

KENYA

POLICE BULLETS, DIGITAL CHAINS: STATE SANCTIONED BRUTALITY IN KENYA'S PEACEFUL YOUTH-LED UPRISING



Protesters gather during nationwide protests against the Finance Bill 2024. (Photo by Amaury Falt-Brown/AFP via Getty Images)

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Protests sparked by the controversial 2024 Finance Bill brought [thousands](#) to the streets in June 2024 reflecting widespread public anger at [proposed tax increases](#) on necessities such as bread, diapers, sugar, mobile phones and money transfers, and phone and internet data services, among others. The bill also sought to introduce a highly controversial and heavily opposed motor vehicle tax to make vehicle owners pay an annual charge of 2.5 per cent of the value of their vehicle, in addition to their compulsory annual vehicle insurance costs.

[Discontent](#) at Kenya's sluggish economy, high unemployment, rising inflation and evident corruption by government officials combined with their [flagrantly opulent](#) lifestyles was expressed online through various social media platforms before protests began. Kenya's young people, who make up 65 per cent of the population, were at the [forefront of protests](#), demanding the withdrawal of the proposed punitive taxes and accountability over the use of public resources. The protests which began in opposition to harsh taxes developed into a larger movement calling for structural changes in the public service and governance sectors, government accountability, and an end to police brutality.

In response, police used live ammunition, including by deploying snipers to shoot peaceful and unarmed protesters, while plainclothes and masked police officers in unmarked vehicles shot live ammunition and teargas directly at people, including medical personnel and journalists. National security and intelligence operatives arrested and [abducted](#) protesters, including social media influencers who had been vocal in supporting the protests, on allegations of leading and funding protests.

According to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, as of 31 October 2024, at least 60 people had been [killed](#). As of 26 December 2024, 82 cases of enforced or involuntary [disappearances](#) had been documented. While the government [reported](#) in September 2024 that at least 1,208 people had been arrested during the protests, and that at least 132 were missing, civil society groups estimated the numbers to be much higher. Bodies of some of those reported missing were [found](#) in abandoned quarries, forests, rivers and mortuaries, showing signs of torture, with some mutilated and dismembered. Dozens of protesters are still missing to date.

A year later, a chilling crackdown on civic freedoms has [continued](#) unabated, with state-sanctioned abductions continuing and the authorities clamping down on freedom of expression. As Kenyans turn to digital spaces to seek safer, alternative ways to express dissent, state repression has escalated even in online spaces. In June 2025, activist Albert Omondi Ojwang [died in suspicious circumstances](#) in police detention after being held over a social media post, while software developer Rose Njeri was arrested for allegedly breaching the 2018 Misuse of Computer and Cybercrimes Act for designing an online tool enabling people to object to the latest finance bill. Creative arts have also faced censorship with protest-themed art facing bans in public spaces and schools.

This brief sets out how the state weaponises Kenya's policing system, deeply rooted in a broken, brutal and colonial legacy, to violently suppress dissent. Far from serving the public, the security apparatus is used as a tool of repression, unleashing state-sponsored violence to silence people who dare to speak out and demand justice and accountability. This brief also discusses the disproportionate impact civic space violations are having on young people, as exemplified by the state's response to the 2024 protests.

Amidst these violations, the report also highlights how Kenya's judiciary has been a crucial safeguard against authoritarian overreach, rendering decisions that seek to uphold law enforcement's accountability, defended protesters' rights, and overturn unlawful bans by authorities.



INTRODUCTION

Kenya's civic space rating was downgraded from obstructed to repressed in the CIVICUS Monitor's 2024 People Power Under Attack [report](#). This downgrade to the second-worst civic space rating was caused by a significant deterioration in civic space in the context of protests, which has continued in 2025.

The contentious Finance Bill 2024, which called for harsh tax increases in the face of a struggling economy, set off an unprecedented wave of youth-led protests in Kenya in the middle of 2024. The call to oppose the Bill swiftly grew into a larger movement opposing government incompetence and unaccountability, police brutality and systemic corruption. Spearheaded by a digitally connected generation, the protests brought to light the public's intense dissatisfaction with poor governance and economic hardship. Kenya's declining civic space was made clear by the state's response, which was characterised by excessive force, abductions, enforced disappearances, brutal killings and a crackdown on fundamental freedoms. This report looks at the demonstrations, the government's repressive tactics, and the young people of Kenya's unwavering resilience in the face of growing authoritarianism.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The CIVICUS Monitor, an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Kenya as **Repressed**.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED**REPRESSED****OBSTRUCTED****NARROWED****OPEN**

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

2024 FINANCE BILL: YOUNG PEOPLE BRAVE POLICE BRUTALITY TO DEMAND ACCOUNTABILITY

On 16 June 2024, ahead of parliament's debate on the 2024 Finance Bill, massive nationwide protests erupted in at least 23 counties, with protesters calling on President William Ruto to resign over poor governance. In Nairobi, police fired [teargas](#) and water cannon to disperse peaceful protesters, with demonstrators accusing police officers of provoking violence. Police violence resulted in injuries to protesters, with reports of the police [shooting](#) a journalist, while another reporter witnessed a protester's body with a head wound.

Two days later, on 18 June 2024, a huge wave of peaceful protests erupted. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly young people from Generation Z, from cities and towns across Kenya took to the streets to protest against the Finance Bill.

On 20 June 2024, the day that members of parliament (MPs) were to debate the bill's second reading, more protests were held across Kenya to demand they reject the bill in its entirety. Peaceful protests [were held](#) in cities and towns in at least 35 of Kenya's 47 counties, including Eldoret, Kakamega, Kisumu, Lamu, Mombasa, Nairobi and Nakuru.

Kenyan security forces, long [known](#) for using unlawful and brutal tactics to respond to peaceful protests, indiscriminately and [brutally opened](#) fire at unarmed protesters using live ammunition, water cannon and teargas. Journalists, lawyers and medical personnel in attendance at protests were targeted, with police officers following them into safe spaces such as churches where they were helping injured protesters. Several protesters were killed and many others injured, with some protesters killed by bullets fired by police [snipers](#) on top of buildings.

Despite the police violence, the protests [continued](#) throughout the day and into the night, after the bill passed its second reading. The bill's passing was accompanied by allegations that MPs had been [bribed](#) to vote for it.

Smaller protests continued across Kenya in constituencies represented by MPs who had voted in favour of the bill, as protesters gathered to march to their homes and offices to demand their resignation. In some instances, people [destroyed](#) properties owned by or linked to these MPs.

In the days that followed, national security and intelligence operatives embarked on an arrest and [abduction](#) spree, kidnapping popular social media influencers who vocally supported the protests on their platforms, accusing them of leading and funding protests. They arrested many others.



Protesters hold a Kenyan flag outside the Kenyan Parliament during protests against tax hikes in 2024 (Photo by LUIS TATO/AFP via Getty Images)

Further nationwide protests were scheduled for 25 June 2024, the day of the Finance Bill's third and final reading. That day, Kenyans woke up to shocking news of [overnight abductions](#) of several prominent social media influencers. Planned protests however proceeded as scheduled. Protesters [gathered](#) in central Nairobi to march towards parliament. After it was announced that parliament had passed the bill, some protesters [stormed](#) into the parliament buildings, breaching the building's wall. Property within the parliament buildings was [destroyed](#) and set on fire and several business were broken into and looted by [politically-sponsored](#) thugs who were allegedly paid by government officials to violently infiltrate



and delegitimise the peaceful protests. Police responded by firing live ammunition and teargas, [killing](#) several unarmed protesters.

On 1 July 2024, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights reported that at least 39 protesters and bystanders had been [killed](#) and at least 361 people had been injured. It documented 32 cases of enforced or involuntary [disappearances](#) and 627 incidents of arrests of protesters in the same period.

The Kenyan diaspora held solidarity protests demanding the withdrawal of the Finance Bill, dissolution of government, an end to police brutality and action on government corruption and overspending, among other demands. They held protests in [Germany](#), [the Netherlands](#), the [UK](#) and several [US](#) states, among other countries.

On 26 June 2024, president William Ruto bowed to protest pressure and [announced](#) he would not sign the Finance Bill into law. He also called for dialogue with young people.

While Ruto's announcement came as a relief to many Kenyans, the call for dialogue was widely [rejected](#) by young people as insincere, given that authorities continued to track down and abduct people in retaliation for the protests.

Protests quickly [expanded](#) to articulate broader grievances and demands for better governance. Under the slogan 'Ruto Must Go', protesters called for the dissolution of the government, an end to endemic corruption, accountability for government officials, cuts to government spending and the replacement of inept government officials hired for their loyalty to the ruling party with competent technocrats. Protesters also called for police reforms and an end to police brutality. Protesters continued to organise more protests.

On 11 July 2024, Ruto [announced](#) in a national address that he had dissolved his cabinet apart from the foreign minister. The week before, he had announced sharp cuts in government spending. On 19 July 2024, Ruto [made](#) 11 cabinet appointments, six of whom had been in the previous cabinet. Many protesters saw this as emblematic of the government's insincerity. They widely rejected the new cabinet and organised more anti-government protests.

PROTEST REPRESSION CONTINUES

On 23 July 2024, Kisumu police [arrested](#) human rights defender Ogutu Boniface during a protest against poor governance and transferred him to Vihiga police station, where four officers tortured him and filmed the abuse on their phones. They punched and strangled him, pierced his finger and struck his head and nose, causing bleeding and soft tissue injuries. The officers demanded Ogutu reveal his phone password and stop mobilising protests. On 24 July 2024, the court ordered Ogutu be taken to hospital before entering any plea.

On 25 July 2024, authorities [arrested](#) several people, including human rights activist Boniface Mwangi, as they led a protest demanding justice for recent victims of protest repression. Caroline Nduku Mutisya, mother of Ericson Mutisya, who was killed by police, and two relatives of Evans Kiratu, who died from teargas exposure, were also detained. Police also [arrested](#) prominent protest supporter Shadrack Kiprono, popularly known as Shad Khalif, holding him until the following day.

On 8 August 2024, police fired [teargas](#) volleys and set up roadblocks in central Nairobi to disperse small groups of protesters demanding Ruto's resignation.

On 3 September 2024, Pablo Chacha, Erot Franco, Boniface Mwangi, Robert Otieno and Albert Wambugu [appeared](#) in the Milimani Law Courts on protest-related charges. The court rejected the prosecution's request for an additional two weeks to conclude investigations and released them unconditionally.

More protests came in December 2024, as the numbers of those abducted by security officers continued to soar. The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights documented 82 cases of enforced or involuntary [disappearances](#) as of 26 December 2024, sparking further outrage.

On 30 December 2024, peaceful nationwide protests [broke out](#) in response to rising abductions and enforced disappearances. Security forces again used excessive force, deploying teargas and violently dispersing protesters. A group of civil society organisations (CSOs) [reported](#) that at least 50 unarmed protesters, including former presidential candidate Reuben Kigame, Senator Okiya Omtatah and several human rights defenders, were teargassed and arrested in Eldoret, Mombasa and Nairobi. In Mombasa and Nairobi, 18 protesters suffered injuries, including blunt-force trauma, minor cuts and respiratory distress from teargas exposure. Reports also indicate that four detainees faced assault and torture with batons and rifle butts inside a Nairobi police station. Human rights groups continue to condemn the state's escalating crackdown on peaceful dissent.

In 2025, protest violations have continued as seen on 17 June when peaceful protests [broke out](#) across several cities to demand justice after the brutal torture and killing of online activist Albert Ojwang in police custody, over a social media post (see expression section). The demonstrators demanded the immediate resignation of Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Eliud Lagat, after reports emerged that Lagat had [issued](#) instructions to police officers to "discipline" the blogger, after he published a social media post allegedly implicating the DIG in corruption. While police officers disrupted the protests using teargas and live ammunition which saw one civilian get [shot](#) at close range, government officials are reported to have [deployed](#) armed thugs to violently attack, injure and intimidate protesters, and loot shops while police officers stood by without intervening, in what can be seen as an additional layer of [state-sanctioned](#) terror on unarmed protesters, compounding the brutality already inflicted by law enforcement.

KEY TRENDS IN KENYA'S YOUTH-LED MASS PROTESTS

ILLEGAL POLICE TACTICS CONTINUE TO BE NORMALISED

Police have met protests with unethical and unlawful practices that go against the constitutional right to peaceful assembly and international human rights standards on policing of assemblies. Police used [snipers](#) to kill and wound peaceful and unarmed protesters, while other police officers, with faces masked and clad in plainclothes and [roaming](#) in unmarked vehicles, shot live bullets and lobbed teargas directly at people, including medical personnel and journalists.

POLITICALLY SPONSORED THUGS INFILTRATE PROTESTS

Politicians and government officials hired armed thugs to infiltrate peaceful protests and provoke violence. This tactic was intended to create chaos and shift blame onto protesters by portraying them as violent agitators. It aimed to delegitimise protests in the public eye and justify excessive police force, masking state-sponsored repression as a necessary response to unrest.

Reports emerged that thugs linked to politicians [infiltrated](#) protests on 20 and 25 June 2024, attracting a reaction from police by looting and destroying property. Hired thugs are accused of setting parliament on fire and destroying property. In contrast, peaceful protesters [helped](#) MPs escape the parliament buildings. Kenyan media outlets have previously [reported](#) on rogue politicians who exploit the high unemployment rate to contract jobless young people to infiltrate and delegitimise protests.



Demonstrators engage Kenyan security forces in Nairobi during the 2024 Finance Bill protests (Photo by KABIR DHANJI/AFP via Getty Images)

Shockingly, videos circulating on social media also showed uniformed police officers [looting](#) from businesses amidst the chaos.

This pattern has [persisted](#) into 2025. In June 2025, as peaceful protests broke out across several cities to demand justice after the brutal torture and killing of online activist Albert Ojwang in police custody (see more in expression section), videos surfaced online showing hired thugs in Nairobi—allegedly [connected](#) to Nairobi Governor Johnson Sakaja—chanting slogans in his support and carrying crude weapons. While the city was filled with armed police officers, none of them [attempted](#) to stop the thugs as they terrorised and violently robbed protesters, and broke into and looted shops, further calling into question the use of state-sponsored thugs to violently repress peaceful protests.

ABDUCTIONS AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE USED TO REPRESS PROTESTS

Despite official claims that the government does not engage in extrajudicial killings or abductions, evidence suggests otherwise. The Kenya National Human Rights Commission [documented](#) 82 cases of abductions and enforced disappearances as of 26 December 2024, with 29 people still missing. The primary targets are government critics. Security agents are widely suspected of being behind these disappearances, though authorities deny involvement.

Reports highlight [discrepancies](#) between police records and autopsy findings in cases involving anti-government protesters. In November 2024, Ruto [dismissed](#) reports of abductions as ‘fake news’, but the following month he pledged to [stop](#) the abduction of government critics, a U-turn [interpreted](#) by some as signalling an acknowledgement of state involvement or complicity in these incidents.

On 30 December 2024, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights [called](#) on the Kenyan government to end abductions and enforced disappearances. The Commission urged authorities to conduct thorough, transparent and impartial investigations into all reported cases. It also emphasised the need to strengthen oversight bodies, including the judiciary, the Police Oversight Commission and human rights commissions, to ensure they can effectively prevent and address violations. The Commission called on the government to provide immediate support to families of the disappeared by cooperating with investigations, providing legal assistance and ensuring access to justice. It also stressed the importance of promptly informing families and the public about arrests or detentions and ensuring detainees appear in court without delay.

On 14 January 2025, Justin Muturi, former Cabinet Secretary for Public Service, alleged in a written statement to police that the National Intelligence Service (NIS) was [responsible](#) for his son’s abduction during the protests. Muturi stated that his son, Leslie, was taken by ‘armed, hooded gangsters’ and was only released after Ruto personally intervened. He described visiting the presidential residence on 23 June 2024, where Ruto called NIS Director-General Noordin Haji to secure Leslie’s release.

Former Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua, who was [impeached](#) in October 2024 after falling out with Ruto, accused the ruling party’s administration of using abductions to silence critics. In December 2024, he described the reported abductions as a ‘security crisis’ and [condemned](#) the NIS for its inaction on the issue. These claims add to growing concerns over the state’s use of enforced disappearances as a tool to suppress dissent, raising questions about state accountability and the protection of civil liberties.

KENYANS FIND ALTERNATIVE PROTEST TOOLS AMID BRUTALITY

As the abduction, arrest and killing spree continued, Kenyans used alternative ways of organising and protesting online. On 22 June 2024, over 60,000 people [joined](#) an online space on Twitter/X to call for the immediate release of those abducted and arrested, denounce police brutality and chart a way forward for protests. On 26 June 2024, over 129,000 people [joined](#) a similar online space hosted by protest supporters.

Kenyans also used other gatherings to protest and express discontent about the Finance Bill. Videos shared on social media showed that people in [nightclubs](#) in the cities of Eldoret, Nairobi and Nakuru and the major towns of Kericho, Naivasha and Narok [broke](#) into ‘Ruto Must Go’ and ‘Reject Finance Bill’ chants as the call for parliament drop the bill intensified. Nightclub DJs stopped playing music and led revellers in the chants. In [churches](#), people collectively chanted against the Finance Bill and actively supported plans for further protests.

A year on, the ‘Ruto must go’ chants have [continued](#) as part of a fully-fledged wave of discontent that has swept across Kenya, expressed in political and non-political gatherings, including national [football matches](#) and other high-profile events.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The shift of young Kenyans, in response to police brutality against protests, to digital platforms as a refuge for resistance has been met with an aggressive push by authorities to tighten control over the digital sphere, with the aim of silencing dissent in virtual arenas. This has included the weaponisation of cybercrime laws.

Amidst these violations, the recent brutal torture and murder Blogger and activist Albert Ojwang under police custody in June 2025 (see more below) has become a chilling reminder of the tragic consequences of the weaponisation of cybercrime laws by state officials to punish speech.



Kenyan police officers intervene as peaceful protesters march to parliament during the 2024 nationwide Finance Bill protests (Photo by Gerald Anderson/Anadolu via Getty Images)

INTERNET DISRUPTED

On 25 June 2024, internet monitor NetBlocks reported that Kenya’s internet network service had experienced a major [disruption](#). This followed user reports of [internet disruptions](#) as protests unfolded.

ABDUCTIONS OF ONLINE CRITICS CREATE A CHILLING EFFECT

In December 2024 alone, unidentified people [abducted](#) at least six online critics in separate incidents. Some victims were allegedly targeted after [AI-generated](#) images of Ruto in a coffin circulated online. Authorities abducted Gideon Kibet and his brother Ronny Kiplangat after Gideon posted cartoons critical of Ruto and his government on social media.

On 6 January 2025, five of six missing people, including content creator Bernard Kavuli, student Billy Munyiri Mwangi, Gideon Kibet, Ronny Kiplangat and Peter Muteti, were found alive after being [released](#) in different locations under unclear circumstances. However, the sixth person, Steve Mbisi, remains [missing](#). In a CNN interview, those who returned stated they did not know who detained them but some have since stopped [criticising](#) the government online or gone silent.

GOVERNMENT TARGETS SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES A MID GROWING ONLINE CRITICISM

On 16 January 2025, the government [ordered](#) social media companies to establish physical offices in Kenya, citing the need for accountability and safeguards against digital platform misuse. The directive followed

months of tension over critical online content targeting top officials, including Ruto, following the June 2024 mass protests.

On 28 January 2025, ICT and Digital Economy Cabinet Secretary William Kabogo warned the government could [shut down](#) social media platforms if it deems national security is at risk. While he stated there were no immediate plans to disrupt internet access, he emphasised the need for tighter regulation of online spaces and warned against misuse, citing potential prosecution under the Misuse of Computer and Cybercrimes Act.

Both measures reflect the government's increasing efforts to control digital spaces, claiming these actions are needed to combat disinformation, online abuse and incitement. CSOs warn that these regulations [undermine](#) free speech and set a dangerous precedent for suppressing digital rights on the pretext of national security.

BBC DOCUMENTARY SCREENING CENSORED, FILMMAKERS DETAINED

On 28 April 2025, the BBC [cancelled](#) a planned screening in Nairobi of its documentary, '*Blood Parliament*', following government pressure. The programme investigates the killing of three unarmed protesters by security officers outside parliament on 25 June 2024. Using open-source footage and user-generated content from the day, the documentary identifies uniformed officers allegedly responsible for the shootings. A private screening was set to take place followed by a panel discussion featuring activists who appeared in the documentary. The BBC instead streamed the [documentary](#) on its YouTube channel, sparking widespread public debate about police brutality.

On 3 May 2025, it was reported that four filmmakers – Brian Adagala, Mark Karubiu, Christopher Wamae and Nicholas Wambugu – had been [arrested](#) and detained on charges of false publication in relation to the documentary, even after the BBC confirmed the four had played no role in its making. While they were later released on a free bond, they [face](#) charges of publication of false information and cyber harassment, with the state seeking imprisonment of up to 10 years or fines of KES 20 million (approx. US\$155,800) each.

NEW COMMUNICATIONS BILL THREATENS MASS SURVEILLANCE

On 3 June 2025, it was reported that a new bill had been tabled in parliament, the Kenya Information and Communications (Amendment) Bill, 2025. It [proposes](#) a metered billing system for internet users, assigning each subscriber a unique, trackable meter number to monitor real-time usage and generate detailed logs. While the bill cites consumer protection under article 46 of the constitution as its primary objective, experts warn it could create a surveillance infrastructure that enables the state to monitor, map and potentially control people's internet use. It would potentially grant the government [expansive tracking powers](#) without adequate safeguards or accountability.

WEB DEVELOPER DETAINED, CHARGED FOR DEVELOPING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION TOOL

On 3 June 2025, software developer and civic activist Rose Njeri was [arraigned](#) at the Milimani Law Courts in Nairobi after spending over 90 hours in police custody. Njeri faces charges of unauthorised interference with a computer system, contrary to the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, after she created a platform to allow people to input their views on the 2025 Finance Bill through a web interface, which then autogenerates an email to a designated parliamentary address. Njeri's arrest demonstrates the government's growing intolerance of citizen action.

Noting that Kenya's cybercrime law is intended to target cyber terrorists, fraudsters and malicious hackers, and that the constitution requires parliament to facilitate public participation in law-making, Njeri's lawyers have pointed out that the charges against her were political and accused the office of the prosecutor of being used politically by the executive.

The case has [sparked](#) national outrage and [attracted](#) some of Kenya's most prominent lawyers, including Senior Counsel John Khaminwa, who is Kenya's oldest practising lawyer, Senator Dan Maanzo, former Chief Justice David Maraga, Senior Counsel Kalonzo Musyoka and former Law Society of Kenya president Eric Theuri, who have all represented Njeri in court. During the court session, activists and protesters gathered outside the building demanding her release. Njeri was released on a bond of KES 100,000 (approx. US\$680), pending a hearing of the case later in June 2025.

BLOGGER BRUTALLY TORTURED AND KILLED OVER SOCIAL MEDIA POST

As state repression continues to expand beyond the streets to target online and social media users, on 8th June 2025, Kenyans woke up to shocking news of the death of Albert Ojwang, a digital content creator who shared commentary on political and social issues through X and Facebook. Ojwang had been [arrested](#) the afternoon before from his home in Homa Bay County, on orders from the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Eliud Lagat, who accused him of "tarnishing" his reputation online, after Ojwang published posts on his X account [alleging](#) the DIG's involvement in corruption. While the police initially tried to cover up the murder by claiming that Ojwang died from injuries he had sustained after hitting his head on a cell wall, clear evidence of foul play was [discovered](#) after a post-mortem revealed injuries including head trauma, neck compression, and multiple soft tissue injuries - evidence he was severely beaten and strangled. His murder sparked protests in several cities (see Peaceful Assembly section), with demonstrators demanding justice and the immediate resignation of Deputy Inspector General Lagat. Their calls were fueled by claims from the police officer now considered a key suspect, who alleged that Lagat had [issued](#) instructions to "discipline" the blogger.

PARLIAMENT PROPOSES INCREASED BUDGET FOR MONITORING SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY

Just two days after the brutal killing of social media user Albert Ojwang by police officers because of a post on X (see above incident), on 10th June 2025, the National Assembly's Budget Committee in June [proposed](#) to amend the budget estimates of the National Treasury, reallocating KES. 150 million (approx. USD \$1,153,000) to the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) to procure and service a system with the potential to track social media users in the country. The proposed allocation would see the DCI purchase and run an Optimus 3.0 system and run a forensic lab. Experts have raised serious concerns regarding state surveillance and privacy, warning that the system may allow authorities to track social media users, identify their posts and locations, and track the devices they use.

CONCERNS OVER THE ROLE OF ICT COMPANIES IN AIDING PROTEST AND DIGITAL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Safaricom, Kenya's largest internet and telecommunications provider, has come under fire following an exposé on its alleged involvement in mass surveillance. On 29 October 2024, the Nation Media Group [published](#) an investigative report revealing that Safaricom, in collaboration with Neural Technologies Limited, had developed software that gave Kenyan security agencies access to private consumer data. The system reportedly enabled authorities to track and capture suspects, raising concerns about the possible use of consumers' mobile phone records to assist abductions amid the 2024 protests.

Safaricom responded to these allegations by threatening the Nation Media Group with legal action, in what was broadly seen as a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP), and [withdrawing](#) advertising from the media house. Safaricom also sent a [legal warning](#) to CSOs, including the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, which issued a statement calling for transparency. The CSOs [noted](#) that although Safaricom issued a statement in response to the exposé, it failed to respond to the key findings of the investigative report.

In June 2025, questions also arose as to how blogger and activist Albert Ojwang (see incident above) was traced by police officers to his home in Homabay County, raising concerns about state surveillance

of government critics. Opposition leaders [accused](#) Safaricom of aiding and facilitating the tracing and abduction of Kenyans including Albert Ojwang.

STANDARD MEDIA GROUP THREATENED AND TARGETED OVER PROTEST RELATED COVERAGE

Alongside the government's brutal response to protests, it threatened media outlets. On 25 June 2024, Kenya Television Network (KTN), operated by the Standard Media Group, [reported](#) it had received threats from authorities to shut it down because of its detailed live coverage of the protests and police violence.

On 9 April 2025, the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA) [announced](#) it was revoking the Standard Media Group's broadcast licences, citing unpaid licence fees and Universal Service Fund levies, despite the media house following a KES 48 million (approx. US\$369,000) repayment plan. The CA had issued revocation notices in September 2024, which expired in March 2025, and rejected the existing payment arrangement. Meanwhile, the government owes the Standard Media Group KES 1.2 billion (approx. US\$9.2 million) in unpaid advertising fees. The group's Chief Executive Editor, Chacha Mwita, described the CA's action as a politically motivated move to silence the media following its critical coverage of the government. However, on 16 April 2025, the Communications Appeals Tribunal temporarily [stopped](#) revocation of the group's licence, pending a hearing on the matter.

Earlier in March 2025, the government had [cancelled](#) the Standard Media Group's contract with the Ministry of Irrigation due to its critical coverage. Alongside other media outlets, the group had been selected earlier that month to run a campaign for the launch of the National Irrigation Sector Investment Plan.

Separately, on 31 May 2025, two Standard Media Group journalists were [denied](#) entry to State House in Nairobi to cover a joint press briefing by Ruto and visiting Slovenian President Nataša Pirc Musar, in what is believed to be a response to the outlet's critical coverage.

CENSORSHIP OVER PROTEST-THEMED CREATIVE ARTS IN SCHOOLS

In April 2025, Butere Girls High School was [barred](#) from performing 'Echoes of War', at the annual Kenya Schools and Colleges National Drama and Film Festival in Nakuru County, following a directive from State House. The play focuses on the 2024 protests. Although a court order later directed that the students could stage their play, police officers reportedly [assaulted](#) journalists and lobbed teargas as they tried to cover the play.

Amnesty International Kenya's Executive Director, Irungu Houghton, [said](#):

'By targeting a school play performed by children, the state is criminalizing creativity and turning cultural spaces into zones of fear and censorship. This brazen attack undermines children's right to participate in society through art, a right enshrined in both Kenyan law and international human rights standards.'

CLERGY RAISE CONCERNS OVER GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE IN CHURCHES

On 23 October 2024, a group of preachers in Kiambu County raised concerns over alleged government [surveillance](#) of their church services. During a press conference, clergy members revealed that unidentified people, believed to be government agents, had been attending church services without identifying themselves and later questioned congregants about who had been invited. Some preachers reported that local chiefs were demanding explanations about the content of sermon and details of attendees. This followed people's growing use of social spaces such as churches to [express](#) discontent with the government, with clergy across Kenya vocally condemning the country's ills, including failed governance and high living costs.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

In an attempt to salvage its image and divert attention from the mounting public anger driving the 2024 protests, the government launched a smear campaign against CSOs. Officials falsely accused CSOs of financing unrest, seeking to undermine the legitimacy of the protests and shift blame away from the governance failures identified by protesters.

CSOS FACE SMEAR CAMPAIGNS AS STATE SEEKS SCAPEGOATS FOR THE PROTESTS

In June 2024, as authorities struggled to identify protest organisers and leaders, politicians began to publicly vilify CSOs, accusing them of funding protests. Senator Cleophas Wakhungu Malalah [claimed](#) that foreign investors and CSOs were funding the protests. Senator Samson Cherargei [called on](#) the NIS to investigate his unfounded claims that CSOs were funding protests.

In July 2024, Ruto [accused](#) the Ford Foundation of being behind the protests, [alleging](#) it had sponsored the violence and threatening to 'kick it out of the country'. In a letter to the Ford Foundation dated 18 July 2024, Foreign Affairs Principal Secretary Korir Sing'oei, on behalf of the government, [alleged](#) that the organisation was financially supporting CSOs whose funds were being used to organise and facilitate protests. The head of the Public Benefit Regulatory Authority claimed most CSOs operate illegally due to improper registration and asked the Directorate of Criminal Investigations to [probe](#) the matter. In a [statement](#) responding to these allegations, the Ford Foundation reiterated the non-partisan nature of its grant-making and denied any claims of funding protests.

In September 2024, President William Ruto seemingly [took](#) an unexpected U-turn on his previous accusation after he held talks with the Foundation's president, Darren Walker in New York, now praising the organisation for supporting Kenya's call for economic reforms.

BRIGHT SPOT: KENYAN COURTS STAND FIRM AS HUMAN RIGHTS CUSTODIANS

Amidst executive overreach and with a partisan legislature co-opted by the executive, the judiciary has emerged as a vital safeguard of democracy and the rule of law. Courts, with their constitutional mandate and institutional independence, have increasingly assumed the role of the last bastion of hope for activists, dissenters, protesters and people in general. Despite weakening democratic norms, the judiciary has stood firm as a critical check on power and a protector of fundamental rights.

HIGH COURT SEEKS TO PROTECT PROTESTERS FROM POLICE EXCESSES

On 28 June 2024, the High Court [issued](#) a temporary order restraining the police from using live ammunition, rubber bullets, teargas, water cannon, or any other form of violence against people protesting against the Finance Bill. The court also issued orders restraining the police from abduction, arrest, detention, extrajudicial killing, harassment, intimidation, torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of protesters pending the hearing of a petition challenging police brutality.

HIGH COURT RULES AGAINST USE OF UNIDENTIFIED POLICE OFFICERS IN PROTEST POLICING

On 14 August 2024, the High Court [issued](#) a ruling directing all police officers to wear name tags and uniforms when policing protests, and mandated that plainclothes officers must not conceal their identities. The court also emphasised that the national police service must ensure that the identification,

registration and markings of any vehicles used during protests are visible. The court [affirmed](#) this ruling on 30 April 2025.

COURT ORDERS RELEASE OF PROTESTERS

On 3 September 2024, as highlighted above, a Nairobi court [rejected](#) the prosecution's request to detain protesters for an additional two weeks pending investigations and released them unconditionally. On 31 December 2024, a Nairobi court [rejected](#) a police request to detain 23 protesters arrested during anti-abduction demonstrations for 14 days. Instead, the court granted their release on a KES 50,000 (approx. US\$385) bond with surety, or a KES 1,000 (approx. US\$8) cash bail. On 21 January 2025, the High Court further ruled in favour of the protesters, ordering the release of their phones, which had been [confiscated](#) during their arrest.

HIGH COURT REJECTS EXECUTIVE'S BID TO LIMIT RIGHT TO PROTEST

On 6 February 2025, the High Court quashed a directive [prohibiting](#) protests in Nairobi's Central Business District, declaring it unconstitutional. The ruling nullified a 17 July 2024 police statement that sought to [justify](#) a ban by citing security risks and claims of criminal infiltration. The court emphasised that such restrictions could not be imposed arbitrarily.

COURT REVERSES BAN ON PROTEST-THEMED HIGH SCHOOL PLAY

After Butere Girls High School drama students were banned from presenting their play 'Echoes of War' (see above), a Nyamira court [directed](#) that they could stage their play.

TRIBUNAL HALTS THE STANDARD MEDIA GROUP'S LICENCE REVOCATION

On 16 April 2025, as discussed above, the Communications Appeals Tribunal temporarily [stopped](#) the revocation of the Standard Media Group's broadcast licences, pending the full hearing of a case challenging the regulator's decision to revoke the licences.



CONCLUSION

A deeply ingrained culture of police brutality, enforced disappearances, censorship, and attacks on fundamental freedoms was brought to light by the 2024 #RejectFinanceBill protests in Kenya, which revealed the startling extent of state repression. The youth-led movement achieved a symbolic victory with the Finance Bill's withdrawal, but a larger crisis of governance, accountability and repression of human rights was highlighted by the government's subsequent, prolonged crackdown. These incidents have demonstrated Kenya's dwindling civic space, the use of state institutions as weapons to quell dissent, and the tenacity of a new generation that refuses to tolerate authoritarianism. The June 2025 torture and brutal murder of social media user Albert Ojwang by police officers over a post on X is emblematic of the growing pattern of abuse against government critics and highlights the extent of state-sanctioned police brutality and state repression. His execution is a sobering example of the devastating consequences of a legal system now being weaponised in response to criticism, turning free expression into a criminal offense.

Amidst all this chaos, Kenya's judiciary has become a vital line of defence for human rights, providing a ray of hope for reform and justice in a setting that is becoming more and more antagonistic to civil liberties.