

Policy Neo-Colonialism: Examining the Gen Z Protests in Kenya

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Abstract

The recent spate of youth-led protests in several countries has raised interest and debates on the state of democracy, corruption, elite privilege and political leadership. Pointing to high unemployment, rising costs of living and weakness of the state, some scholars contend that the protests and activism are challenging the deep structure of state governance and the economy resulting from disillusionment of promises of equal citizenship, social justice and representative democracy. While plausible, these accounts fail to examine the role of global power relations in the youth protests. This article seeks to fill this gap by arguing that the Gen Z protests in Kenya were a form of resistance against global powers. Drawing from on-going field interviews in and a review of literature, we examine the youth-led protests in Kenya in light of policy sovereignty. We argue that international organizations interference in policymaking contributed to the protests, and that at the core of the protests were demands for nationally-defined social policy agendas and policy sovereignty.

Key words: policy interference, policy neo-colonialism, youth-led protests, policy sovereignty

Introduction

On 25 June 2024, Kenya witnessed yet again the brutality of the state as youth-led protesters entered the National Parliament in Nairobi and burned the building. Estimates indicate more than 20 people were killed by the police on that day (KNHCR, 2024), some shot from close range with many found dead under unclear circumstances in the weeks that followed. Dubbed the Gen Z protests, demonstrators led by young people, had for more than two months demonstrated in various towns of the country demanding amongst others good governance, reduction of taxes, an end to mismanagement of public funds, responsive social and public policies, and an end to political elites' opulence and corruption. Sparked by the contents of the Finance Bill 2024, young people mobilized through social media platforms under various hashtags, holding street demonstrations to demand the withdrawal of the Bill. As the key government financial legislative document, government had proposed amendments to taxes to increase or impose new levies. Faced with pressure to grow national income amidst a debt distress, the government proposed increased levies on basic goods like sanitary towel, baby diapers, the introduction of taxes on food items including bread. Other contentious proposals included a new tax on land and a motor vehicle circulation tax.

Following the 2022 election of the Kenya Kwanza Coalition under President William Ruto, government had undertaken various policy reforms aligned with its manifesto, the Plan. Riding on its "Hustler" campaign slogan, government had already increased contribution charges for those in formal employment for taxes to finance healthcare, education and

housing in 2023. Social movements and activists contested the increased charges through court processes, delaying the implementation of the changes but in the end government plans prevailed. Trust levels with the previously hugely popular President were beginning to wane as key social and economic projects like the Hustler Fund, on which Kenya Kwanza had anchored its campaign collapsed. Poor governance, and perceptions of exclusion and participation in policy processes fuelled discontentment among the youth and the general population. Other areas of discontent were with the open display of opulence and arrogance by the political class. Amidst an arduous socio-economic environment characterized by high unemployment, increased precarity of informal labour, reduced income and a high cost of living, the Finance Bill elevated public discontent sparking the Gen Z protests. Following the events of 25th June, the government withdrew the Bill.

The recent spate of youth-led protests in several countries has increased interest and debates on the state of democracy, corruption, elite privilege and political leadership. Significant youth-led protests erupted across South Africa, Kenya, Senegal, Nigeria, Mozambique, Angola, Uganda and recently in Tanzania. Several arguments have emerged explaining the drivers of recent youth protests. Pointing to high unemployment, rising costs of living and some scholars argue that social entrenched political leadership without civic participation have driven youth mobilization and protests (Branch and Mampilly, 2015; Cheeseman and Larmer, 2015; Honwana, 2019). Other arguments point at economic and social grievances, such as unemployment, the high cost of living and austerity measure as the major divers of protests across regions (Resnick, 2019). Political frustrations including lack of transparency, dissatisfaction with the political leadership, corruption have fuelled youth protests demanding for better governance and political participation. Other scholars argue that the current protests point to the weaknesses of the state in managing a demographic shift leading to high rates of urbanization and a youth bulge (Honwana, 2019; Resnick, 2019). This article is situated within these arguments but argues that the Gen Z protests need to be understood within the context of the social question and global power relations.

The Gen Z protests in Kenya follow earlier forms of youth-led demonstrations and mobilizations. Street protests and demonstrations are commonplace in Kenya with young people at the centre of various struggles (Mati, 2013a, 2020). Young people led the struggle for independence from the British colonial rule through various means including protests. In the 1980s and 1990s, young people participated in the struggle democracy ushering in an era of multipartyism in Kenya. During the same period, university students protested against structural adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF and the World Bank (Amutabi, 2002; Zeilig, 2009). While protests against governance and the cost of living are not new in Kenya, the Gen Z protest brought to the fore the issue of sovereignty with protesters accusing international organizations pointedly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank of interference and directly pressurizing the government to adopt policies not aligned to the social realties of most Kenyans. Linking the rising cost of living to the debt crisis, protesters blamed the IMF of imposing conditionalities on government's social and economic policy measures. Effective national state-led social policy measures, promote well-being, cushioning citizens from risks and protects against further despondency and poverty.

However in times of financial distress brought about by a high debt burden, governments cut on social spending thereby shifting responsibility to individuals and households (Fischer and Storm, 2023). The roll back by the state on social provisioning hurts citizens especially the youth with limited employment and livelihood options.

It is against this background that this article examines the Gen Z protests in Kenya by examining the social policy question and the extent to which pressure and interference by international organizations led to the protests. This paper contributes to scholarship on youth protests, and argues that the protests in Kenya were a call to sovereignty. To do this, we examine the policy issues that fuelled the protest, and the extent to which external influence shaped the protests in Kenya. This paper argues that the Gen Z protests fall under the need to understand the uprisings in the context of the generations' struggles for political, social and economic emancipation and not just from a national perspective but within the globalisation order, and as an assertion and demands for policy sovereignty and a call for nationally-defined social policy response. The paper is structured in this manner: after the introduction is a section situating the protests in Kenya within other similar forms of activism on the continent. This is followed by a section that discusses social policy and policymaking. After, is a section that discusses the theoretical framework upon which the paper draws. The findings section follows before the conclusion.

Youth movements and political mobilization

The rise of youth-led movements has led to varied scholarship on the topic. Drivers of the recent wave of youth protests include social and economic pressures, discontent with political governance and a lack of inclusive participation. The success of youth protests is viewed as stemming from and supported by several contemporary issues including the use of social media which has been used in mobilisation and enhanced agency, increased democratisation on the continent which provides youth with greater space for protest and global connectivity which enhances notions of solidarity (Saud et al., 2023; Mutongoza and Hendricks, 2025). Increasingly young people have also become aware of the disconnect with the national realities and their aspirations leading to calls and demands for national governments to provide social services and open up spaces for political and governance participation of the youth (Honwana, 2019).

Africa has had a long history of youth-led movements with young people continually been at the forefront of political change (Branch and Mampilly, 2015; Mati, 2020). Through various strategies and tactics including street protests, youth in many countries led colonial struggles leading to independence (Bangura, 2022). Young people at the time were keen on independence but also sought the sovereignty and the right to self-determination of their countries as exemplified in the spirit of the African independence leaders (Mati, 2020). Between 1960s and 1980s referred to as the nationalist period, young students mostly from universities were involved in various movements and protests against an African elite keen on solidifying the political class system. The political system that was formed then has persisted and endured despite years of struggle and is part of which the youth continue to fight and

resist (Mati, 2020; Bangura, 2022). Political independence ushered in a form governance that looked different from the outside but on the whole has remained the same with the political class heavily involved in solidifying their place through patriarchal and exclusive politics especially excluding the youth from national governance. With the period marked by the rise of dictatorship, a financial crisis, the rise of the neoliberal orthodoxy and with the imposition of SAPs, student-led activities rose against governments and the IMF across countries in Africa (Zeilig, 2009). Accompanying the protests, was the visible brutal nature of the state inherited from colonial structures especially by dictatorial governments like those in Kenya during Moi's regime (Frayne, 2025) to repress student movements.

For the last decade there has been a significant rise in the number of youth-led protests in Africa. Starting in Tunisia with the Arab Spring leading to protests in other countries as young people seek to "be heard, to shape their future, and that of their counties, and free themselves from traditional patriarchal models of governance." (Onodera, Kaskinen and Ranta, 2025). Recent youth-led protests on the continent include Nigeria's #Endsars, South Africa's #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, Sudan Protests among others. With the advancement of technology, social media is increasingly morphing into sites of resistance, mobilization and protest (Idowu, 2022). Like other recent youth uprisings, social media played a central role in the Gen Z protests. X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and Facebook were platforms for mobilization, civic education and engagement. Pushing various hashtags like #RejectFinanceBill, #RutoMustGo, young people galvanized against government. Though not novel, the use of social media signalled a new form of civic engagement by the Gen Z. But use of social media does not entirely preclude other forms of protests like street marches.

Social policy and policymaking in Kenya

Social policy relates to actions of the state and others aimed at improving and affecting well-being and improving the quality of life and human welfare. Social policy is therefore linked to the idea and relationship of social provisioning and the state. At the core of transformative social policy is the key role of the state in social provisioning. State-led social policy as presented, can serve multiple functions that go beyond mopping the diswelfares or the deficiencies of economic policy. As such, governments can craft social policy measures that enhance redistribution, production, social cohesion, protection and reproduction (UNRISD, 2006; Mkandawire, 2007; Adesina, 2015). The idea of transformative social policy is important at the national developmental phase as it ties with the idea and imperative of nation-building and advancing social cohesion. These are crucial in post-colonial states seeking to bridge a wide range of divisions like ethnic, religious and regional, including class, inherited from the colonial state.

With the focus and emphasis beyond the nation state, global social policy opened up more space for global institutions and actors to influence and affect social policy at national level. This influence on policymaking runs across a continuum; at one end transnational actors employ subtle interactions like learning to influence policy uptake, with more aggressive

forceful tactics on the other end. The taking up of space by international actors has diminished the capacity of states (Adesina, 2023) and also led to the uptake of the uptake of unsuitable policies largely drawn from the neoliberal orthodoxy that has pushed single instruments (Ouma, 2020) resulting in the loss of policy autonomy and the ability to determine national policies.

Decades after independence and ‘self-determination’, Kenya’s social policy remains residual, minimalistic and inadequate. The pattern derives from the colonial legacy of, and follows a path-dependent motif laid out by the colonialist government with past and present “... shaped by ideas, interests, path dependence and international norms” (Mkandawire, 2015, p. 592). Except for limited periods of rupture, government provisioning has been targeted to segments of the population with little vision or imperative to reach entire population. Despite its flaws, the Free Primary school programme is one such exception of government’s widening of social policy to a universal programme. Social policy programmes tend to be modest, limited and highly targeted at the poor of the poorest. A case is the National Safety Net Programme; a cash transfer scheme started in 2002 (Government of Kenya, 2016) which has a coverage of only 1.4 people million to date. Coupled with the highly targeted mechanism, the programme provides an amount below even the minimum threshold of a dollar per day.

The colonial project minimised social policy for the natives with provisions only tied to employment labour hence favouring men and disadvantaging women whose form of labour was largely informal and small-scale agriculture-based. (Aina, 2004) argues that colonial social policy was residual, characterised by discrimination and exclusions to address the needs of the colonisers only. Postcolonial social policy in Kenya, similar to other newly independent broadened social policy for the natives to create a working class and human capacity for a labour force gap left by the colonial state (Adesina, 2009; Kwon, Mkandawire and Palme, 2009; Shivji, 2009). To improve well-being and promote welfare, governments invested in the provision of public goods particularly education, health and other services like water and sanitation. In Kenya, investment in broad social policy provisions especially in health drastically improved health outcomes like decreased child and maternal cases. At the time, social policy aspirations transcended utilitarian needs for creating a labour force, or for productive or protective purposes. Post-colonial states like in Nigeria and Tanzania crafted social policy programmes aimed to address the contextual questions of nation-building and social cohesion (Adesina, 2009). The imperative was to create a cohesive society to transcend ethno-religious divisions and even those of regional nature inherited from the colonial state. (Adesina, 2022) argues that Tanzania, under Nyerere was most successful at deploying social policy for nation-building.

Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s to 1990 stymied the nascent broad social policy projects. IMF and World Bank reforms aimed at stabilisation, imposed conditionalities leading to an end to expansive state led social policy in Kenya and other countries on the continent (Mkandawire and Soludo, 2002). Years of under-investment in social policy resulted in increased poverty, labour informality and precarity. Part of the adjustment project, by design or default created space for transnational actors and globalized

ideas into the policymaking, leading to what Adesina (2023) describes as “a self-allocated right to make policy for others” leading to policy coloniality. Attempts at policy sovereignty, state-led interventions and self-determination of social policy were cut short. As described by Getachew (2019), persistence of the colonial project subverted the right, choice and aspirations of self-determination that had arisen with “flag independence.” Since then, social policy and the policymaking role of the state continues to suffer undue influence of transnational actors.

Social policymaking is a contested terrain. With the rise of global social policy characterized largely as social protection globalized ideas like the SDGs and its predecessor MDGs (Deacon and Stubbs, 2013) are increasingly pushed at national level by transnational actors (Adésinà, 2020; Ouma, 2021). Transnational actors have usurped national roles including setting agendas, crafting policies and programmes, financing and implementing social policy interventions (Ouma and Adésinà, 2018). As we show in the earlier research, transnational actors deploy both subtle and coercive tactics in pushing certain policies. Following years of destruction of state-capacity, debt distress among other challenges, transnational agendas have eroded state capacity and miffed nationally-defined social policy aspirations. In exercising their agency, governments especially veto players like members of parliament have at times resisted policy imposition (Ouma, 2020). However, in times of financial vulnerability, resistance is often weak. Attempts at claiming policy sovereignty is limited and undemocratic as veto institutions like parliament are easily relegated to the periphery of policymaking by international organizations whose resource base easily tips the balance of power relations in policymaking spaces. Moreover, resistance from enfeebled states is met by accusations of lack of “political will.”

The current debt crisis in Kenya compromises national policy autonomy, narrowing the policymaking space resulting in the subversion of governance and state social policy provisioning. With Kenya seeking financial relief from the IMF, conditionalities similar to those of the SAPS era are imposed on social spending (Kentikelenis and Stubbs, 2024). Some authors argue that the nature of the IMF and World Bank has changed but the control of international organizations especially that of the IMF continues to be felt in how the conditionalities it imposes on governments affect social spending (Reinsberg, Stubbs and Kentikelenis, 2022). The current debt crisis has led to constraints in fiscal financing and hence narrowed the space for the current government to exercise sovereignty in policy making and to pursue the kinds of social provisioning programmes it so desires for the promotion of wellbeing for its people.

Recent changes to public provisioning in Kenya reflect the constraints arising out of IMF conditionality in the stabilization period. Changes to health and education sectors where government is raising taxes on one hand, while minimising provisions thereby hurting the lower classes contradicts Kenya Kwanza’s campaign promises for hustlers. The COVID-19 crisis and the global recession impaired government’s fiscal provision for social expenditure but the debt crisis has worsened the situation (Siringi, 2021). As a result, recent changes to public provisioning in Kenya constrained by the debt crisis has stifled government control over decisions of policy. Needing IMF bailout to meet its obligation, means the government

has little room in independent policymaking. To increase fiscal space, the government has raised taxes on goods and services one hand, and on the other adopted more stringent targeting measures on programmes like Inua Jamii, the national safety net programme. Policy changes implemented by the Kenya Kwanza government have failed to address social needs, and questions of responsive and adequate social policy. Stricter modalities for university funding, involving tighter means-tested measures has disenfranchised students from poor background minimising their access to higher education. The vision of universal health care as encapsulated in Kenya Kwanza's manifesto, falls short in financing despite increased taxation of workers engaged in formal employment (Muinde and Prince, 2023). Moreover, harsh premium payments for those in the informal sector is translating to increased personal and household debt.

Theoretical framework: Policy sovereignty and Policy Neo-Colonialism

Policy sovereignty relates to the ability of a nation to formulate independent policies. It refers to the degree to which a nation controls its own policy agenda without undue external influence. Beyond "flag independence", the fight for independence for the postcolonial state centred on self-determination, emancipation and the freedom for the nascent state to craft its own developmental policies (Getachew, 2019; Adesina, 2022; Onodera, Kaskinen and Ranta, 2025). Beyond "flag independence", the fight for independence for the postcolonial state centred on self-determination and the freedom for the nascent state to craft its own policies. But the ability to make policies, or reforms without undue interference can come under compromise when a nation is under debt distress needing to get fiscal relief thereby seeking IMF stabilisation and structural reforms programmes. IMF financing includes conditionalities required for countries to undertake which is withheld, can cripple government functioning. Conditionalities become intertwined within the structure of the loan agreement and the stabilization demands. One of the IMF powers derives from its ability to tie disbursement to the fulfilment of conditions negotiated with the borrower country (Reinsberg, Stubbs and Kentikelenis, 2022). With criticisms levelled against the relationship of the IMF and borrower countries the IMF embarked on a reform agenda. However, reforms at the IMF remain superficial, with the Fund arguing that it does not impose conditions on borrower countries but that agreements are agreed upon and the conditions tied to the funding facility are an outcome of bargain between the Fund and borrowers (Lang, 2021). But often for a country under distress, in need of fiscal space the IMF conditions become stringent. With this power imbalance, and under the conditions of debt distress, it cannot be argued that the outcomes of negotiations are not coercive.

Despite documented evidence of negative social and economic effects of IMF's structural adjustment programmes on countries in Africa, under the current debt crisis, the IMF conditionalities continue to push borrower countries to involuntarily abdicate policy autonomy to meet the demands of the facility (Kentikelenis and Stubbs, 2024). Country under adjustment experience declined economic growth with borrower countries experiencing higher poverty levels and worsened well-being (Biglaiser and McGauvran, 2022). Loan

arraignments are pegged to structural reforms that contribute to getting people trapped in poverty cycle. As the poor lose most of their income due to the stringent ways that structure structural reforms especially those related to cuts in social spending and labour, inequality increases (Lang, 2021; Biglaiser and McGauvran, 2022).

Structural reforms have wider implications beyond the cuts in spending, trade and exchange policies among other reforms. Donor conditions also restructure government as the state is required to put in place new rules and institutions that at times limit the role of the state. IMF conditions have wider implications on the national political economy as the Fund pressures governments to implement certain conditions, but also restrain the government from modifying or deviating from conditionalities (Biglaiser and McGauvran, 2022). IMF-related protests are common in times of SAPs as students and young people protest and call out the Fund on conditions that increase distress. In several countries, youth protests against the Fund and the World Bank become prevalent due to requirements of governments to undertake donor-driven reforms related to tax and other structural reforms which lead to fiscal austerity. By encroaching on borrower sovereignty (*ibid*), the IMF and other lenders compromise policy autonomy creating dependency which in turn constrains state capability, to act on behalf of its citizens (Mkandawire, 1999). Few studies connect youth activism, the action of international organizations like the IMF and debates on policy sovereignty. This paper aims to fill the gap by interpreting the Gen Z protests as both social policy critique and claims of sovereignty.

Postcolonial Africa and Policy Neo-colonialism

Drawing upon studies on policy sovereignty, this paper argues that the Gen Z protest in Kenya is a continuation of the postcolonial project of self-determination. This orientation of the paper draws upon the ideas of Presidents Nkrumah of Ghana, Senghor of Senegal and of Nyerere of Tanzania as presented by Adesina (2022). I argue that the Gen Z protest is an attempt at the revival of the truncated efforts of post-colonial leaders at self-determination. The protests, we argue are demands by the youth for state-led and nationally-defined social policy projects. We further argue that the demands on social policy tie with those for sovereign projects as envisioned by post-colonial leaders.

Referring to the phenomenon as policy colonialist or policy neo-colonialism, Adesina argues that policy interference and the loss of policy autonomy is linked to the ideas of choiceless democracy as advanced by Mkandawire (1999) and Ake, (2001). The current and continued infringement of policy space in Kenya is partly due to the debt crisis which has provided a window of opportunity for the pursuit of structural and stabilisation reforms, and with it the advancement of policy neo-colonialism. The government of Kenya under pressure to cut down on social spending and embrace tax reforms at the expense of its citizens is the classic case of choiceless democracy. Under this conditions, a newly elected government is constrained to undertake its promises due to constraints arising out of international organizations imposition on policymaking processes (Olukoshi, 2004). Policy autonomy is therefore compromised as conditionalities squeeze out the policy space at national level. As

Adesina argues policy coloniality “does not serve to inform national policymaking but is it the imposition of those advancing policy coloniality who then operate on the self-allocated right to make policy for others’ (Adesina, 2023, p. 9). Policy neocolonialism results in the subversion of “deliberated governance and national contexts” – it alters the political economy and goes beyond affecting the policy outcomes but affects the citizen-state nexus and further governance which may compromise legitimacy of duly elected governments. Further policy interference is inimical to efforts at national building and social cohesion.

While policy making and that of social policymaking is the domain of government, these can be infringed upon by international actors. The ideological orientation of the state and the fiscal vulnerability of the country determine the level of sovereignty and policy autonomy that a country especially developing countries can exercise (Adésinà, 2007; Gebremariam, 2024). While fiscal space matters, ideological disposition matters most in providing policy autonomy and resistance to policy interference. Gebremariam (2024) demonstrates how Ethiopia between 1991 to 2018, through strong ideological persuasions of creating a developmental state, allowed Ethiopia to chart transformation through its rural development policy. The same can be argued of Rwanda pointing to how the state is able to implement nationally-determined developmental projects (Gaudreault and Bodolica, 2024).

Drawing upon postcolonial scholars, this paper following Adesina (2022) Adesina paper considers the Gen Z protests in light of policy sovereignty as the theoretical underpinning of the paper. In terms of social policy, the postcolonial period envisaged an idea of broadening social policy for the masses at the end of the colonial period. For postcolonial thinkers above all the social project was that of emancipation not just from direct colonialism or imposition but also that of sovereignty to determine their development trajectory; undergirded by national projects dependent on domestic resources rather than external forces.

Sovereignty and self-determination are struggles that Africa has had to contend with over a long period of time. According to Adesina (2022), three key postcolonial leaders exemplify this; Senghor in his vision of emancipation in thought, Nkrumah on his insistence on the notion of Pan-Africanism under a united continent and Nyerere of Tanzania in attempts at building inclusive growth grounded on socialism. For newly independent states, coming out colonial period the imperative was and still remains that of sovereignty, to wrestle from the lingering effects of colonialism which stymie policymaking and policy thought (Olukoshi, 2004; Shivji, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). Following previous scholars, Adesina argues that for the actualization of this, the level of policy autonomy and sovereignty that can be achieved depends on 3 aspects; “on the importance of cultivating domestic resources rather than being dependent on external forces; need for countries to construct a macro-vison that coordinates their economic, social and political projects; and the importance of maintaining sovereignty of thought in policy thinking to break free from the universal, market-based prescriptions under neoliberalism” (2022, p. 31).

Tied to these aspects is the importance and ability to ward off interferences is the ability of the ruling class to maintain sovereignty of thought in policy making. Caught in a web where the neoliberal thinking controls policymaking and directs policies towards singular directions, the power of a national postcolonial path lies in its ability to craft social policy for African context that breaks free from universal market-based prescriptions under neoliberalism. This ability is determined by the political elite's desire to centre context and to ask "what they want social policy to achieve for the nation?" The current crop of African leaders is constricted by dependency on external resources and unable to break free from the burden imposed by a narrow paradigmatic persistence of thought that constricts freedom of thought which Senghor was keen on breaking free. Bound by the neoliberal thinking, governments are shepherded sometime without restraint, under the mantra "there is no other alternative" to policy prescriptions that have already been agreed upon elsewhere through hegemony and unequal power relations. Fiscal vulnerability further heightens precarity and the inability of governments to break out of the neoliberal trap. For the post-colonial state to break free from policy neo colonialism the rejection of both neoliberal ontology and epistemological reasoning is necessary. This contextual understanding as Adesina argues ought to be based on contextualise thinking and decision-making based on our reasoning of where we are and about charting a path that captures our shared humanity.

From a transformative social policy perspective, Kenya would do well to borrow from the ideas of its closer neighbour, Tanzania. Facing similar ethnic, religious, and in the case of Kenya, entrenched class divisions, the national-building project undertaken by President Nyerere offers lessons on how to overcome these barriers. Nyerere envisioned a nation-building project founded on norms of solidarity, generosity and care, with socialism at the core(Adesina, 2009, 2022). As such, social relations, and how humans relate to each other forms the basis of social policy programmes. Shaping social policy along the norms of mutuality, generosity, work and the collective ownership of the means of production can transform social policy for nation-building and create social cohesion for inclusive development.

Disenfranchisement from the 'means of production' is one constitutive aspect of the Gen Z protest, without forms of employment, and making a livelihood. Whereas the political rhetoric Hustler -dynasty slogan signalled to redistribution and collective ownership of both economic and social life beyond the mass accumulation and control of the dynastic group in Kenya, the current political elite follows a path dependent pattern laid out at independence.

Findings and discussions.

Several factors influence the level of policy autonomy and sovereignty that a country has. According to Adesina 2 factors determine the degree of intrusiveness; the ideological affinity of the local state agents and the external policy merchants and the fiscal vulnerability that results from a combination of domestic policies and external shocks. Drawing from examples of Zambia and Ghana, he demonstrates how external shocks brought about by the collapse of commodity prices of cocoa and copper in the respective countries led to fiscal vulnerability in

the two countries which resulted in the two countries coming under the control of the IMF. However in the case of Zambia the vulnerability was without ideological affinity but it opened up for dominant World Bank ideas to shape policies in the 1980s and after which has persisted to date as is demonstrated by (Chelwa, Kaulule and Renzio, 2025) as a result of the fiscal vulnerability brought about by the current debt crisis in Zambia. It is through these 2 strands – the ideological affinity of the local state-agents and the external policy merchants, and fiscal vulnerability – that we present our findings.

Rhetoric versus reality: Ideological affinity of state-agents and external policy merchants

Kenya Kwanza's election did not signify a departure from the dominant ideological framework that has framed social policy and policy making in Kenya. Touted as a departure from the ethno-politics that have characterised Kenya's political formation since independence, the elections of 2022 are described as being "issue based on economic improvement" (Opalo, 2022; Lockwood, 2023). President Ruto deployed the hustler-dynasty narrative to signify a move to more redistributive policies targeted at the masses. With this class-based narrative, Kenya Kwanza pitted the political dynastic elite against the masses leading to the successful election. Developed on the mantle of an economic turnaround, the Plan's proposition for social policy included reforming the social security and health sectors, job creation for the youth, gender equality and health care (The Kenya Kwanza, 2022). The changes undertaken were to create an inclusive national model. With the Agenda to empower the poor being through expansion of the agriculture and informal sectors, the Kenya Kwanza grounds its focus against what a market driven idea thus:

"Yet it is so obvious that the rising tide of an empowering those at the masses at the base of the economics of the base is not at the expense of those at the top. On the contrary, it is a case of a rising tide lifting all boats" (The Kenya Kwanza, 2022, p. 4).

Signalling a departure from "trickle down" models of development, Kenya Kwanza campaigned on an inclusive growth agenda suggesting that economic empowerment of individuals in lower income would benefit the whole society. The "bottom-up" or 'trickle up' economics counters the neoliberal economic approach with a shift and direct investment in the economic reliance of the poor and vulnerable. Trickle-up or bottom-up economics is based on 2 assumptions; first that the cost of poverty and inequality have significant cost on society and that when a country invests in lower economic classes this reduces the need for public spending. Second that investment in lower economic classes benefits the poor and creates spillover effects that cost-effectively benefit the broader economy. Government sources point to agriculture and the informal labour as the two sectors targeted by government for trickle-up.

From the interviews with participants in the study, the government has not fulfilled this promise as articulated in its manifesto. Respondents expressed that instead the political elite campaign promises on Bottom-Up economic model was defective. The suggestion echoes

similar sentiments that demonstrate the duplicity of the Kenya state where the political elite adopt socialist rhetoric in language as a mobilizing tool to appeal to the impulses of the masses (Nyong'o, 1986). A sense of betrayal and a “false dawn” is reminiscent of the period after independence (Mati, 2020).

The lack of a transformative agenda for social policy is further highlighted in the Plan thus;

“When unemployed university graduates ask us how empowering wheelbarrow pushers will do for them, they miss the obvious fact that the demand for the white-collar jobs they desire are dependent on the size of the market. Why the disconnect? It suffices to point out that the narrative that the well to do are where they are by merit, and the poor where they are because they are less able, is the time-honoured self-serving justification of the status quo in class and caste societies. For those who lie to themselves thus, I tell you this, the wheelbarrow pushers are as able, talented resourceful as you are. The only reasons our lives have taken different paths is luck or who you know.”

The statement demonstrates the lack of transformative ambition for national social policy programmes. Labour and employment are tied to market forces fundamentally following on the neo-classical appeal that leads to the commodification of labour (Ossome, 2021). Moreover, the sentiments expressed in the statement signals to aspects of merit and bootstrapping - with the self -creation of jobs as the basis, which disadvantage the poor and vulnerable. With youth employment a major issue of discontent during the protests, government rhetoric and reality misalign particularly as most of the youth felt the jobs the government was creating were mismatched to their skills and level of education (FGD 02, September 2024).

Pointing to the proposed annual land tax on freehold land in urban areas in the Finance Bill, respondents in the study argued that through the new levy the government was imposing the additional tax to push out smallholders from urban areas. Questioning the motivation on the proposal, youth in study expressed that the political elite wanted to push them from ancestral land. The land question remains contentious unresolved since independence. Scholars document how the political elite have used land to disenfranchise peasants (Mati, 2020). The inclusion of a tax on land in the Finance Bill, heightened tension for an already low-level trust government. the land question and issues of land remain pertinent as a means of production even to the youth. The youth consider land an important means of production. Land is still fundamental to the youth on the continent as Chipenda (2020) demonstrates in the case of Zimbabwe.

The neoliberal stance of the government on various social policy issues like land, labour and social policy point to the persistence of contradictory ideological orientation of the state in Kenya. The question posed at independence remains relevant in understanding the state; “Was the state to be used by the nationalist in power to create a capitalist class and various classes of property among the Africans or was the state itself to be the capitalist, preventing

the accumulation of capital in private hands but encouraging it in the public sphere?” (Nyong’o, 1986, p. 237). This statement poses the ideological question but also reveals the fragmentation within different groups of the kind of economic and political path Kenya (Mati 2020). Who would own and control capital? The postcolonial state in Kenya has leaned on the ideology with the state serving the interests of the political elite by aiding the elite create a private capitalist class with those in power using government policies, land redistribution and state resources to create wealthy African individuals who would control business and property. The idea of “home grown capitalism” as described by Jomo Kenyatta has resulted in capital amassing in the hands of the political elite producing class differences which at times erupt into violence (Ajulu, 2021). The alternative route would have been one where the state itself would own industries, land and resources, with capital accumulation in the public sector. This was the socialist model or state-led development model. The state-led model favouring public ownership with a stronger state control sought to avoid the creation of African elites replacing European settlers as new privileged class. With these competing visions, the state in Kenya has repeatedly adopted the elite-driven paths which allowing an African bourgeoisie to rise leading to significant class inequalities (Nyong’o, 1986; Mati, 2013b) (Mati). It is upon this class inequality and cleavages that Kenya Kwanza pitched the Hustler versus Dynasty narrative (Opalo, 2022).

Kenya Kwanza agenda to break from the ideological orientation has been largely rhetoric with what respondents in the study believe is a further cementing of the political elite’s grip on ownership of the means of production and elite accumulation (FGD 01, September 2025). This contradiction of the Kenyan state is exemplified in the Sessional Paper No. 10 which Mati (2020) describes as a “deceptive Kenyan political economy blueprint – presented capitalism with an illusory coat of social justice and equity as well as contradictions” (Mati, 2020, p. 19), with nothing socialist about it (Nyong’o, 1986). Respondents were of the opinion that contrary to the campaign promises the government has presided over the creation of another class of elite rather than an agenda to dismantle, or redistribute from the elite (FGD 01, Sept 2024). The Kenya Kwanza campaign promised to deliver the kind of social and economic freedom promised at independence and dismantling the colonial state structures and domination that were appropriated by those in position of power and privilege (Ajulu, 2002). The ideological struggle of the state and the contradictions of the Kenyan state continue.

A debt crisis under enduring fiscal vulnerability

Rent extraction in postcolonial relationships are organized around sovereign lending and borrowing, and development aid which reinforce the continuation of colonial and imperialist relations thereby enhancing continued dependency of postcolonial states to their former masters (Onodera, Kaskinen and Ranta, 2025).

Similar to other countries on the continent, Kenya is facing a debt crisis brought about by both internal and external factors. The government of Kenya raised taxes to cover the fiscal burden brought about by debt distress. With a ballooning debt burden starting in 2012, several

aspects compounded the debt burden in Kenya (Mose et al., 2024). First the country has undertaken huge infrastructural projects like the construction of roads, the Lamu port the Standard gauge Railway which required significant accrual of debt to construct (Were, 2024). Other aspects raising the debt burden include several crisis including several droughts and the COVID-19 pandemic which forced the government to undertake additional loans debt to cover for the deficit in budget to deal. Additional debt accrual has come from the need to fulfil social services like schools, employment of more teachers and in some cases to finance social policy interventions. Having to repay the debts in foreign currency like the dollar puts a strain on expenditure budget forcing the government to repay more in terms of the interest rate but also in currency exchange.

Countries with limited fiscal space find themselves in a place that they have to depend on institutions like the World bank and IMF to gain fiscal space. The country's vulnerability has been occasioned by including persistent budget deficits which have been ongoing since 2012, the high public debt with interest payment absorbing more than a third of the tax revenue, and a depreciating revenue collection following amongst others a reduction in consumption brought about by the high taxes imposed on citizens.

Respondents who were interviewed as part of the study indicated that the IMF and the World Bank have an influence to the domestic fiscal measures undertaken by the government saying in the discussions:

“The people we owe, the government owes them, they also come with punitive taxes, high taxes that even when you look at the things that they (government) promise to give us, the development, we haven’t even received yet. For example, the Kimwarer dam under Uhuru’s regime, money was lost, Ruto came in, he said let’s call off the project that’s money that was lost, then he comes back again and says you know there is some international company that is coming to construct the dam so that’s another financial burden. Let me call them the international bodies, the international financial institutions or we just call them our creditors” FGD 02, September 2025

From the discussions, respondents linked the government fiscal vulnerability of government with the conditionalities imposed by international creditors. Further, respondents pointed to the role of corruption and accumulation in increasing fiscal vulnerability. Drawing from the notion of “choiceless democracy” participants in the discussions explained how pressure by international organizations make it difficult for governments to implement promises. In explaining how pressure by international organizations cascade to citizens of borrower countries respondents referred to some contents of the Finance Bill 2024 to demonstrate how fiscal vulnerability leads to a loss of sovereignty thus;

“Let’s say for instance we are starting a new financial week, we have drafted a budget, we know very well we have a short of let’s say 800 million, we will go to an international market to request for a loan and before you are given, the international markets also have their own demands, they would say now because we want to give you a loan to finance this financial year we want this ABCD. Now this ABCD that we

are given as instructions will now form part and parcel of the Finance Bill, a good example, they wanted to start taxing somebody based on the acreage of land they have. Also, because they also have other person of interest, they will also push it down to the government and the government will now push it down to common man” (FGD 01, September 2025)

In the Extended Fund Facility EFF/Extended Credit Facility (ECF), the IMF states “Remain committed to reforms under the programme” (IMF, 2024). This indicates the extent to which the IMF required the government to implement specific programmes even in times when the protests had begun, the IMF in the package tied to the credit facility urged the government to stay on “course with the reforms” despite the rising threat of civil unrest. This statement signifies how external pressure from creditors can supersede national processes even those related to national security. The statement signalled that the IMF expected the government to continue on the reforms as part of its support framework.

Conclusion

Studies on youth-led protests focussed solely on internal governance deficiency fail it situating the discourse within broader global relations of power and the continued struggles of the postcolonial people to sovereignty and self-determination. This narrow analysis of recent youth-led movements is likely to lead to superficial and ineffective prescriptions that only fix the symptom without dismantling enduring hierarchical global power relations inherited from the colonial state. Policy neo-colonialism and the lack of policy autonomy is one manifestation of the continuation of struggles for sovereignty in Africa.

Lacking self-determination and “choicelessness” forces governments to undertake policy prescriptions that can be inimical to its legitimacy and contrary to the realities of its citizens. The consequence is the recent violent social unrests that also point to the failure at nation-building processes in countries like Kenya. Beyond questions on national governance, social and economic pressures the Gen Z protests exemplify the continued struggles for policy sovereignty and the freedom for mapping out nationally-defined policy choices. Policy neo-colonialism affects a government and state’s ability at nation-building as it stifles and stymies people-centred national approaches to development. While the Gen Z movement is also a struggle for inclusive development and lack of democratic participation, the fundamental question of sovereignty and unequal power relations underlie the demands of the youth. Further, the protests demonstrate the weaknesses of the neoliberal orthodoxy at resolving the ideological questions of control of capital and the means of production.

Equally the Gen Z movement could be viewed as a continuation of nationalists ideas of decolonisation which atrophied after independence and with the imposition of adjustment reforms in a number of African countries (Onodera, Kaskinen and Ranta, 2025). The movement represents a continuation of young people seeking national sovereign paths in the aftermath of formal colonial rule, signify agency, and as Adesina (2022) argues, “the

feasibility of colonial subjects charting alternative paths to national reconstruction, distinct from that of formal colonial domination, or the feasibility of development."

The squeeze on social policy investment brought about by the debt crisis, coupled with a minimalist path of social provisioning excludes many people especially the youth who comprise the bulk of the population. With increased socio-economic pressures as a result of a broken social policy structure, the dominant face of the state becomes one of coercion and violence leading to a loss of legitimacy with the retrenchment of the state serving as a the trigger mechanism (Adésinà, 2007).

A reclamation of policy sovereignty, and the degree of policy intrusiveness will be determined by clarity in ideological orientation of the state beyond rhetoric, and its ability raise its own funds thereby strengthening its fiscal capacity and dependency. Sovereignty is only possible under circumstances where the postcolonial state sets out its agenda and cushions itself from both internal and external influence. The ideological foundation of the state is far much important as demonstrated by Gebremariam (2024) in the case of Ethiopia. Only by charting its developmental path based on a strong ideological underpinning will the state extract itself from policy neo-colonialism.

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