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THE IJR WEEKLY LENS

26 March 2025 Column

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YOUTH PROTESTS IN AFRICA: AN ESCALATING CRISIS?

Africa's youth are rising to protest the failure of governance, and this trend is increasing across the continent. Youth-led protests are emerging in response to the persistence of corruption, high living costs, and inadequate access to health-care, housing, and infrastructure needed to pursue entrepreneurship opportunities. Youth-led protests in Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, and South Africa have shaken the political class into responding— in some instances with deadly force—to contain the uprisings.

The youth protests in Kenya, motivated by Generation Z (Gen Z), were triggered by the government's attempts to introduce punitive tax increases, and subsequently morphed into a wider movement, under the banner #RejectFinanceBill2024, to expose the failures of the regime's governance processes. Kenya's Gen Z

demonstrated an ability to outmanoeuvre the national authorities by using social media platforms to mobilise, disperse, and regroup in different locations across the country.

**“AFRICA'S YOUTH
DEMAND BETTER
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AND SOCIAL
JUSTICE.**



In Mozambique, youth protests also erupted in response to the government's failure to address the socio-economic challenges they face. Following the national elections in October 2024, the protest movement extended beyond the youth-led uprising, as citizens across the country rose up to challenge the electoral outcome, leading to the deaths of more than 300 people as a result of police action.

In Nigeria, youth-led protests were fuelled by the call to disband the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which they alleged had been involved in police brutality. The protests, initially framed as the #EndSARS movement, subsequently widened to raise citizen concerns relating to corruption, maladministration, and economic inequality. These youth-led protests are part of an

emerging trend across the African continent. In South Africa, the legacy of youth protests is apparent through movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, which challenged the high cost of university education and the residual persistence of institutionalised racism within academic institutions.

Young people in Africa are also questioning and challenging the coercive power of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The IMF, World Bank and WTO have maintained a colonial, paternalistic, hegemonic, and unequal relationship with the Global South through harsh conditionalities and heavy interest rates on debt, which have subjected countries to the "debt trap" from which many African nations are struggling to extract themselves.

In this regard, the external control of the economic policies of African countries in the 1980s and 1990s, through the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) and so-called Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) promoted and enforced by the IMF and World Bank, has had a negative impact on Africa's development. By the IMF's own admission, in an internal article entitled "Neo-liberalism Oversold?", the Fund's researchers argued that "there are aspects of the neoliberal agenda that have not delivered as expected" in the sense that their programmes did not achieve the outcomes that they purported to deliver.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that IMF and World Bank policies dictated since 1980 have led to a 10% decline in economic growth in Africa. Youth protesters, particularly the Gen Z movement in Kenya, have pointed to the fact that US-led Western countries have stubbornly refused to allow international financial institutions to be reformed as a statement of intent to continue to exclude Africa, as well as Asia and Latin America, from equal access to the global economic order.

In terms of the BRICS grouping of countries, youth protesters have diverse opinion as to whether the formation is a viable alternative to the IMF and World Bank. On the one hand, some youth actors recognise that BRICS offers an increase in educational opportunities and other people-to-people exchanges, which will ultimately enhance young people's opportunities to widen the scope of their experiences. In addition, BRICS offers avenues for African countries to accelerate their industrialisation through increased trade and investment, including technology transfer and infrastructure development. On the other hand, youth actors have raised concerns about the unequal power dynamics that engagement with the BRICS countries perpetuates, and the danger that it might compromise the independence of Africa's local economies, ultimately further undermining the sovereignty of the people.

A key challenge facing youth-led protests is the inability to convert street-generated movements into policy and decision-making interventions that strengthen anti-corruption measures in public administration and effect the allocation of national resources to address their concerns. It is evident that African governments need to establish social safety nets to prevent vulnerable youth from falling through the cracks.

The youth protesters are also seeking to increase their representation in political decision-making process. This can be achieved by adopting affirmative action processes that will ensure youth constituencies are proactively incorporated into national governments, for example, through the adoption of a policy to nominate representatives.

Youth-led protests have also illustrated the need for African governments to invest more in education and vocational training to empower young people to acquire the skills needed to establish and grow enterprises, which will function as engines for economic growth to address the continent's high levels of unemployment. Evidently, if the continent's youthful labour force is actively engaged in productive work, including manufacturing, energy, and digital technology, it will contribute towards the per capita income. Africa will need to rely on entrepreneurship to transform the job market and grow industries in the energy, health services, pharmaceuticals, and sustainable agriculture sectors in order to leverage and take advantage of its youthful demographic dividend.

The youth protests in Africa are exposing the disaffection with the tried, tested, and failed systems of governance across the continent. The protests have illustrated the power of digital platforms in challenging the lack of transparency and the inclusive governance across the continent. Ultimately, the youth protesters are pointing to the need to rethink and reimagine the relationship between the governed and their governments.

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