potent digital mobilization and its implications for national and regional security within East Africa using Kenya as the case Study. Using social network analysis, and interviews with activists, security practitioners and communication professionals, the study examines how grievances around taxation, governance, and economic marginalization were effectively translated into viral narratives and coordinated action both online and offline.   By situating Kenya's experience within a broader East African and continental trends, the study assesses the growing tension between civic expression and state authority in the digital age. It also examines the emerging risks of external manipulation, misinformation, and the potential hijacking of such organic movements by malign or foreign actors.

Keywords: Gen Z, Digital dissent, viral narratives, digital activism, youth protests, security dilemmas, digital platforms, national security

1.   Introduction

In June 2024, Kenya witnessed an unprecedented wave of youth led demonstrations fueled by viral narratives on digital platforms. The protest dubbed 'Gen Z Uprising' marked a new era of social movements in Kenya and clear (Ingutia, 2025).

The seemingly organic and well-coordinated protests were marked by heightened online activism and street demonstrations in most parts of the country by youth who branded themselves *'Leaderless, Partyless and Tribeless'*. At the core of these protests were grievances around proposed tax measures, demand for accountability that quickly evolved into other demands for political overhaul in the country.

While previous protests have always revolved around organized opposition political parties, civil society groups and Trade Unions, the 2024 protests heralded a new era of civic engagement. What started as a reaction to some perceived punitive tax proposals in the Finance Bill, quickly morphed into a full-blown political crisis, with State apparatus struggling to respond effectively.

The widely publicized protests protest sent shock waves in the political circles as the movement threatened to overrun symbolic institutions of the State power including the National Parliament and State House, a total breakdown of social order, the near collapse of organized government that closely mirrored the Arab Spring of 2011 in North Africa.

This phenomenon of youth-led political mobilization in Kenya, and the ripple effects in Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, and the October 2025 electoral protests in Tanzania marks a significant shift in the

region's political dynamics, largely propelled by youth digital activism on social media platforms and offline action (Ingutia, 2025).

This shift highlights a new form of dissent among young people, which leverages digital spaces to circumvent traditional barriers of participation and galvanize offline action (Kimwere, 2025). Given the security implications of such protests on State power and stability, this novel form of digitally driven activism presents new security dilemmas. On one hand, governments are forced to grapple with the challenges of managing online and offline dissent, while balancing concerns around securitization of digital spaces and the implications on individual freedoms (Iginio& Sambuli, 2015).

This paper explores the intricate relationship between viral dissent, the distinct characteristics of youth-led political disruption in East Africa, and the evolving security landscape with a specific focus on the Kenyan Gen Z movement. This study analyzes how the youth in the Kenya employed both online and offline strategies to challenge state power. The study also draws parallels with similar movements in Uganda and Tanzania where young people have increasingly engaged in political processes through online and offline mobilization. Specifically, the study examines the complex interplay between socio-economic grievances, youth agency, digital technologies, and security responses (Gregory , 2025), exploring how these dynamics reshape the architechture of youth civic and political engagement in East Africa (Ogola, 2025).

2. Theoretical Foundations

Several theoretical lenses can be applied in analyzing the Gen Z uprising in kenya and other African countries.   Within the framework of the social movement theory which looks the emergence, operations, and consequences of social movements, Olson's 1965 work on *The Theory Collective Action* (Olson, 1965) focused on the 'role of organization in transforming collective grievances into group action' emphasizing the membership and hierachy in the social movements for effectiveness.

Building on Olson's seminal work in the *Resource Mobilization Theory,* Gomes (2023) argues that collective action does not just arise out of individual grievances, but rather long term and progressive changes in group organization and increased capacity for collective action and available resources (Gomes 2023). The theory emphasizes the effectiveness of organized and centralized movements, as well as the 'significance of collective strategies, and the broader political climate in which movements operate. (ibid.)

Bennett and Segerberg (2023) describe "*connective action,"* as 'individualized and technologically organized sets of process that result in action'.   They emphasize the 'personalization of politics and multiplicity of entry points to social protests networks' which is facilitated by technology. Thus, *the logic of connective action* recognizes the central role of digital media as organizing agents emphasizing the role of digitally mediated social networks. They argue that participation is driven by sharing of 'expressive content' such as hashtags, memes, stories, and calls to action, that is then recognized by others and widely shared. In this context, individuals will share their 'personalized framing' of the broader issue which in turn inspires and allows others to join in the conversation and action. The logic of connective action emphasizes loosely coordinated collective action that is digitally driven rather

than through traditional organizational structures or formal leadership (Bennett and Segerberg, 2023). The 2024 Gen Z uprising in kenya mirrors the connective action where the movement grew through decentralized networks with individuals connected through viral hashtags, memes, and personalized stories about tax proposals and governance.

3. Literature Review

Since the Arab Spring in 2011, the intersection of digital platforms and youth civic and political engagement has evolved rapidly reshaping the landscape of digital actvitism in Africa. The proliferation of social media, and the increasing use of these platforms for political purposes has transformed traditional models of political mobilization and engagement among the youth (Mwaura, 2017), empowering them to bypass traditional and hierarchical political structures to directly challenge and engage with state authority (Shaghayegh, 2025).

An analysis of youth led protests around Africa reveals common characteristics, namely, viral hashtags, rapid information flow, and transnational solidarity (Rasmidin and Lobwaer, 2025). These protests are primarily driven by economic marginalization, frustration with systemic corruption, and unresponsive governance systems (Idowu, 2022).

3-1 Digital Activism and the Evolution of Leaderless Movements in Africa

Although the Arab Spring of 2010-2011 has been described as the turning point in the digital age of mass mobilization, more recent movements have provided a chance to rethink the concept of the organization of social movements, with leaderless, digitally coordinated protests emerging as disruptive to traditional social movement organization (Barrie and Frelon, 2022). The networked social movements framework by Castells is still influential, in its premise that digital platforms are not simply facilitative of communication but fundamentally changes the terms of power by making possible what Castells refers to as mass self-communication, a horizontal form of communication that does not rely on institutional leadership (Castells, 2015).

In his critique of the modern protest wave, Gerbaudo writes that the discourse of leaderlessness can almost always conceal informal forms of leadership and the choreographies of organization, which emerge on digital platforms. He argues that what is perceived as spontaneous might actually be the result of influential digital actors whose actions shape the agendas and render these movements visible and coherent, despite their lack of formal leadership roles (Gerbaudo, 2022). The conflict between democratic horizontalism and the new forms of digital hierarchies is acutely felt when considering such a movement as the one in Kenya by the Gen Z subculture, where the lack of a formal leadership structure facilitated unprecedented levels of participation and provided an opportunity of exploitation in maintaining a unified demand and negotiating with the state. Yet, there were clear leadership figures either on the frontline or behind the scenes driving the coordinated messaging online and action offline. The Nigeria-based movement to abolish SARS in 2020 offers, perhaps, the most informative example to understand the 2024 protests in Kenya. Both movements have been a result of their youthful, digitally

organized mobilization against state excesses and economic marginalization in African settings. The scholarly discussion about the #EndSARS demonstrates essential information about the working principles and particular obstacles of the leaderless movements (Mwaura, 2017). In their study, Kavada and Poell (2021) focus on how the movement had used decentralized organization using Twitter (now X), WhatsApp groups and Tik Tok to organize protests across various cities in Nigeria. They suggest that the strength of the movement was that it created a sense of connective action that did not rely on a traditional organizational infrastructure but instead, through a personalized engagement and a viral spread of powerful stories (Kavada).   The youth effectively used digital platforms to organize protests logistics, raise funds online, offer legal assistance and amplify messages on police brutality.

3-2 Criticism and Limitations of Leaderless Movements

In their study of digital activism in Africa, Allen, Moyo and Chuma (2024) argue that even though leaderless movements are capable of mobilizing thousands of people, they tend to exhibit what they describe as a strategic 'sustainability problem': how to convert viral moments into permanent institutional changes. The parallels between these processes, and the 2019 estallido social (social explosion) in Chile, further clarifies these processes. Somma and Medel (2017) report the cascading nature of a leaderless mobilization against metro price increases into the broader constitutional change demands, where the achievement of concrete political results was made possible by the fact that eventually the movement learned how to organize itself and negotiate terms of action.

In addition to mobilization mechanisms, recent research has paid closer attention to the

ideological and cultural aspect of Gen Z-led digital activism, focusing on how the specific approach of this generation towards technology influences their political awareness and protesting repertoires. In his argument, Barrie (2021) proposes that an orientation towards authenticity, horizontal peer relationships, and distrust of traditional political institutions is a characteristic of Gen Z activists in various parts of the world. This is reflected in the aesthetics of protest, communication patterns, and organization. However, Milan (2021) offers her own theory of cloud protesting, in which contemporary movements exist in both physical and virtual spaces, and that the entire operation of the digital platforms as the estate of memes, hashtags, and viral content are forms of political activism themselves. Nonetheless, Bosch (2022) states that the academics are generally so excited about the democratizing power of digital activism that they fail to notice how the architecture of platforms and algorithms contributes to the dynamics of protest in a manner that can reproduce and sustain prevailing inequalities, rather than challenge them. Such theoretical arguments highlight the fact that to address the Gen Z uprising in Kenya, it is crucial to shift beyond bridge and bandwagon narratives of digital empowerment toward critical analysis of how the affordances of platforms, generational politics and structural constraints of leaderlessness come to bear on the opportunities and limitations of the modern protest movements.

3-4 Youth Demographics, and Digital-Political Agency in East Africa

Having one of the youngest population structures in the world, East Africa's demographic panorama presents what development analysts refer to as a key "youth bulge," creating both tremendous political instability and economic potential. About 75% of Kenya's population is under 35, and youth

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unemployment rates among those aged 15 to 34 are estimated to be 39%, according to the African

Development Bank's 2022 report on East African economic prospects. These triggers what economists

refer to as a "demographic dividend trap", where large youth populations without economic opportunities

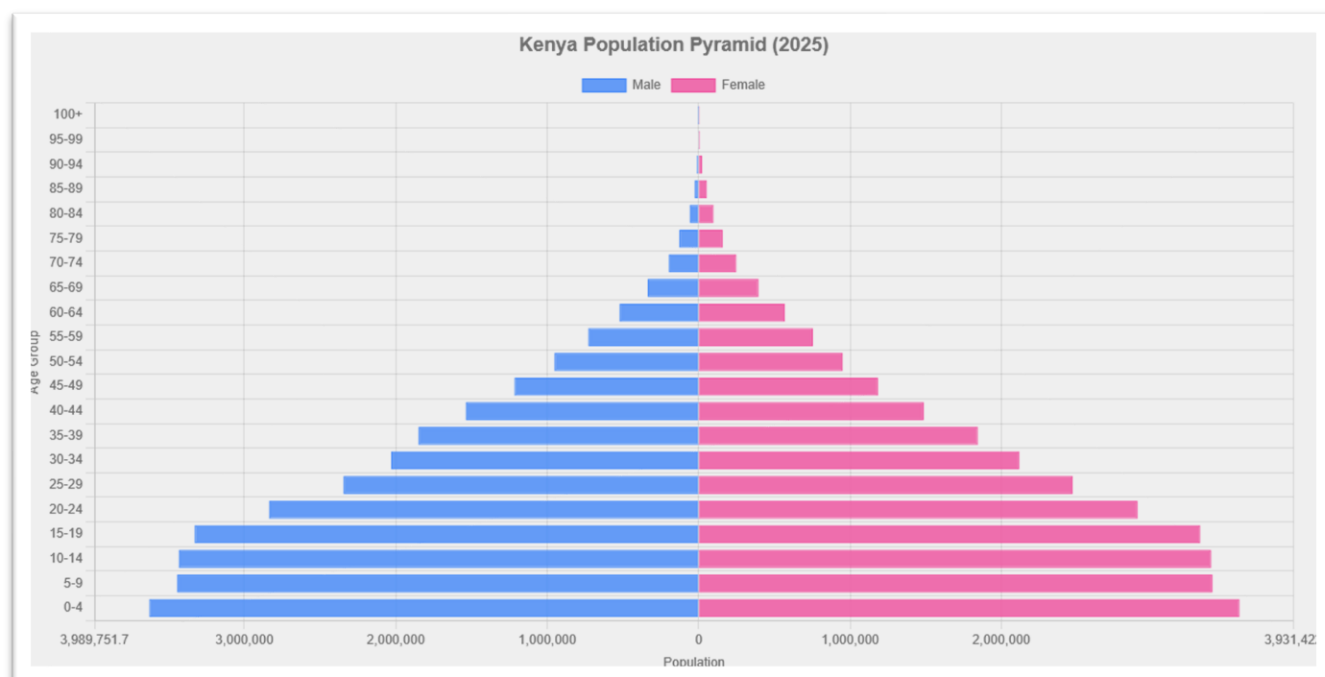become drivers of political volatility rather than economic growth.

Figure 1: Population Pyramid Kenya (source: https://www.populationpyramid.net/kenya/1959/)

The World Bank's 2023 "Kenya Economic Update"[1] indicates that although tertiary enrollment has

increased by 45% since 2015, formal sector job creation has grown by only 2.8% annually, compounding

the demographic pressure. Educated youth are notably vulnerable to economic grievances that fuel

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[1] The World Bank Group, "Kenya Economic Update," Edition No. 22, November 2020, available at https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/957121606226133134/pdf/Kenya-Economic-Update-Navigating-the-Pandemic.pdf (accessed 15 December 2025).

political mobilization. According to the International Telecommunication Union's Digital Development Dashboard, Kenya leads the region in mobile penetration at 119.8 subscriptions per 100 people, and internet penetration will reach 43.5% of the population by 2030. Digital connectivity has emerged as the key characteristic that sets modern East African youth apart from earlier generations. However, the region is not equitably affected by this digital revolution (Mckay, Veronica. (2024). In Kenya, digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), X Spaces, TikTok, and X Spaces have become important avenues for civic and political mobilization through networked participatory formations.

According to UNICEF, Uganda has the second youngest population in the world with 78% of population aged below 35.[2] The same report indicates that 70% of population in Tanzania is below 30. On the other hand, the internet penetration levels in Tanzania and Uganda are about 25% and 31%, respectively.[3] This reflects differences in infrastructure as well as different legal frameworks that influence the use of digital technology for political objectives. These demographic and digital realities are significant because of how they intersect where young, educated, digitally connected, but economically impoverished groups make up what political scientists are increasingly recognizing as a volatile combination. It can trigger political instability especially when traditional institutional channels for grievance redress seem unresponsive or blocked.

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[2] UNICEF Uganda, "U-Report: Amplifying Voices for Young People," available at https://www.unicef.org/uganda/what-we-do/u-report?utm_source (accessed 15 December 2025).
[3] UNICEF Tanzania, "Young People Engagement: A Priority for Tanzania Improving the Lives of 10-24 Year Olds through a Multi-sectoral Lens," available at https://www.unicef.org/tanzania/young-people-engagement-priority-tanzania?utm_source (accessed 15 December 2025).

3-5 Digital Activism

The rapid evolution of the youthful political network and antennae speaks to a novel global pattern of political engagement, what scholars have referred to as "digital citizenship". Social media spaces have been transformed into grounds for political socialization, mobilization and identification. A study by Loader and Mercea, argues that the youthful population has established political identity from social media engagements and trivias, as opposed to the traditionally hitched political patterns found in organizations, trade unions and political parties (Loader and Mercea, 2011). This systemic evolution is more pronounced in scenarios where traditional channels of political activism are deemed easily compromisable by custodians of power and argued to be corrupt. Norris establishes in her seminal work on democratic deficits that young people would prefer what she refers to as "Critical citizens activism" to institutional based political activism (Norris, 2011). In these cases, they would gravitate towards digitally mobilized protests as well as direct action perpetuated from within. A classical example of such a case is the Kenyan Gen Z build up that identified itself as "leaderless, tribeless and partyless", a potential departure from ethnically based political uprisings.

However, the efficacy of this form of influence-peddling remains frail, and to an extreme extent debatable. Theocharis, Yannis and Lowe (2016), insist that while the digitally footprinted activism among the youthful population is issue-centric and leads to rapid mobilization, often it doesn't translate to tangible results as the youth shy away from the formal democratic structures, hence the disconnect. This insight corresponds with East African experiences where bursts of strong digital activism, such as Kenya's 2016 #SomeoneTellCNN campaign or Uganda's 2018 social media tax protests generated

tremendous online involvement but limited permanent institutional impact. The challenges, as Halupka writes, is that "clicktivism" and online political participation may provide an illusion of political efficacy while actually substituting for more challenging forms of political engagement that are necessary for substantial institutional transformation (Halupka, 2014). These conversations suggest that understanding youth political agency in East Africa ought to move past enthusiastic accounts of digital empowerment, to a more critical interrogation as to whether digital platforms genuinely democratize political participation, or just create new escapist forms of short-term engagement that have little impact in meeting the objective of dismantling underlying power structures.

3-6 State Security Responses to Digital Dissent: Surveillance, Repression, and the Securitization of Cyberspace in East Africa

In the wake of online political mobilization, Governments in East Africa have resorted to both legal and extralegal means to curb digital dissent, turning cyberspace into a democratic frontier and a battlefield (Nyabola, 2020). This has raised concerns and accusations of securitization of digital spaces in East Africa as the default form state response to online activism. In Tanzania, the 2015 Cybercrimes Act, allows mass arrests of bloggers, journalists, and common citizens due to content perceived as critical of the government (Mwesige, 2021). The ambiguous nature of the law on what amounts to causing annoyance or even spreading false information has criminalized ordinary political speech, effectively muzzling online speech and compelling political activists to engage in self-censorship or exile.   Similarly, the Excise Duty Amendment Act of 2018 in Uganda that introduced the notoriously unpopular social

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media tax evinced how fiscal policies can serve as censorship mechanisms excluding millions of people as digital users but also creating surveillance data by forcing them to register their addresses due to compulsory registration (Levi, 2023).

The situation in Kenya is more of a pendulum, which swings between relative digital freedom and periodic crackdowns that hint at authoritarian tendencies behind the seemingly democratic stance. Although Kenya has escaped the crude censorship characteristic of her neighbors over several years, the government has resorted to using Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act of 2018 to crack down on opponents, even though some more repressive clauses have been ruled unconstitutional by the courts (Ogola, 2020). Following the 2024 Gen-Z protests, the advanced digital surveillance tactics and targeted arrests of social media influencers suspected of distributing fake news and inciting sentiment, points to forms of repressive actions (Mutsvairo and Rønning,2020). Internet shutdowns have emerged as the sledgehammer in the toolkit of the region, and the complete internet blockage in Uganda during 2021 elections and Tanzania's 2025 elections epitomizes how states have turned internet connectivity into a weapon of suppression in politically sensitive times to address the security concerns raised by protests and elections (Tully and Ekdale, 2023). Critics of security argue that the shutdowns are more of a political tool and a security imperative.

The cybersecurity responses show how the East African states view digital activism as a national security risk as opposed to a democratic act of political expression. Governments constantly use terrorism, hate speech, and foreign interference claims to justify widespread surveillance initiatives and severe action against online dissent (Mutsvairo and Rønning,2020). The examples of foreign spyware

and surveillance systems in East Africa underline how the interplay between smaller nations and external actors can facilitate advanced digital oppression (Gagliardone, 2022). These technological imports come with capacity-building initiatives for security agencies on social media surveillance, data interception, and cyber forensics, which is interpreted by some as legitimizing and professionalizing digital repression. An analysis of digital responses by East African states reveals a clear script; create grey legislation on cybercrime, invest in surveillance infrastructure, build relationships with Western technology vendors, and selectively apply the law to deal with critics without having a noticeable appearance of deliberately repressed people.

However, in some instances, some of the state reactions to internet repression have been counter-productive, creating the very outrage that they are supposed to contain. When Ugandan scholar Stella Nyanzi was arrested on cyber harassment charges on account of Facebook poetry she had written against President Museveni, it led to an outcry of indignation around the globe amplifying her messages in ways previously impossible to achieve (Kalulé, 2023). Equally, the case of Tanzania prohibiting local newspapers to publish foreign material online sparked diaspora reactions drawing immense, unintended, foreign attention (Pamba,2021). In kenya, the initial arrest of suspected Gen Z movement leaders gave energy to the protests with new hashtags to #Free those arrested. These examples indicate underlying contradictions within state practices where repression can only partially increase the cost of activism but is usually ineffective in stopping it, driving it to encrypted spaces, ex-patriated sites, or ciphers of language that can escape surveillance. The success of digital repression, therefore, is not only tied to the technological capacity but also control of the states to regulate narrative, preserve their legitimacy,

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and manage the reputational consequences of observable authoritarianism in a globalized world (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2020).

3-7 External Actors, Misinformation Ecosystems, and the Vulnerability of Organic Movements

The integrity of grassroots digital activism in East Africa is facing challenges of foreign influence, organized inauthentic action, and disinformation weaponry. Analysts reporting on the 2022 elections in Kenya recorded in-scale bot networks distributing polarizing ethnic rhetoric and forensic evidence indicated a pattern, bespeaking external coordination, as opposed to organic political passion (Mwangi and Waema, 2023). Such findings challenge optimistic accounts of digital democratization when real movements can be manipulated by artificial rage or algorithmic distortion. These weaknesses are further compounded by the lack of transparency in the algorithms of platforms, with activists unable to differentiate legitimate solidarity movements and astroturfing efforts that aim to delegitimize their movements or invite state repression (Kazeem and Olukotun, 2022). The case of the 2017 Kenyan elections, revealed by whistleblower testimony, showed the commercialization of societal polarization by foreign companies that use psychographic targeting to fuel the ethnic conflict and influence voter turnout (Nyabola, 2022).

The digital infrastructural geopolitics and socio-technical configuration of the internet bring in another dimension of vulnerability since the reliance of African states on foreign technology firms and telecommunications equipment brings in avenues of possible interference. Wide-ranging fiber optic networks, data centers, and surveillance systems of smart cities built by China in the region has led to

concerns regarding the sovereignty of data and the possibility of providing a back door to foreign intelligence (Gagliardone and Golovchenko (2021). Although indicators of systematic manipulation cannot be proven, the structural ability is present and creates valid fears about digital colonialism. Anti-Western messages have been amplified by Russian-connected accounts on things such as LGBTQ rights and the possibility of conditions on international aids, used against real grievances to generate disunity and damage to democratic institutions (Dwoskin and Bergengruen, 2024). Such actions exploit cultural sensitivities and postcolonial resentments and are effective, making it hard to counter without seeming to reinforce Western hegemony.

These weak points are further aggravated by concerns around platform governance, in the sense that Meta, X (previously Twitter), and Tik Tok do not have the proper content moderation capabilities on East African languages and culture. The study of the 2020 Ethiopian Tigray crisis showed that the algorithmic amplification of inflammatory content in the Amharic language on Facebook fueled the ethnic violence, and the fact that Facebook took a long time to respond indicated that the platform does not protect its peripheral markets with appropriate vigilance (Adem and Zegeye, 2023). Incentive structures created by the same algorithmic logic that incentivizes engagement over accuracy are built to benefit sensationalism and polarization at the expense of fact-based journalism and reporting. Fact checkers and other people fighting misinformation are outgunned by organized disinformation efforts aimed at using the platforms to increase user interactions at the expense of truth. This disparity is also evident in enforcement, where state-sponsored troll farms and commercial influence operate without fear of legal consequences, while grassroots activists face suspension of their accounts for content flagged by

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coordinated reporting behaviors.

4 . METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods qualitative approach integrating digital ethnography, social network analysis (SNA), and key informant interviews with activists, security practitioners, and communication professionals to examine how grievances around taxation and governance were transformed into powerful viral narratives and coordinated online and offline action during Kenya's 2024 Gen Z uprising.

SNA mapped influential actors and the process of content amplification within the protest networks while the interviews provided insights into protest dynamics and organization as well as state responses.

5. FINDINGS

5-1 The Transformation of Political Mobilization

The Gen Z uprising in East Africa represents a *paradigmatic shift in political mobilization from the traditional political party and civil society driven mobilization to decentralized, agenda driven online and offline political engagement.*

While the use of social media for civic and political engagement is not new in Kenya, the 2024

protests was different in scope, organization and impact. From the use of viral hashtags to coordinated messaging, use of novel platforms, the online to offline mobilization gave the movement significant impetus across the country.

Inspired by the developments in Kenya, similar movements emerged in other countries such as the #EndBadGovernance conversation in Nigeria that started with X space hosted on the 3rd of July 2024. In Uganda, the #March2Parliament movement started as citizens initiated demands for accountability and transparency in the government. Like Kenya, the #March2Parliament protest was planned on X and morphed into offline action.

"That this new youth led activism appeared to catch the political class by surprise signaled a new era of civic engagement and dissent and which upstaged the traditional elite hold over political discourse and mobilization."

5-2 The Rise of Viral Dissent as a Political Force

The 2024 Kenyan Gen Z uprising catapulted *digital platforms as the new arena of political expression, mobilization, organization, and resistance against State power and policies.* For the youth, the protesst were more than a reaction to proposed taxation policies but an outlet of pent-up frustrations around governance gaps, and socio-economic exclusion.

Using Twitter (X), Tik Tok, Instagram, and WhatsApp, the youth created a collected identity of dissent that transcended political, party and ethnic affiliations herading a new era of issue based and

generational politics.

The well-coordinated primary messaging during the uprising revolved around four main viral hashtags: *#Reject, #Occupy, #Free and #MustGo* which were calls for tax justice, political accountability, governance overhaul, and the release of arrested protesters.

X (formerly twitter) served as a digital Town Square for meetings, organizing and amplifying key messages related to the protests including livestream of conversations on X Spaces. According to Nendo, a digital research company, the volume of online traffic associated with the protests spiked during the peak of the protests in the18 day period between 12 June when the first #RejectFinanceBill2024 appeared and 30 June 2024, a total of total of 25 million tweets were shared.
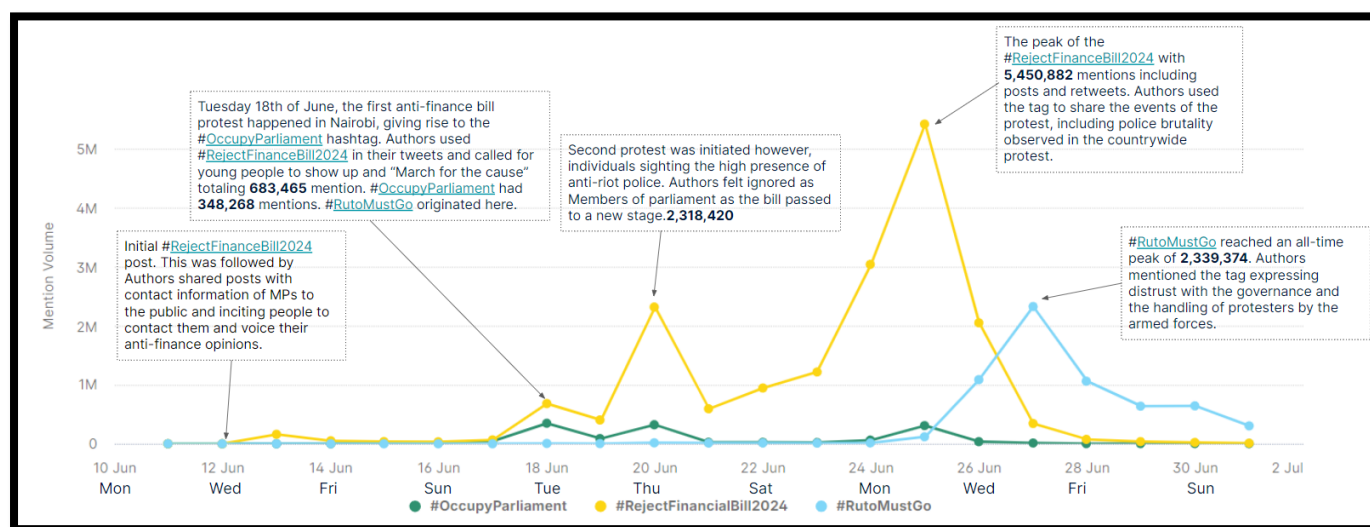

Figure 2: Social media Traffic on X over an 18-day period (Nendo)

#OccupyParliament moved the protests from online activism to offline protests where the protesters invaded the National Parliament on June 25 where over 1.3 million tweets were shared.
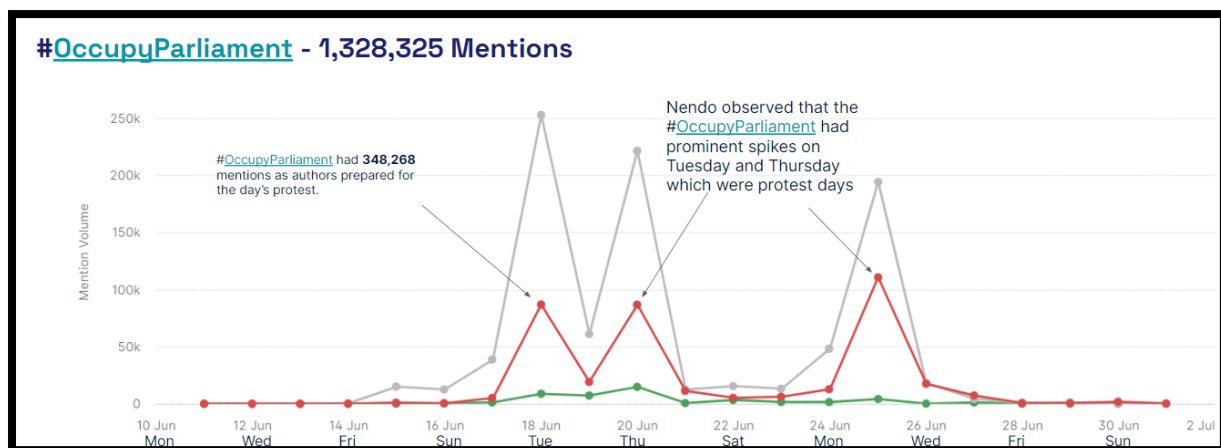
Figure 3: #OccupyParliament mentions on X (Nendo)

During the period, Tik Tok was generating an average of 14 million views every day with over 3,000 videos published daily leading to a total of 339.9 million views. Notably, unlike X(Twitter) which is dominated by popular activists, influencers, and politicians, the leading voices on Tik Tok were representation of ordinary people where content matters more than the creator.
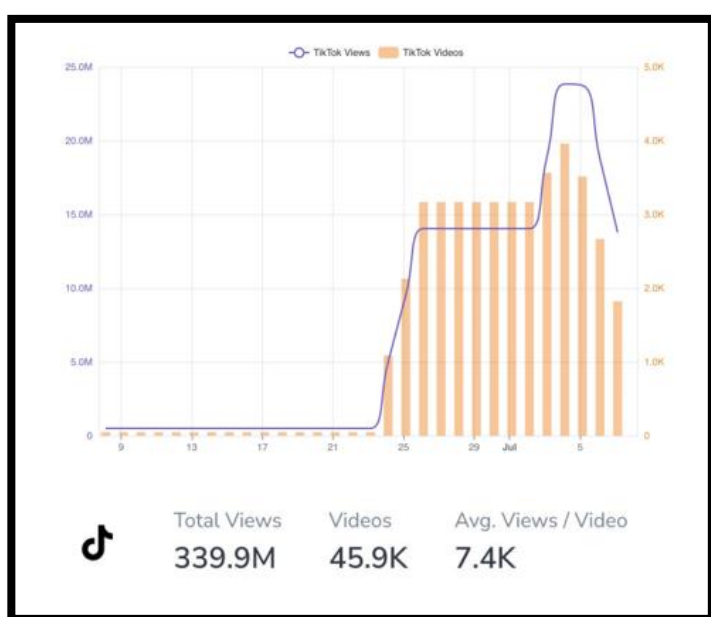
Figure 4: Volume of Tik Tok videos (Nendo)

5-3 Leaderless but Strategically Coordinated Movements

Although protests were dubbed leaderless, they were characterized by remarkable organization and creativity through cordinated messaging, logistics, legal support, and online fundraising.

> "The online and offline actions were sustained for over one month through decentralized digital coordination without a clearly recognized or hierarchical leadership."

The findings reveal the presence of small influence networks of distributed decision making, powered by digital creators and online amplifiers that generated energy to sustain the protests. The anonymity and multiplicity of actors frustrated state attempts to counter the protest due to their inability to identify key leaders.

By branding themselves leaderless, the Gen Zs took control from traditional political gate keepers and established new rules and platforms for political engagement based on horizontal governance and participatory democracy without institutional anchoring. Key movement leaders who appeared to align with formal political order quickly lost their place and were easily replaced by new ones.

5-4 Digital Ecosystems as Political Battlegrounds and the Role of Misinformation

With information wars becoming a key element of the digital era, *the digital sphere has now become a key arena for political contestation, where truth, facts, opinions, are constantly negotiated in the quest for influence and dominance.*

In the battle of narratives during the 2024 protests, two extremes dominated the political discourse. On one side, the Gen Zs had a moral protest frame built around their legitimate quest for good governance, political accountability, inclusion, and justice. On the other hand, the State viewed the protests as disruptive chaos aimed at undermining legitimate state power and attributed the chaos to local political networks and foreign interference.

This contestation created a charged information environment where viral misinformation sought to deligitimize both the protests and state authority. There were many instances of decontextualized information and unverified claims by both sides. Responding to the online (mis)information which was fueling the offline protests became as important as responding to the street protests.

5-5 Foreign and Transnational Dimensions

The youth led protests attracted significant attention globally. A key look at social media traffic data revealed the popular hashtags were trending globally with millions of views and posts emanating from outside Kenya. Additionally, the Kenyan diaspora community played a key role in amplifying protest messages and mobilizing solidarity and support abroad.

International media coverage framed the protests within the context of legitimate youth democratic quest giving the protesst some level of support and legitimacy. On the other hand, the State

actors attributed the protests to foreign entities, framing the protests as a threat to sovereignty, in some cases singling out different foreign nations.

5-6 State Response and the Security Dilemma

The protests created a dilemma for the state. First, the absence of hierachichal structures created difficulties for State surveillance and response. Two, the profile and mode of engagement of youthful protestors was markedly different from the profile of previous protesters. In the early stages of the protests, the police were hesitant to lodge teargas at the young protesters most of them female and only armed with smartphones and placards.

"For the state, it was the balance between legitimate law enforcement and the risk of escalation in clashes with protesters."

Heavy use of force would not only delegitimize the state but also add fuel to the protests and the added risk of turning the confrontations into compelling global media spectacles creating the 'optics of repression' driven by international media coverage. On the other hand, a show of restraint could inadvertently signal weakness on the part of the State. As the protests escalated, the State resorted to the use of force, which culminated in violent clashes with protesters which amplified public outrage and fed into the narrative of state brutality.

The protests further exposed the inadequacy of traditional crowd control mechanisms in

managing modern digitally driven dissident. While traditionally, use of force and anti-riot police appeared effective in managing dissent, the sight of youth armed with nothing, but placards, national flags and smartphones created a dilemma for the police. Additionally, the leaderless nature of the movement made it hard to isolate key leaders.

6. Discussion

The initial optimism around the original promise of social media to reinvigorate democracy in the early days appeared to have waned with the rise of misinformation and disinformation, commercialization of the digital sphere, as well as the repeated concerns around data privacy and digitla surveillance. However, the viral dissent witnessed in 2024 and 2025 protests in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania appears to have restored the democratizing power of social media by shifting the fulcrum of political power from institutional authority and figureheads to networked digital publics. The success of young people in challenging official state narratives and forcing reforms using counter narratives and organized action have redefined power and legitimacy in the Eastern Africa region. During the protests, the digital space reemerged as a primary avenue for mobilization, collective identity and galvanization around core issues. Citizen-generated content easily overwhelmed official state narratives and response and eroded the state's control over the information environment.

It has however been argued by some that the inability of leaderless movements to convert viral moments into permanent institutional changes undermines their potency (Munoriyarwa, Moyo & Chuma,

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2024). While issue based digital mobilization is effective in creating online movements and raising the salience of issues, there are questions whether the quest achieves any tangible results because of the refusal or reluctance by the youth people to engage within the formal democractic and constitutional structures. Ocassional, digital action has been seen as a substitute for the required offline action to deliver meaningful change (Thoecharis, Yannis, and Lowe, 2016). With all the attention and traction, the movement gained nationally, it struggled to sustain the original gains and the movement fizzled out following the state's crackdown.

The nature and impact of the Gen Z uprising raised new concerns for the state institutions in dealing with this new threat vector which defied traditional mechanism of handling dissent. The standard response by most governments in East Africa has been securitization of digital spaces. By defiing digital activism as a national security challenge, many states respond by increasing the scope of cybe offences, with some going a step further to either shut down, ban, or limit access to social media in politically sensitive times (Nyabola, 2020, Mwesige, 2021). This fails to address the underlying issues driving these movements and risks compounding the crisis. Additionally, without formal engagement structures and mechanisms, it becomes hard to realize and sustain gains. While the previous protests around Finance Bill in 2023 ended with structured engagement with the key leaders of the protest movement, the 2024 Gen Z protests without clearly identifiable leadership structures limited state ability to engage or negotiate with key movement leaders. Consequently, the State resorted to seemingly disproportionate coercive supression tactics against the protesters with varying levels of success.

6-1 Implications for National and Regional Security Policy

The findings from this study highlight an urgent need to rethink security frameworks and governance models in the digital era. As the Kenyan experience demonstrates, coercive suppression tactics in the digital era are inadequate and can be self-defeating leading to escalation instead of resolution. Traditional models focusing on the use of force, surpression, and surveillance are ineffetive when dealing with leaderless but organized digitally networked political mobilization. Additionally, for the state, there is need to recognize the nature of youth grievances rooted in economic reality and powered by shared online culture and generational comradeship and solidarity.

Without meaningful engagement, political inclusion and responsive governance models, the East African states will remain caught up in an endless cycle of dissent and securitized response risking further escalation and destbalization.

The angle of foreign interference also raises concerns about the associated risks of foreign influence, hijacking and weaponization of internal issues by external actors. Organized weaponization of misinformation poses a particular challenge to State power due to risk of manufactured political rage or algorithmic distortion (Mwangi & Waema, 2023). Further, international media engagement, diaspora voices and regional solidarity invite the attention of the world by elevating local dissent into global narratives thereby complicating the State's reponse. It does not help that the architectutre of the internet and ownerhip digital insfrastructure and reliance on foreign technology firms creates specific vulnerabilities for African nations, leaving them susceptible to foreign interference and backdoor

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infisltration (Gagliardone & Golovchenko (2021)

Theoretically, the study advances the social movement theory by recognizing and incorporating the power of digitally networked coordination and digital solidarity as new drivers in political mobilization.

7. Conclusion

Notably, the Kenyan gen Z uprising is not just an episodic isolated incident., rather, it signals a renewal of civic engagement.   Indeed, it's a dot on the horizon, a warning signal of the consequences of an interplay of a youth bulge, enemployment, digital connectvity and unresponsive government action creating a potent mix that threatens State stability and power. Security frameworks and governance models must therefore adapt to the realities of an interconnected world.

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