

ANTITHESES

Commentary

My enemy's enemy is my friend: reflections on the Gen Z protests in Kenya

Natalie Tegama

Postdoctoral Researcher in Global Health Ethics, Centre for Tropical Medicine and Global Health, Nuffield Department of Medicine, University of Oxford

E: natalie.tegama@ndm.ox.ac.uk

22 July 2024

Over the last few weeks, young Kenyans (Gen-Zs), have successfully launched a campaign against a finance bill, triggered the dismissal of all but one member of the cabinet and continue to engage in mass protests across the country, calling for the president's resignation. In this piece we co-reflect with Kenyans, on protesting, value disagreements, adversarial cooperation and the values that have underpinned the success of their campaign.

On protests

Arundathi Roy, writes “What an act of faith and hope! How brave it is to believe in today’s world, reasoned, non-violent protest will register, will matter. But will it?”¹ By Roy’s metrics, protesting Kenyans, led by Gen Zs, have collectively engaged in collective faith and hope. Reasoning, mobilising, educating and building a movement, online that has split onto Kenya’s streets, in a series of mass protests across the counties that have ‘registered’. Demanding the attention of the political class, shifting the weight of power within the political class and calling to attention an older generation of citizens and imploring them to engage in critical self and political reflection. There is a progeny with so strong a grasp of the constitution, that quoting articles of the constitution is commonplace in conversation, on X (the platform formerly known as twitter) in memes that have become cultural moments, making their way offline and onto merchandise. Like the [video](#) of a man whose comical articulation of article one, in reference to the people’s right to impeach the president is currently trending online. To the “learned counsel” (his words), on the other side of the questioning he articulates “all powers, all sovereign power belongs to the people of Kenya and shall underline shall,... ‘mandatory’ be exercised only in accordance with the constitution. The people may – ‘optional’, may – ‘optional’ exercise their sovereign

¹ Roy, A. (2019: 179) *My Seditious Heart*. London: Penguin Random House.

power either directly or through their democratically elected representatives.”² His argument? That the people can constitutionally directly impeach the president. So in their t-shirts and with posters with article one printed, ‘shall’, either underlined, in bold or all caps, they take to the streets to exercise their democratic right and successfully #RejectTheFinanceBill that they argue would exacerbate the challenges that the country is facing. In their most recent protests (July 17th), the president’s resignation has become their point of focus, mobilised online under the hashtag #RutoMustGo

#RejectTheFinanceBill

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Kenya is a country that is facing multiple challenges including “a cost-of-living crisis, climate change impacts, high poverty rates and inequality and elevated debt vulnerability.”³ With a focus on debt vulnerability, on May 13th 2024, the chairperson of the Finance and National planning committee of the National Assembly Kuria Kimani MP tabled the finance bill for consideration and public participation with the view to bring it into law at the beginning of the 2024/2025 Kenyan fiscal year which runs from July to June⁴ . The bill proposed a series of tax hikes and new levies to meet lender demands, reduce the budget deficit and borrowing in line with World Bank and IMF recommendations. The 2024/2025 bill would have seen taxes hiked up, the introduction of a series of new levies that would have a rippling effect across much of the social strata, including new levies on basic commodities like bread, goods and services for some specialised hospitals, within education, the creative sector and the digital market place. It sought to increase thresholds for tax exemption on pensions and introduce higher rates of excise tax on telephone and internet data. In debates on the bill, the house of parliament was polemic. The likes of MP, Millie Odhiambo opposed the finance bill, citing proposed hikes on sanitary towels and diapers as devoid of strong underpinning evidence for policy⁵. The loudest voice came from outside the house, amidst, the threat of the most stringent austerity measures in Kenyan history, Gen Z engaged in the debate online and mobilised offline. Through grassroots organising, content creators assembled, with skin in the game, given the threat of new levies on creative content. They used their platforms to discuss the finance bill, engage followers in civic education including on understanding their constitutional rights. In an interview with a Kenyan who has been involved in the protests, she tells me part of the success of the online mobilising and protests has been because the Bill was geared to affect almost everyone, so much so that it created a common ground, that for her and many others, it instigated a brief period of truce online and offline, between people with differing political identities, who ordinarily sit on opposing sides. She being a self-identified womanist, elaborates on how she and many others in her womanist, feminist and socialist circles made conscious decisions to unblock the capitalists and misogynists. She gives the example of a man with a large online following who she describes as a leading misogynistic figure whose content she ordinarily finds violent. She blocked him following the online discourse surrounding the

² Msupa, M. (2024) [X formerly known as Twitter] 10.07. Available at: <https://x.com/Mollage/status/1810889602175225971> (Accessed 15.07.2024)

³ International Monetary fund (2024) <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/KEN/kenya-qandas>

⁴ Parliament of Kenya. (2024) National assembly commences consideration of finance bill 2024, <http://www.parliament.go.ke/node/21852>

⁵ Citizen TV Kenya, 2024. Good girls don't get the corner office" Millie Odhiambo <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekB3YUblHTQ>

femicide protests in Kenya earlier this year. On the finance bill, she reflects on how he was part of leading a key component of civic action in rejecting the bill, by driving a movement to upload the phone numbers of MPs and send them messages requesting that they reject the bill. In the first instance the bill was adjusted, the MPs passed the bill. Gen Z took to the streets, broke into parliament and continued to engage and garner support online and in doing so they shifted the weight of power in country. Even the president had to find his way to an X Space (formerly twitter space), where live discussions are held and participants can engage with hosts⁶. The president was hosted within the space so he could speak directly to Gen Z. Within days, following the president – Gen Z dialogue, Ruto withdrew the bill, dismissed all of his cabinet bar one and in turn, Gen Z returned back to the streets calling for his resignation.

As of July 18th, more than 50 Kenyans have been killed, 400 plus have been injured, mostly youthful protestors.⁷ Of the 109 Gen Z's who reported to court on July 17th after arrests at the protests, all were charged with drunken and disorderly behaviour, many of them were bruised and spoke of police brutality on X⁸. Elsewhere others reported stories of abductions that are in part linked to how the movement has unfolded, and its capacity to grip and shift the weight of power without a central leading figure. Instead, it has been reliant on collective action. Successfully engaging in a new brand of politicking through adversarial cooperation, moving beyond party politics to engage in non-tribal, non-gendered politics. In practice, effectuating new modes of resistance in country, by instrumentalising the constitution to delegitimize the government and employing adversarial cooperation to build the required strength in numbers to bring about change. This form of resistance is new too, to those in government and in reacting to the leaderless movement, those who report having been abducted like Joshua Okaya, a student leader at Kenya's school of law detail being detained, beaten and questioned on who is organising, funding and leading the protest?⁹

On antagonistic cooperation

Perhaps theirs is a success that lies not in a single leader for there is none, but in the strength in numbers, in community and in learning to play with and against one's adversaries. In our analysis, we borrow from Ralph Ellison's notion of antagonistic cooperation, in part inspired by conversations with Kenyans who have shared their stories of unblocking their adversaries to reject the finance bill and blocking them following its withdrawal. For Ellison, a jazz

⁶ Soy, A, (2024) Historic first as takes on Kenya's online army. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cv2g14dy4dlo#:~:text=This%20was%20a%20first.,after%20deadly%20anti%20government%20protests.>

⁷ Rukanga, B. (2024) Protester killed as crowds call for Kenya leader to go <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cv2gd0ye0v2o>

⁸ Gachie, K. (2024) Over 100 Protesters Arrested In Nairobi CBD Charged With Being Drunk And Disorderly <https://www.citizen.digital/news/over-100-protesters-arrested-in-nairobi-cbd-charged-with-being-drunk-and-disorderly-n346080>

⁹ Al jezeera English (2024) Kenya protesters call for President Ruto to resign following abductions and police violence. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anRD8lc2ZH8> (Accessed 16.07.2024)

improvisation was both a site of deep creativity and antagonistic cooperation¹⁰. Antagonistic in the competitiveness, playful as it may have been to the untrained eye. Embedded within the playfulness was, and is, both competition and collaboration. It is a creative dance that sits somewhere between playing with and playing against one another to make space for an emergent newness, something artistically innovative and entirely dependent on the collective striking the right balance in the ebb and flow of playing and pushing, against each other.

From art, more specifically, from uncurated and organic jazz jam sessions we are able to draw lessons that can become the seedlings of our understanding of the deep-seated ties between innovation, community, mutual dependence and social progress¹¹. In conversations with Gen Zs they insist that theirs is a peaceful protest, that “picketing is legal” that this is their right and yet exercising that right has been a delicate balancing act, between resistance and resilience, knowing when to stay and when to go, when to march in defiance and when to run in the face of police brutality, in between flying bullets and water canons in the haze of teargas.¹² For them the protests have been a series of recalibrating, realigning and in that realignment some adversaries and comrades have left. What is clearly communicated to me in interviews and in online gatherings is that no one experiences the protests the same. That even in this collective action, the class divide rears its head, with for example poorer neighbourhoods like Mukuru being targeted in the aftermath of protests, where police teargas their market places and raid homes in the name of looking for protestors, in Rongai, a 12-year-old boy was shot with eight bullets¹³, in Kitengela, a 19-year-old was shot with a single shot to the head on his way to buy medicine¹⁴.

On care and community

When I sit in an online social space that is a gathering of Gen Zs, I listen to stories of generosity and I am struck by ethic of care that runs through their discourse, the need for care work and caring. Protesting is too, care work. When I go back to X, I look for examples of care and they abound, care in the court room between the 109 Gen Zs rubbing balm and deep heat on their bruised bodies following encounters with the police¹⁵. Care in the food packages that have been

¹⁰ O’Meally, R.G. (2022) *Antagonistic Cooperation: Jazz, Collage, Fiction, and the Shaping of African American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press

¹¹ O’Meally R.G. (2022)

¹² Aljazeera news (2024) Several killed as Kenyan police open fire on anti-tax bill protesters. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/25/reports-of-live-fire-as-kenyan-police-crack-down-on-tax-bill-protests> (Accessed 16.07.2024)

¹³ Abich, A (2024) Boy Shot In Rongai Protests To Wait Longer For Final Rest As Family Is Set To Begin Mediation Next Week. Available at: <https://www.citizen.digital/news/boy-shot-in-rongai-protests-to-wait-longer-for-final-rest-as-family-is-set-to-begin-mediation-next-week-n346135> (Accessed 17.07.2024)

¹⁴ Omondi, M. (2024) Family Reveals Last Moments of 19-year-old Who was Shot in Kitengela. Available at: <https://thekenyatimes.com/latest-kenya-times-news/family-reveals-last-moments-of-19-year-old-who-was-shot-in-kitengela/> (Accessed 16.07.2024)

¹⁵ Africa Uncensored (2024) [X formerly known as Twitter] 17.07. Available at: <https://x.com/AfUncensored/status/1813526409933201763> (Accessed 17.07.2024)

delivered to the court room by the collective¹⁶. In Bumula, a relatively poor neighbourhood, residents evict police officers who lived amongst them from their community, following the killing of a security guard on July 16th¹⁷. This is solidaristic care work. On X, in dialogue with the president, a participant asks “its like life doesn’t matter to you guys in government. I saw the boy being killed. Even if you go to the Larry Madawo videos. The boy was carrying nothing. You are a father, a grandfather. He was a guy who was born in 2002 now he is dead how does the mother feel?”¹⁸. There are many examples of care, notions on the sanctity of human life, the commitment to change and disagreements on how best to disagree with government including disagreements with the elders, the church, tribal leaders. We have in this piece, focused on a sub-section of the Gen-Z demography. Our hope is to continue to engage in conversations on disagreement broadly, even as disagreements unfold. We have therefore have not waited until after the fact and have engaged and continue to engage with Kenyans because part of our work is on conducting responsive research and enabling real-time understanding, evaluation and evidence generation about the emergence and resolution of value controversies, we therefore believe there is value in mapping the genealogy of disagreement and protest, of sitting with and listening to how and why values deepen, change or shift in context.

Our hope is to continue to develop an understanding of why, how, if non-violent protests, still register, still matter and the role of values and adversarial cooperation in them. Kenyan writer and community organiser Kedolwa Waziri, reflecting on the protests writes, “we protest to say we are dreaming in action with and for each other...to say we are committed to each other, to collective care, love and in sustenance of our lives. We protest in the name of love and in the spirit of care”¹⁹.

ANTITHESES: *Wellcome Discovery Research Platform for Transformative Inclusivity in Ethics and Humanities Research*

www.antitheses.net

[@ANTITH3SES](https://twitter.com/ANTITH3SES)

[antith3ses](https://www.instagram.com/antith3ses)

¹⁶ Wanjeri J. (2024) [X formerly known as Twitter] 17.07 Available at:

<https://x.com/JamesKWaNjeri/status/1813511978310406478> (Accessed 17.07.2024)

¹⁷ The Kenyan Daily Post. (2024) Watch the moment Bumula residents forcefully evicted police officers from their camp after a watchman was killed in the area. Available at: <https://www.kenyan-post.com/2024/07/watch-moment-bumula-residents.html> (Accessed 17.07.2024)

¹⁸ Kenyans on Twitter (2024) [X formerly known as Twitter] 05.07 Available at:

<https://x.com/kot/status/1809236309451456997> (Accessed 10.07.2024)

¹⁹ Kedolwa Waziri, (2024) Our bodies in protest Available at: <https://downriverroad.org/2021/06/21/kedolwa-waziri-our-bodies-in-protest/> (Accessed 17.07.2024)