

Continuity and Change in Kenya's Protest Movements, 1895–2024

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Abstract: *This study examines Kenya's protest movements from colonial resistance to digital activism, exploring how socio-political shifts and technological advancements have influenced collective action. Beginning with the 1905 Nandi Resistance led by Koitalel Arap Samoei, followed by early anti-colonial mobilization by the Maasai, Kikuyu, and other communities in colonial Kenya. The research highlights pivotal moments opposing land confiscations and colonial policies regarded as discriminatory. The Kikuyu Central Association in the 1920s and the Mau Mau Rebellion in the 1950s marked critical stages, culminating in independence in 1963. Employing historical document analysis and content analysis, the study draws insights from archival sources, historical records, and media portrayals to map changing protest strategies. From post-colonial authoritarianism under Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi to the 1990s multi-party democracy movement, Kenya's protest landscape reflects shifting governance and societal demands. The study further addresses the rise of digital activism by Generation Z in 2024, where platforms like TikTok, X (Twitter), and Facebook facilitate decentralized mobilization on economic and social justice issues. Protests against the 2023 and 2024 Finance Bills underscore ongoing public dissatisfaction with governance, economic disparities, and concerns over parliamentary representation. The study concludes that, despite the 2010 Constitution's reforms, challenges like electoral fraud, corruption, and inequality persist, driving continued activism. This research highlights the resilience of Kenyan society and the evolving impact of digital tools, historical legacies, and political changes in shaping the nation's pursuit of justice and effective governance.*

Keywords: *Colonial Resistance; Mau Mau Rebellion; Multi-Party Democracy; Generation Z Activism etc.*

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1.0 Introduction

Globally, protest movements have long served as catalysts for transformative political change, particularly in contexts of colonial domination, authoritarianism, or systemic inequality. The end of World War II triggered a wave of decolonization that reshaped political boundaries and ideologies. Countries such as India under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, Algeria through the National Liberation Front (FLN), and South Africa via the African National Congress (ANC) emerged as epicenters of resistance to colonial rule and racial oppression. (Fanon, 1963). These movements inspired similar struggles worldwide, generating a shared lexicon of civil resistance, sacrifice, and democratic aspiration.

Africa, deeply embedded in this global transformation, experienced its own surge of nationalist movements from the late 1940s through the 1970s. These struggles reflected both the influence of international decolonization and the continent's unique historical injustices. Ghana's independence in 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah became a template for pan-African mobilization. Nigeria's path, characterized by constitutional negotiation and elite political maneuvering,

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illustrated the diversity of protest strategies. More militant cases, such as Algeria's war of independence and Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, highlighted the injustices of racial domination and land dispossession, reinforcing the urgency of African sovereignty (Meredith, 2011).

Kenya's anti-colonial resistance unfolded within this continental momentum but with distinct local characteristics. The Mau Mau rebellion (1952–1960), driven largely by land grievances and nationalist fervor, became one of the most militant and symbolically charged revolts in Africa. Though colonial authorities dismissed it as a tribal insurrection, subsequent scholarship has recognized it as a pivotal force in accelerating Kenya's independence in 1963 (Anderson, 2005; Elkins, 2005). However, independence did not mark the end of resistance; rather, it initiated a shift—from anti-colonial confrontation to postcolonial contestation.

In the decades following independence, the Kenyan state—first under Jomo Kenyatta and later under Daniel arap Moi—became increasingly authoritarian, suppressing dissent and eroding democratic institutions. Ironically, this repression galvanized civil society, culminating in the Saba Saba protests of 1990. These demonstrations, led by opposition figures such as Kenneth Matiba and Charles Rubia, demanded an end to one-party rule and the restoration of multi-party democracy. Despite violent state crackdowns, the protests succeeded in forcing constitutional reforms by 1991, redefining Kenya's political landscape (Throup 1987; Widner, 1992).

In the 2020s, Kenya's protest traditions have evolved with Generation Z activists leveraging digital tools to confront enduring challenges such as corruption, economic inequality, and police brutality. Movements like #EndPoliceBrutalityKE (2020–2021) exemplify a shift toward decentralized, social media-driven mobilization, mirroring global trends in youth-led activism. This new phase of resistance underscores the continuity of Kenya's protest legacy while demanding fresh scholarly engagement. Analyzing these movements within a broader historical and transnational framework is essential for understanding how civic agency, state legitimacy, and democratic aspirations continue to evolve in post-colonial Kenya.

1.2 Objective

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1. To critically examine the historical evolution of protest movements in Kenya, from anti-colonial struggles to contemporary resistance efforts.
2. To analyze how socio-political and technological shifts have influenced protest strategies, focusing on key historical phases, prominent figures, and the role of digital technologies in modern activism.

1.3 Methodology

This study utilized a two-stage analytical approach to explore the development of protest movements in Kenya:

Historical Document Analysis

This stage involved examining primary sources, including archival materials, historical newspapers, official records, and oral histories, to trace the evolution of protest strategies and key figures from the colonial period to the present. This analysis provided insights into historical contexts and shifts in protest methodologies (Brown, 2020).

Content Analysis

In this stage, media portrayal of protest movements was assessed across conventional outlets such as newspapers and television, as well as digital platforms like social media. The study examined changes in media representation, public opinion, and the role of digital technology in modern activism, offering a comprehensive understanding of both historical and contemporary protest dynamics (Brown, 2020).

Justification and Significance for the Study

This study holds significant importance for comprehending Kenya's socio-political landscape, as it traces the evolution of protest strategies from colonial times to the contemporary digital age. By investigating how historical resistance movements have shaped current activism, the study provides valuable insights into the ongoing quest for justice and equity in governance. The examination of digital media's impact on activism is particularly relevant in today's context,

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where social media plays a crucial role in mobilizing public sentiment and fostering collective action.

Furthermore, this research offers a unique synthesis of historical and contemporary perspectives, addressing gaps in existing literature and enhancing our understanding of the dynamics of resistance in response to current social and political challenges. By illuminating the trajectories of activism and the factors influencing them, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Kenya navigates its path toward social justice and democratic governance. Ultimately, this work serves as a critical resource for scholars, policymakers, and activists interested in the interplay between historical legacies and modern forms of activism.

Colonial Period (1895-1963)

2.1 T Foundations of Anti-Colonial Struggle in East Africa 1895-1920

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 marked a pivotal moment in African history, formalizing the continent's partition among European powers and establishing the legal framework for colonial domination. In Kenya, this translated into the creation of the East Africa Protectorate in 1895, which triggered immediate and sustained resistance from indigenous communities. These early anti-colonial movements, though often localized, established critical patterns of resistance that would reverberate throughout Kenya's colonial experience and beyond.

Regional resistance patterns reveal fascinating parallels and connections across East Africa. In Uganda, the Baganda resistance (1897-1901) under Kabaka Mwanga manifested differently but shared underlying causes with Kenyan movements. The Baganda combined military confrontation with sophisticated diplomatic efforts, including appeals to other European powers to counterbalance British influence (Reid, 2017). This multidimensional approach highlights how early African resistance leaders strategically navigated the complex geopolitics of colonialism. The Maji Maji Rebellion (1905-1907) in German East Africa (modern Tanzania)

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represented perhaps the most dramatic regional resistance, uniting over twenty ethnic groups in a movement that combined spiritual mobilization with military action (Iliffe, 1979). The rebellion's suppression, which included scorched earth tactics causing an estimated 75,000-300,000 deaths, became a cautionary tale about colonial brutality while simultaneously inspiring future generations of activists (Sunseri, 2003).

The Nandi resistance (1895-1905) under Koitalel Arap Samoei's leadership represents one of the most sophisticated early challenges to British rule. The Nandi people, renowned for their military organization, employed innovative guerrilla tactics that exploited their knowledge of the local terrain. Their resistance was not merely military but also deeply ideological, rooted in the Orkoiyot spiritual leadership tradition that united diverse Nandi clans against the colonial threat (Lonsdale, 2008). The British response was characteristically brutal, culminating in Koitalel's assassination during fake peace negotiations in 1905 - a tactic that would become tragically familiar in later colonial conflicts (Berman, 1990). The Nandi struggle, though ultimately suppressed, demonstrated the potential for coordinated resistance and established important precedents for future movements.

The Kikuyu response to colonialism during this period was particularly complex, reflecting both confrontation and adaptation. Early resistance focused on land alienation, particularly in the fertile highlands that white settlers coveted. The establishment of colonial reserves and the expropriation of Kikuyu lands created economic displacement that would fuel resistance for decades (Kanogo, 1987). What made the Kikuyu response distinctive was its combination of armed resistance with legal challenges and political organization. Leaders like Harry Thuku emerged who could navigate both traditional Kikuyu political structures and the new colonial bureaucracy (Anderson, 2005). This dual approach prefigured the more sophisticated anti-colonial strategies that would develop in later decades.

Three key themes emerge from these early resistance movements that would profoundly influence Kenya's political development: First, land as the fundamental contention. Across all cases, land dispossession served as the primary catalyst for resistance. The economic and

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spiritual significance of land in African societies made its alienation particularly devastating, creating a unifying grievance that transcended ethnic divisions (Berman, 1990).

The second is adaptive resistance strategies: Communities developed remarkably sophisticated responses that blended traditional military tactics with new forms of political organization. This adaptability countered the colonial assumption of African backwardness and demonstrated the intellectual vitality of resistance movements (Branch, 2011). The last is emergence of transethnic solidarity: While often rooted in specific communities, these movements increasingly recognized the need for broader alliances. The Maji Maji rebellion's pan-ethnic character and the Baganda's diplomatic outreach both reflected this growing consciousness (Reid, 2017).

The legacy of this early resistance period cannot be overstated. Though colonial powers often succeeded militarily, they failed to establish moral or political legitimacy. The memory of these struggles, preserved through oral traditions and later historical research, provided crucial inspiration for the mass nationalist movements that would emerge after World War II (Lonsdale, 2008). Moreover, the organizational innovations and tactical lessons from this period directly informed later activism, creating continuity in Kenya's long struggle for self-determination.

These early resistance movements also established enduring patterns in state-society relations. The colonial state's reliance on violence and divide-and-rule tactics created pathologies that would persist into the postcolonial era (Branch, 2011). Simultaneously, the resistance tradition bequeathed to future generations a repertoire of protest strategies and, crucially, the moral conviction that unjust authority could and should be challenged. This dual legacy - of state violence and popular resistance - would shape Kenya's political trajectory throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

2.2 The Rise of Political Movements (1920s-1940s)

Significant transformations unfolded within Kenya's political landscape throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and into the 1940s, marked by the emergence of organized political associations that directly challenged colonial authority. This period was characterized by the rise of African political consciousness and the crystallization of resistance against socio-economic and political

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marginalization. Several political organizations and key indigenous leaders emerged to voice African grievances, advocate reforms, and inspire mass mobilization against discriminatory colonial policies.

The political awakening began with the East African Association (EAA), established in 1921 by Harry Thuku, becoming Kenya's first multi-ethnic political movement. The EAA protested against forced labour, the kipande system, and low wages for African workers (Rosberg & Nottingham, 1966). Thuku's arrest on March 14, 1922 sparked violent protests in Nairobi where colonial police opened fire on demonstrators, marking a watershed moment in Kenya's anti-colonial resistance. Though the EAA was banned shortly after, its brief existence demonstrated the potential for organized African unity against colonial exploitation (Throup, 1987).

Among the most influential organizations that followed was the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), established in 1924 as a successor to the EAA (Lonsdale & Berman, 1979). Initially led by Joseph Kang'ethe and later joined by Jomo Kenyatta in 1928, the KCA focused on land grievances and political representation for the Kikuyu community, while its message resonated across ethnic lines. The association sent Kenyatta to London in 1929 to petition the British government, marking Kenya's first international anti-colonial lobbying effort.

In subsequent years, the momentum of protest politics spread geographically and ethnically. The Young Kavirondo Association established in 1929 and the North Kavirondo Central Association formed 1935 in western Kenya emerged to represent the interests of the Luo and Luhya, respectively. These associations opposed exploitative labour practices, poor educational opportunities, and discriminatory administrative structures (Atieno-Odhiambo, 1987). In eastern Kenya, the Ukamba Members Association (UMA), formed in 1937 under the leadership of Samuel Muindi Mbingu, organized one of the largest early African political processions to Nairobi in 1938 to protest land alienation and labour exploitation. UMA's action was particularly significant as it prefigured the type of mass mobilization that would later define nationalist movements (Tignor, 1976).

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Parallel to these African-led organizations, the Kenya Indian Congress (KIC), founded in 1914 in Mombasa by Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee, served as a political platform for Kenya's South Asian population. Under leaders like M.A. Desai in the 1930s, the KIC vocally opposed racial discrimination and advocated for a non-racial franchise. Its critique of colonial segregation policies and insistence on constitutional reforms indirectly supported African struggles for inclusion and political equality (Gregory, 1993).

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, these fragmented regional and ethnic associations had exposed the limits of localized protest, prompting African leaders to seek broader national unity. The Second World War became a critical catalyst in this transformation. Over 98,000 African soldiers who served returned with heightened political awareness and expectations for reform (Branch, 2009). This new consciousness led to the founding of the Kenya African Study Union (KASU) in 1944, which sought to prepare Africans for greater political participation through education and constitutional advocacy.

In 1946, KASU evolved into the Kenya African Union (KAU), marking the decisive shift from ethnic-based protest to nationalist movement. Under the leadership of James Gichuru and later Jomo Kenyatta, KAU became the first truly national political organization, demanding universal suffrage, land reform, and ultimately self-government (Maloba, 2017). Kenyatta, having returned from studies and Pan-African engagements abroad, brought international exposure and intellectual credibility to the movement. KAU's establishment signaled the beginning of structured nationalism in Kenya, bringing together the grievances and lessons of previous decades into a coherent movement that would eventually galvanize the independence struggle (Kagunda, 1990).

The ferment of political activism during the interwar decades and the early 1940s profoundly influenced the trajectory of Kenya's decolonization. These early political associations—ethnic, regional, and racial—served as crucibles for leadership, political education, and mass mobilization. They exposed the fundamental contradictions of colonial rule, challenged the legitimacy of racial hierarchies, and introduced a new political language rooted in rights, justice, and representation. While often fragmented, these early movements collectively sowed

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the seeds of Kenya's nationalist struggle, shaping the political consciousness that would galvanize the mass resistance of the 1950s. The 1940s, therefore, served as a decisive turning point when protest matured into coordinated nationalism and pan-African solidarity (Branch, 2011). It can thus be concluded that the period between 1920 and 1946 laid the foundational phase of political protest in Kenya—one characterized by growing political awareness, experimentation with organizational forms, and the evolution of protest strategies that would eventually coalesce into the independence movement.

2.3 The Mau Mau Rebellion (1952-1960)

The groundwork laid by early political movements and regional associations in Kenya between the 1920s and 1940s matured into more confrontational and revolutionary expressions of protest in the 1950s, with the Mau Mau uprising emerging as the most emblematic of these developments. The Mau Mau rebellion did not arise spontaneously but was a culmination of escalating frustrations with colonial intransigence, deep-rooted socio-economic disparities, and the failure of moderate constitutional dialogue to yield meaningful reforms. As Branch (2011) observes, Mau Mau was “the dramatic rupture in a long continuum of African agitation against colonial oppression,” a movement that harnessed decades of discontent and radicalized it into armed resistance.

By the early 1950s, the colonial government's piecemeal reforms had failed to respond adequately to African demands, particularly concerning land rights, racial equity, and political representation. The Kikuyu, disproportionately affected by land alienation, were central to the Mau Mau uprising, yet their struggle resonated far beyond Central Province. The rebellion's themes—dispossession, labour exploitation, and demand for dignity—echoed grievances held by many other communities across Kenya, which had been articulated since the interwar years through associations like the Ukamba Members Association, Young Kavirondo Association, and others. Thus, Mau Mau can be seen not as a regional revolt but as the militant climax of national discontent (Elkins, 2005).

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The colonial state's brutal reaction to the rebellion—declaring a State of Emergency in 1952, detaining over 100,000 Africans, and instituting draconian laws—exposed the moral and political bankruptcy of British rule in Kenya. The international community began to scrutinize British policies, and within Britain itself, segments of the public and political elite started to question the sustainability of empire. This pressure, both internal and external, forced the colonial state to initiate significant constitutional changes.

One such shift was the Lyttelton Constitution of 1954, which for the first time allowed for multi-racial representation in the Legislative Council. Though limited in scope, it marked the beginning of African political inclusion in formal governance structures (Ogot & Ochieng, 1995). The Lyttelton reforms were quickly followed by the 1957 elections, in which Africans were allowed to directly elect eight representatives to the LegCo. These elections ushered in a new cadre of African political leaders, such as Tom Mboya, Oginga Odinga, and Daniel arap Moi, who would come to dominate post-independence politics.

Meanwhile, protests and political agitation were also occurring in other parts of the country. In Nyanza, Luo leaders criticized the uneven distribution of educational opportunities and economic development. In Western Kenya, peasant resistance to agricultural regulations and forced conscription had deepened during the war years and spilled over into more organized political expression. The war itself had also radicalized African servicemen, who returned with a heightened sense of political entitlement and global awareness, contributing to the post-war surge in anti-colonial consciousness (Anderson, 2005).

By the late 1950s, African political mobilization had become national in scope. In 1960, the formation of the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and its rival, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), signified the institutionalization of African political power. These developments were not possible without the immense sacrifices and ruptures brought about by Mau Mau and preceding movements. The Lancaster House Conferences (1960–1963) that negotiated Kenya's independence were themselves the product of sustained protest, revolt, and diplomacy—each phase of resistance building upon earlier ones.

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The connection between Mau Mau and democratic transformation is thus not incidental. Mau Mau symbolized the depth of African alienation under colonialism and forced the British to reckon with the impossibility of maintaining control through repression alone. As Berman and Lonsdale (1992) explain, the colonial government's harsh response to Mau Mau "destroyed its own legitimacy and created a political vacuum which African nationalism filled." The outcome was a gradual dismantling of racial privilege in governance and the extension of democratic rights to the African majority.

In retrospect, the trajectory from Harry Thuku's 1922 protest to the armed rebellion of Mau Mau in the 1950s reveals a historical continuum of resistance, each phase intensifying as colonial responses hardened. The Mau Mau Rebellion (1952–1960), far from being a parochial Kikuyu insurrection, became the crucible in which nationalist consciousness was re-forged through violence, sacrifice, and ideological commitment. Sparked by deep-seated grievances over land dispossession and economic marginalization, the rebellion embodied a radical escalation of earlier protest traditions. The British declaration of a state of emergency and the subsequent brutal counterinsurgency campaign only underscored the depth of African discontent and the illegitimacy of colonial authority. Despite severe repression, Mau Mau's guerrilla tactics and capacity to mobilize broad-based rural support brought international scrutiny to the injustices of British colonialism and forced political concessions that earlier moderate movements had struggled to secure. In doing so, the rebellion accelerated constitutional reforms and negotiations, culminating in Kenya's independence in 1963. The Mau Mau thus completed the arc from fragmented local protest to a unified nationalist movement, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to influence contemporary debates on land rights, historical justice, and nationhood in Kenya.

Post-Independence Period (1963-1990s)

3.1 Early Independence and Discontent (1963-1970s)

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Kenya's independence in December 1963 was met with immense optimism, a moment that many believed would usher in a radical break from colonial oppression. However, the transition soon revealed itself to be what Frantz Fanon (1963) famously described as a mere "changing of the guard," where colonial structures of power were inherited rather than dismantled. The Kenyatta administration, initially celebrated as the vanguard of liberation, quickly moved to consolidate authority, undermining the federal (*majimbo*) protections that had been central to the independence negotiations. Scholars such as Anderson (2005) have characterized this period as one of institutional betrayal, where constitutional reforms systematically dismantled regional autonomy in favor of centralized rule. The suppression of dissenting voices, particularly those advocating for a more decentralized state, marked an early departure from the democratic ideals that had fueled the anti-colonial struggle.

Economically, the promise of equitable redistribution gave way to policies that reinforced existing inequalities. The 1965 *Sessional Paper No. 10 on African Socialism*, ostensibly a blueprint for economic justice, has been critiqued by scholars like Arrighi (1973) as a document that legitimized neocolonial capitalism rather than challenging it. Instead of dismantling the settler-dominated economy, the state facilitated the rise of a new African elite, many with close ties to the ruling party. Land redistribution, a key demand of the independence movement, became a tool of patronage, disproportionately benefiting political loyalists while leaving many landless peasants disillusioned. This growing disparity fueled unrest, particularly in regions where communities felt marginalized by the new order. Rural resistance, often led by former freedom fighters, was met with state violence, signaling that the government would tolerate no challenge to its authority.

The emergence of the Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1966, led by Oginga Odinga, represented the first major organized opposition to Kenyatta's rule. The KPU's platform, which called for genuine socialism, linguistic decolonization, and a non-aligned foreign policy, resonated with many who felt betrayed by the ruling party's compromises. However, the state's response was swift and severe. Legal mechanisms were weaponized to suppress dissent, including constitutional amendments that forced elected officials to defect from opposition

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parties or lose their seats—a move that Ghai (2004) argues effectively outlawed multiparty politics. The banning of the KPU in 1969 and the violent crackdown on its supporters, most notably in the Kisumu massacre, demonstrated the regime's willingness to use brute force to maintain control.

Ethnicity, always a latent factor in Kenyan politics, became increasingly weaponized during this period. The assassination of Tom Mboya in 1969 deepened ethnic polarization, as many saw his killing as part of a broader strategy to sideline certain communities from power. Anthropologist Parkin (1978) observed that this moment marked the "unmasking" of Kenya's ethnicized politics, where loyalty to the state was increasingly equated with loyalty to a particular ethnic elite. The civil service and educational institutions, once seen as meritocratic, were reshaped along ethnic lines, further entrenching divisions.

By the 1970s, resistance had evolved into more radical forms. Underground movements such as *Mwakenya* emerged, articulating a Marxist critique of the neocolonial state and organizing clandestinely among workers and students. The 1975 murder of J.M. Kariuki, a populist MP who had become a vocal critic of government corruption, sparked nationwide protests, revealing the depth of public anger. Perhaps most strikingly, the 1977 "Women's War"—a mass protest by mothers, including wives of senior officials—highlighted the moral bankruptcy of the regime. Historian Presley (1992) interprets this event as a pivotal moment in which even those within the system's patronage networks began to openly reject its excesses.

Though these movements were suppressed, they laid the groundwork for future struggles. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981) aptly described this era as one that nurtured an "underground river of resistance," a tradition of dissent that would resurface in later decades. The Kenyatta years, rather than fulfilling the promise of liberation, instead revealed the contradictions of postcolonial governance—where the rhetoric of freedom coexisted with authoritarian control. Yet, as Hornsby (2012) notes, this period also saw the birth of Kenya's enduring "culture of dissent," a legacy that continues to shape the nation's political imagination.

3.2 The 1982 Coup Attempt and Its Aftermath

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The failed military coup of August 1, 1982 represents one of the most significant political crises in post-independence Kenya, marking a definitive turning point in the country's democratic trajectory. This watershed moment exposed fundamental contradictions within the nation's political system and laid bare the fragility of its democratic institutions under mounting authoritarian pressures. The coup attempt, while ultimately unsuccessful, revealed deep fissures not only within Kenya's military establishment but across the broader societal spectrum, reflecting widespread discontent with President Daniel arap Moi's increasingly autocratic governance style.

To fully appreciate the significance of the 1982 coup attempt, one must examine the political context of its emergence. Following Jomo Kenyatta's death in 1978, the transition to Moi's presidency had initially been marked by cautious optimism. Moi's famous "Nyayo" (footsteps) philosophy promised continuity with Kenyatta's legacy while projecting an image of moderate, inclusive leadership. However, as Hornsby (2012) meticulously documents, by 1981 this facade had begun to crumble, replaced by an increasingly centralized and paranoid style of governance. The banning of opposition parties, the systematic dismantling of parliamentary checks on executive power, and the growing influence of security services in civilian affairs created an atmosphere of political suffocation that would ultimately contribute to the coup attempt.

The events of August 1st unfolded with dramatic suddenness. In the early morning hours, sections of the Kenya Air Force, led by Senior Private Hezekiah Ochuka, seized control of key installations including the Voice of Kenya radio station. Their broadcast declaring the overthrow of the government sent shockwaves across the nation. However, as Ake (1993) analyzes, the coup's failure was virtually guaranteed by several critical factors: the plotters' lack of coordination with other military branches, their failure to secure the person of the president, and most crucially, their inability to articulate a coherent political vision that might have garnered broader support.

The government's response was swift and brutal. Loyalist forces, primarily from the General Service Unit (GSU) and sections of the army, moved decisively to crush the rebellion.

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Within hours, the coup had collapsed, but the repercussions would reverberate for years. The security forces' conduct during the crisis, particularly their violent retribution against suspected participants and the broader Air Force establishment, revealed the regime's willingness to employ extreme violence to maintain power (Hornsby, 2012).

In the coup's immediate aftermath, the Moi regime embarked on what Branch (2011) terms "the great political lockdown." Within months, Kenya formally transitioned to a *de jure* one-party state through a controversial constitutional amendment. This institutional shift provided legal cover for an unprecedented wave of repression targeting real and perceived opponents. The notorious Special Branch expanded its operations dramatically, while the judiciary was systematically weakened through the appointment of pliant judges and the manipulation of legal processes.

The university system, traditionally a space for intellectual dissent, became a particular target of state repression. Ogot and Ochieng (1995) document how security forces conducted frequent raids on campuses, with hundreds of students and lecturers detained without trial. The infamous "queue-voting" system imposed on student elections epitomized the regime's determination to extinguish autonomous political activity. Simultaneously, the independent press faced relentless harassment, with critical newspapers like the Nairobi Times subjected to punitive taxation and distribution bans.

Paradoxically, this period of intense repression also witnessed the emergence of innovative forms of resistance. As Kanyinga (2009) demonstrates, the 1980s saw the proliferation of underground intellectual movements and clandestine publications that kept democratic ideals alive. The "Pambana" (Struggle) newsletter and similar samizdat literature circulated widely despite severe penalties for possession. Perhaps most unexpectedly, mainstream Christian churches gradually assumed the mantle of moral opposition. Anglican Bishop Henry Okullu and Presbyterian Reverend Timothy Njoya became prominent critics of government excesses, using their pulpits to challenge the regime's human rights abuses and corruption. This religious resistance proved particularly significant as it operated in a space the

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regime was reluctant to violate completely, given the churches' moral authority and international connections.

The political crisis of the early 1980s coincided with profound economic challenges that have often been overlooked in analyses of this period. Kenya's first serious encounter with IMF-imposed structural adjustment programs created what Branch (2011) describes as a "dual crisis" of political repression and economic dislocation. Austerity measures led to massive public sector layoffs, while currency devaluations dramatically eroded living standards.

Urban youth, disproportionately affected by unemployment and economic marginalization, became both victims of police brutality and participants in growing informal sector protests. The phenomenon of "machinga" (street vendor) uprisings in Nairobi and Mombasa during this period represented a unique form of economic resistance that occasionally spilled into political confrontation. This economic dimension helps explain the surprising durability of dissent despite the regime's overwhelming coercive capacity.

The international community's response to Kenya's political crisis was marked by striking ambivalence. Western powers, particularly the United States and Britain, prioritized Cold War geopolitical considerations over democratic principles. As Anderson (2003) notes, Kenya's strategic importance as a regional bulwark against Soviet influence ensured that criticism of Moi's authoritarian turn remained muted throughout most of the 1980s.

However, this international tolerance had limits. The 1985 visit by West German President Richard von Weizsäcker, during which he pointedly criticized Kenya's human rights record, marked the beginning of more critical international scrutiny. Similarly, the World Bank's increasing emphasis on "governance" issues in its lending criteria reflected growing discomfort with the regime's excesses, even as economic assistance continued to flow.

The enduring significance of the 1982 crisis lies in its role as a political crucible that shaped Kenya's subsequent development. The event crystallized several enduring patterns of state-society relations: a suspicious, centralized executive prone to equating dissent with treason; the military's formal depoliticization alongside its continued latent political role; and the creative adaptation of resistance strategies under conditions of extreme repression.

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Perhaps most importantly, as recent scholarship emphasizes (Anderson, 2003; Branch, 2011), the coup attempt and its aftermath revealed fundamental tensions in Kenya's post-colonial state-building project. The nationalist consensus that had sustained the independence movement and early post-colonial governments had fractured irreparably, replaced by a more overtly transactional and coercive model of governance. This shift would have profound consequences for Kenya's subsequent political trajectory, influencing everything from constitutional development to ethnic relations.

More than four decades later, the 1982 coup attempt demands reassessment beyond the conventional narrative of a failed military rebellion. While undoubtedly a critical moment in Kenya's authoritarian turn, it also marked the beginning of a resilient resistance tradition that would ultimately bear fruit in the democratic reforms of the 1990s. The creative adaptation of civil society, the courageous stance of religious leaders, and the persistence of intellectual dissent under extremely adverse conditions all testify to the complexity of this historical moment. Ultimately, the significance of 1982 lies not in the coup's failure, but in how it revealed the fundamental tensions between state power and democratic aspirations in post-colonial Kenya. These tensions remain unresolved in many ways, making the study of this period not just an historical exercise, but a crucial lens for understanding contemporary Kenyan politics.

3.3 The Birth of Multi-Party Politics

The Birth of Multi-Party Politics in Kenya

The 1990s in Kenya witnessed a significant and highly mobilized campaign for political pluralism, driven by widespread demands for socioeconomic equity and democratic reforms. This period was characterized by intense public activism, most notably the Saba Saba protests on July 7, 1990. Organized by opposition leaders and civil society groups, these demonstrations

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called for the restoration of multi-party democracy and articulated popular discontent with President Daniel Arap Moi's authoritarian regime. The protests served as a powerful manifestation of the public's demand for greater political freedoms, justice, and governmental accountability (Hornsby, 2012).

The Saba Saba demonstrations were marked by mass participation and fervent calls for social justice, reflecting deep-seated frustration with the Kenya African National Union's (KANU) repressive single-party system. The government's violent crackdown—including arrests, beatings, and police brutality—further galvanized reformist sentiments. This repression underscored the regime's resistance to democratization while simultaneously amplifying domestic and international pressure for political change (Branch, 2011).

Sustained activism, coupled with heightened global scrutiny, ultimately compelled KANU to concede to constitutional amendments in 1991, legalizing multi-party politics. This pivotal shift marked the beginning of a new political era in Kenya, directly responding to popular demands for a more inclusive and equitable governance structure (Kanyinga, 2009).

Despite progress, Kenya's transition to multi-party democracy was fraught with challenges, including allegations of electoral malpractice and ethnically charged violence. The 1992 and 1997 general elections were marred by widespread irregularities, including voter intimidation and ballot fraud, exposing the country's entrenched political and ethnic divisions (Ogot & Ochieng, 1995). In response, the formation of the Inter-Parties Parliamentary Group (IPPG) in 1997 represented a critical juncture. Comprising both KANU and opposition representatives, the IPPG facilitated key electoral reforms, such as enhancing the independence of the electoral commission and instituting anti-fraud mechanisms (Cheeseman et al., 2018). These measures were instrumental in addressing public demands for transparency and equitable representation (Branch, 2011).

The 1992 elections—Kenya's first multi-party contest in decades—were overshadowed by violence and logistical failures, revealing deep societal fractures (Hornsby, 2012). Similarly, the 1997 elections faced allegations of manipulation and coercion, yet they signified incremental

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progress in Kenya's democratic evolution. Opposition persistence in challenging KANU's dominance underscored an enduring commitment to political equity (Kanyinga, 2009).

Legacy and Reflections on Kenya's Democratic Struggle

The 1990s constituted a defining decade in Kenya's political history, marked by a resolute push for multi-party democracy (Mwaura, 2010). This revolutionary phase was shaped by mass protests and an unwavering pursuit of social justice, culminating in constitutional and electoral reforms (Chege, 1997). Historical antecedents, such as the Mau Mau Rebellion, had earlier laid the groundwork for anti-authoritarian resistance, setting a precedent for later democratic struggles (Anderson, 2005; Elkins, 2005). However, the electoral shortcomings of the 1990s underscored the persistent need for institutional reforms in Kenya's pursuit of democratic consolidation (Kanyinga, 2009).

The 1990s in Kenya were a transformative era defined by the struggle for multi-party democracy, epitomized by the Saba Saba protests against Moi's autocratic rule. This period demonstrated the efficacy of collective action and civil society in confronting oppressive governance, alongside the catalytic role of international advocacy. While the reintroduction of multi-party politics in 1991 was a landmark achievement, subsequent elections revealed systemic flaws, including electoral fraud and ethnic polarization. The establishment of the IPPG reflected a growing recognition of the necessity for structural reforms. Despite these obstacles, Kenyans' resilience in advocating for equitable governance established a foundation for sustained political engagement and institutional reform.

4.0 The New Millennium and the Quest for Reform (2000s-Present)

4.1 2002: A New Era

The dawn of the new millennium marked a transformative period in Kenya's political landscape, characterized by renewed activism and institutional reforms. The 2002 general elections represented a pivotal moment, ending the Kenya African National Union's (KANU) 39-year dominance and ushering in the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) under Mwai Kibaki's leadership (Hornsby, 2012). This transition raised expectations

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for sweeping reforms, particularly the enactment of a new constitution to address systemic governance challenges, including corruption and political exclusion (Branch, 2011). However, the reform agenda encountered significant resistance, revealing the complexities of institutional change in a polarized political environment.

A critical test of Kenya's reform trajectory came in 2005, with a national referendum on a proposed constitution. The draft sought to decentralize power, strengthen human rights protections, and enhance governmental accountability (Kanyinga, 2009). Despite vigorous advocacy, the draft was rejected, reflecting deep divisions over issues such as devolution and land reform (Hornsby, 2012). This setback underscored the challenges of consensus-building in Kenya's fractious political climate.

The 2007 general elections further exposed the fragility of Kenya's democratic institutions. The contentious contest between Kibaki and Raila Odinga was marred by allegations of electoral fraud, triggering widespread violence that claimed over 1,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands (KNCHR, 2008). The crisis laid bare entrenched ethnic and political fault lines, necessitating urgent intervention.

International mediation led to the National Accord and Reconciliation Act (2008), establishing a coalition government between Kibaki and Odinga (Branch, 2011). This agreement not only quelled immediate violence but also set the stage for long-term reforms, including constitutional review and the creation of the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) (Lynch, 2018). The Accord's emphasis on inclusivity and institutional restructuring catalyzed the eventual adoption of Kenya's 2010 Constitution, a landmark achievement in the country's democratic evolution.

The 2010 Constitution represented a watershed moment, introducing progressive measures such as devolution, enhanced human rights safeguards, and mechanisms for governmental accountability (Hornsby, 2012). Despite these advances, implementation challenges persisted. Electoral disputes in 2013 and 2017, marked by allegations of fraud and violent protests, highlighted enduring governance deficits (Cheeseman, 2019). The 2017 election

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rerun, boycotted by the opposition, further eroded public trust in electoral institutions (ICG, 2018).

Beyond elections, civil society and protest movements have increasingly focused on socio-economic inequality, land injustices, and police brutality (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), launched in 2018, sought to address these issues through constitutional amendments aimed at fostering national cohesion (Mkandawire, 2023). However, critics argued that the BBI risked entrenching elite interests rather than delivering substantive reform (Mutua, 2021).

Kenya's post-2000 reform journey illustrates both progress and persistent challenges. The 2010 Constitution laid a robust legal framework, yet its full realization remains hampered by corruption, ethnic patronage, and weak enforcement (Branch, 2011). While initiatives like the BBI reflect continued efforts to stabilize governance, their success hinges on transcending political expediency to address structural inequities. Ultimately, Kenya's democratic consolidation demands not only institutional reforms but also a deeper societal commitment to transparency, inclusion, and accountability—principles at the heart of the reform movement since the early 2000s.

4.3 The Finance Bill and Parliamentary Representation

The introduction of Kenya's 2023 Finance Bill marked a significant turning point in the nation's fiscal policy landscape, sparking widespread debate about economic justice and political representation. The bill's controversial provisions, which included substantial tax increases on essential goods and reductions in social welfare programs, were widely perceived as disproportionately burdening ordinary citizens while failing to address systemic inequality (Mkandawire, 2023). This legislative approach reflected a broader pattern of policymaking that prioritized revenue generation over equitable development, exacerbating existing socioeconomic disparities and fueling public discontent.

The parliamentary debate surrounding the 2024 Finance Bill further exposed deep flaws in Kenya's representative democracy. Members of Parliament faced intense criticism for their

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apparent prioritization of executive directives over constituent interests, with numerous legislators accused of rubber-stamping unpopular measures without meaningful consultation (Cheeseman, 2022). This phenomenon was not merely anecdotal; empirical research revealed that a substantial majority of Kenyan MPs consistently aligned with presidential positions on contentious legislation, even when such stances directly contradicted the expressed needs of their constituencies (Afrobarometer, 2023). The resulting erosion of public trust in legislative institutions reached alarming levels, with surveys indicating that nearly 70% of citizens believed their representatives were more accountable to party leadership than to voters (Electoral Integrity Project, 2023).

This crisis of representation created fertile ground for a new form of political mobilization led by Kenya's digitally-native Generation Z. Drawing inspiration from global protest movements, particularly the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-2012, young Kenyans developed innovative strategies to voice their dissent. The Tunisian revolution, sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's desperate act of self-immolation against economic marginalization, served as a powerful example of youth-led resistance to authoritarian governance (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Kenyan activists adapted these lessons to their local context, leveraging social media platforms to organize, mobilize, and amplify their message beyond traditional political channels. Digital platforms like X (Twitter) and TikTok became crucial tools in this new wave of activism, serving multiple functions in the protest ecosystem. These technologies facilitated rapid information sharing and coordination, enabled real-time documentation of state violence, and created spaces for participatory policy critique that bypassed conventional media gatekeepers (Mare, 2023). The resulting movement exhibited a distinctly horizontal structure, consciously avoiding centralized leadership in favor of decentralized, crowd-sourced organizing - a strategic choice that mirrored successful protest models from Sudan's 2019 revolution to Chile's social uprising (Tufekci, 2017).

This generational shift in political engagement reflects broader theoretical concepts about the evolution of democratic participation. The phenomenon aligns with Jacques Rancière's (2010) framework of "the politics of the unheard," where marginalized groups create new forms

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of visibility and audibility to challenge established power structures. In the Kenyan context, digital platforms have effectively redistributed what Rancière terms "the sensible" - the boundaries of what can be seen, heard, and discussed in the political sphere. By creating alternative spaces for discourse and mobilization outside traditional institutions, young activists have fundamentally altered Kenya's political landscape.

The implications of this transformation extend far beyond any single piece of legislation. The Finance Bill protests revealed deep structural tensions in Kenya's governance system, including the declining relevance of formal opposition parties in the eyes of young citizens, the emergence of new accountability mechanisms through digital platforms, and the growing importance of transnational activist networks (McAdam & Tarrow, 2022). These developments suggest that Kenya may be entering a new phase of democratic contestation, one where traditional institutions must adapt to remain relevant in an era of technologically-enabled, youth-led political engagement.

As the nation grapples with these changes, the fundamental questions raised by the Finance Bill protests remain unresolved. How can representative democracy function when citizens perceive their representatives as unresponsive? What institutional reforms might restore faith in legislative processes? And how should governments respond to these new forms of digital activism that operate outside conventional political channels? These challenges will likely shape Kenya's political trajectory for years to come, as the country navigates the complex intersection of economic policy, democratic representation, and technological change.

Conclusion

The evolution of protest movements in Kenya, from colonial-era resistance to contemporary digital activism, reflects a persistent struggle for justice, equity, and democratic governance. This study has demonstrated that Kenya's history of collective action is not merely a series of isolated events but a continuum of resistance shaped by shifting socio-political and technological landscapes. The anti-colonial struggles of the early 20th century, epitomized by the Mau Mau Rebellion, laid the ideological and tactical foundations for later movements, while the push for

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multi-party democracy in the 1990s marked a pivotal transition toward political pluralism. The 2010 Constitution, with its emphasis on devolution and human rights protections, represented a significant institutional response to long-standing grievances. However, the persistence of electoral malpractices, economic disparities, and governance deficits underscores the incomplete nature of Kenya's democratic consolidation.

The rise of digital activism, particularly among Generation Z, signifies a transformative shift in protest dynamics. Platforms such as X (Twitter), TikTok, and Facebook have enabled decentralized mobilization, circumventing traditional political structures and amplifying youth voices on issues of economic justice and accountability. This phenomenon aligns with global trends in which technology redefines civic engagement, yet Kenya's case is distinguished by its historical context—where past struggles inform present tactics. Nevertheless, the limitations of digital activism must also be acknowledged, including its susceptibility to state surveillance, misinformation, and the absence of formal mechanisms to translate online mobilization into sustained policy change.

Policy Recommendations

To address these challenges and harness the potential of Kenya's protest legacy, the following measures are proposed:

Institutionalizing Participatory Governance

- Establish structured digital forums that facilitate direct citizen engagement with legislators, ensuring transparency in policy formulation and implementation.
- Strengthen devolution by empowering county governments to address localized grievances, thereby reducing the centralization of political discontent.

Enhancing Accountability Mechanisms

- Reform electoral systems to minimize fraud and enhance public trust, including the adoption of robust auditing processes for election technology.
- Enforce stricter oversight on parliamentary conduct, ensuring that representatives prioritize constituent interests over partisan or executive directives.

Addressing Structural Inequalities

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- Implement progressive fiscal policies that mitigate the regressive impacts of taxation on low-income populations, as exemplified by the contentious Finance Bills of 2023 and 2024.
- Accelerate land reforms to resolve historical injustices, which remain a potent source of socio-political tension.

Investing in Civic Education and Digital Literacy

- Integrate the study of Kenya's protest history into educational curricula to foster a deeper understanding of democratic struggles.
- Expand digital literacy initiatives to equip citizens—particularly youth—with the skills to engage critically with online political discourse and counter disinformation.

Balancing Repression and Reform in State Responses

- Encourage security sector reforms to prevent the excessive use of force against protesters, aligning state actions with constitutional guarantees of assembly and expression.
- Legitimize digital activism as a form of civic participation rather than treating it as a subversive threat, thereby reducing adversarial state-society relations.

Final Reflections

Kenya's protest movements illustrate the enduring tension between state power and societal demands for accountability. While historical resistance dismantled colonial rule and authoritarianism, contemporary activism continues to challenge neopatrimonial governance and economic exclusion. The 2010 Constitution provides a framework for reform, yet its promise remains unrealized without substantive institutional and cultural shifts.

The future of Kenya's democracy hinges on its ability to integrate the energy of digital activism into formal governance structures while addressing the root causes of discontent—corruption, inequality, and unresponsive leadership. By bridging historical lessons with innovative democratic practices, Kenya can transform its legacy of resistance into a foundation for inclusive and sustainable governance. The resilience of its people, demonstrated across generations, offers a compelling narrative of struggle and hope—one that remains critical to the nation's ongoing pursuit of justice and equity.

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