

Kenyan Narratives of Resistance and Liberation: The Sixth Pan-Africa Newsletter (2024)



Yinka Shonibare (Nigeria/UK), *Feeling Free Like a Bird*, 2023.

Earlier this month, the Kenyan government put forward new **tax** proposals in the 2024 Finance Bill, which were deeply unpopular and caused protests in the capital, Nairobi. These **included** a 16% levy on bread (which was previously tax exempt), the transportation of sugar, and financial services, as well as a 5% tax **increase** on money transfers, disproportionately affecting small entrepreneurs. These are the latest set of tax hikes introduced by President William Ruto since he came to power in 2022. The public's discontent and police using live ammunition on protestors has made **international headlines**, Kenya's latest appearance in recent months.

Last month, the **deployment** of Kenyan police troops to Haiti amidst global outcry, was **perceived** by many shocked progressives as proof that the Ruto administration is committed to being an instrument of Western imperialism. The same Western imperialism which has perpetuated the cost-of-living crisis, unending violent wars, and the imposition of detrimental economic policies in the Global South. Ruto's May trip to the United States marked the first visit by an African president in fifteen years and resulted in '**tangible benefits**' that include funding for projects and the possibility of Kenya being designated as a NATO non-ally. This move could be interpreted as a strategic effort by the US to reinforce its dwindling influence in Kenya and Africa at large.

The roots of imperialism in Kenya run deep. In fact, a friend of mine once described our country as where 'capitalism is at home'. The post-independence Kenyan state has been closely aligned with both capitalist and imperialist agendas. For example, Kenya maintained relations with the apartheid regime in South Africa while other African states boycotted it. Yet multiple histories exist at once. The presence of liberation and resistance struggles have often been neglected and overshadowed by tales of capital.

From the Mau Mau in the 1950s to the Marxist underground movement, December Twelve Movement-Mwakenya (DTM) in the 1980s, alternative paths have been forged before, during and after independence. At **Ukombozi Library** and **Vita Books**, we digitise the materials underpinning movements in the '80s, many of which come from Shiraz Durrani's personal archive. The collection reveals the heroic fight led by the working class at every stage of our country's history.

Kenyan Marxist historian **Maina wa Kinyatti** divides the struggle against imperialism in Kenya into four main stages. The first stage, from 1800 to 1900, commenced with the initial establishment of colonial settlements and ensuing political domination. The second stage of resistance, at the turn of the twentieth century, involved a more politically conscious struggle led by the East African Association. The third stage of Kenya's struggle against colonialism began in the late 1920s and lasted until the early 1950s. In this period, the Kikuyu Central Association made wider alliances with regional associations with working-class members in order to challenge British colonialism. The organisation of the Mau Mau Movement, wa Kinyatti defines as the fourth and most significant stage of the Kenyan anti-colonial struggle. This movement signified a turning point, as workers and peasants emerged as a leading political force under the leadership of Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi.



Thandiwe Muriu (Kenya), *Unity*, 2022.

After gaining independence in 1963, the aspirations of at least four generations of Kenyans who had waged the war for independence were thwarted by an emerging African elite, nurtured by the UK and the US. This elite succeeded in maintaining neo-colonialism and entrenching capitalist interests in Kenya, at the expense of the Kenyan working class. Instead of returning land to its rightful owners, the government adopted a ‘willing buyer-willing seller’ policy, which was financially inaccessible for freedom fighters emerging from the forest. The right-wing government headed by the Kenya African National Union’s Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mboya (1963–1978) pursued a reactionary, pro-imperialist agenda and pushed out (Bildad Kaggia and Oginga Odinga) or assassinated (Pio Gama Pinto) left leaders such as who strongly advocated for agrarian reform and wealth redistribution.

The Ukombozi Library archive is home to several key publications created by the clandestinely established Workers’ Party of Kenya (wa Kinyatti was a founding member), which emerged in this political climate in 1974. This party introduced Marxist-Leninist-Maoist social philosophy to Kenya’s struggle for a new democracy. Texts such as *Kenya Students Against Imperialist Education*, *Cheche Kenya* (‘Kenyan Spark’), and *Pambana* (‘Fight’) were circulated as the Workers Party transitioned in the DTM.

With a following from militant students and lecturers, the movement ruthlessly critiqued the neo-colonial state through anti-imperialist literature, theatre, and art. Pamphleteering was an important aspect of their work, serving as a popular method for disseminating their ideas and mobilising support. The secretive DTM operated amidst the oppressive political climate cultivated by the Daniel arap Moi regime, that stifled open political expression, intellectual debate, and diverse perspectives.

Liberal intellectuals have often minimised the achievements of the DTM because of the pervasive atmosphere of ‘red scare’. However, many Marxist scholars and political dissidents in the DTM were subjected to detention and torture, particularly in the notorious **Nyayo House** which was constructed in 1985 with UK and US assistance. For instance, wa Kinyatti’s revolutionary thought was a direct challenge to the prevailing political and economic order so in 1982, he was arrested on charges of possessing and producing seditious

literature. His vital research on the Mau Mau and his collection of Marxist literature was seized.



Ian Banja (Kenya), *Black Excellence*, 2021.

The introduction of multi-party democracy in Kenya in 1992, the end of the Kenya African National Union dominance, and the end of the 24-year-long arap Moi dictatorship in 2002 was largely the culmination of efforts by the DTM and other community organisations. Despite the hype of this transition, Kenya's challenges within a liberal democracy did not cease.



Michael Armitage (Kenya), *Curfew (Likoni March 27 2020)*, 2022.

The crises of capitalism have reached a critical point. In Kenya, these crises have manifested in the privatisation of public institutions and healthcare systems which care for the few at exorbitant prices. Last year, the government **proposed** a nearly threefold increase in university fees. This commodification of education, if approved, will alienate and exclude the children of the poor. Economic disparities have widened, and a sense of despair and hopelessness has enveloped the masses. Despite the promises of liberalism, it has failed to offer concrete solutions to pervasive poverty. Instead, it has merely served to rehabilitate and perpetuate capitalism.

The situation in Europe offers a cautionary parallel. Liberal democracy there has shown itself to be alarmingly close to fascism and far-right politics. These far-right elements are now attempting to re-establish ties with African political players as they seek to maintain their influence in a world that is increasingly challenging their unipolar dominance. In my view, the Kenyan government's revamped relationship with imperialist powers is still unjustified.

While constrained by these challenges, peasant and working-class organisations, socialist movements and political parties carry on the work. Kenyans from all walks of life have shared the negative impact the new bill would have on their lives on social media using the hashtag **#RejectFinanceBill2024**, building a groundswell of support across the world.

Hundreds of us attended the **protests** against tax hikes which started on 18 June, and we were met with guns, water cannons and teargas. On the first day of action alone, the police **arrested** 335 people. The protests have largely been led by teenagers and adults in their early 20s (also known as Generation Z) harnessing online mobilisation and turning it into crowds gathering in person. This generation, which was once considered apolitical, is now the leading force rejecting the neoliberal policies of the Ruto government administration. Despite illegal state **abductions** and other forms of suppression, the people's dissent was triumphant and resulted in the bill being **scrapped** entirely on 26 June. Our ongoing struggle represents the other side of Kenya's resistance story, one where *mwananchi* ('ordinary people') are actively resisting and seeking alternatives to the current economic crisis. Here, capital won't be comfortable.

Warmly,

Nicholas



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