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# Interventions

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CONTEMPORARY LEFT ISSUES IN AFRICA

ISSUE 06

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## Kenya Is Not in Crisis – Kenya Is the Crisis

Nicholas Mwangi traces the June 2024 protests to Kenya's colonial foundations and neoliberal entanglements. From anti-colonial resistance to the present-day rebellion against the Finance Bill, this searing analysis reveals how professional theft, by elites, IMF policies, and global capital, continues to define Kenya's trajectory, and poses urgent questions about sovereignty, socialism, and the future of Africa's political economy.

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# KENYA IS NOT IN CRISIS – KENYA /S THE CRISIS

BY NICHOLAS MWANGI

'The Finance Bill is professional theft,' read one of thousands of placards in the mass protests that gripped the streets of Kenya in June 2024. Straightforward political analysis was encapsulated neatly in a slogan, a diagnosis of a deeper crisis. It was a clear indictment of the Kenyan state's role as an enforcer of global capital, not through outright looting, but through legal instruments, budget bills, and bureaucratic language. It is a form of theft carried out in suits, sanctioned by law, and imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its local intermediaries.

Kenya occupies a central place in the story of East Africa. It is a region celebrated for its great socio-historical importance as home to one of the cradles of humanity, and it is the fastest-growing economic bloc on the continent. The East African Community (EAC) is projected to account for nearly a third of Africa's GDP by 2040 (double the 2000 figure). Since Kenya is positioned as the 'bastion of pro-Western stability' and a 'gateway' to the region for the global market through its port infrastructure and logistical corridors, the country is routinely cited as a success story.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this growth has come alongside deepening inequality, rising debt, declining public services, and a crisis of legitimacy for the ruling class. What appears on charts as progress has not translated to advances in homes and on the streets. This contradiction between GDP growth and mass suffering is not accidental. Austerity, debt servicing, and the privatisation of life's necessities are not policy mistakes.

This crisis did not begin with the 2024 Finance Bill. Nor is it merely about taxation. In 2024 alone, protests ranged from women marching against femicide, to strikes by doctors, teachers, and university lecturers, to workers resisting the planned privatisation of Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, and university students opposing the new tuition funding model. The interlinked rebellions of last year are a symptom of a deeper contradiction: a post-colonial state that secured political independence but not economic sovereignty. Today, Kenya's mass protests serve as a popular unmasking of the model of liberal democracy, and market-led development in East Africa that have been hailed for decades but ultimately failed. This is not just a Kenyan story. It is part of a continental crisis, a reckoning with the failures of post-colonial capitalism across Africa – from the anti-French rebellions in the Sahel to the strikes in South Africa, and the food protests in North Africa.

To understand the significance of this moment, we must ask: What are the structural roots of Kenya's crisis? What does this rebellion tell us about the limits of neoliberal governance in Africa? And most importantly, what possibilities does it open for a renewed struggle for sovereignty, dignity, and socialism in our time?

## **Colonial Foundations: Kenya under British Rule (1884-1920)**

Kenya's colonisation was not incidental. The country's geostrategic location on the Indian Ocean coast made it a critical gateway for imperial trade routes connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Kenya's port cities, fertile highlands, and access to the interior made it a valuable colonial possession, both as a settler economy and a logistical hub. British imperial planners envisioned Kenya not only as a site of resource extraction but as a geopolitical corridor linking their interests in India, Egypt, and South Africa. Its natural endowments, such as its mineral potential, reinforced its attractiveness as a destination for European settlers and commercial capital.

The Portuguese were among the first Europeans to set foot on Kenya's coast in 1498. They aimed to control the lucrative Indian Ocean trade and key coastal cities like Mombasa and Malindi became central to this goal. To secure their hold, the Portuguese built Fort Jesus in Mombasa in 1593, a defence structure designed to fend off both local African resistance and rival European powers. Despite their technological advantage in naval and military power, the Portuguese faced continuous opposition from local African communities, including the Mijikenda, Swahili city-states, and Omani Arabs. Portuguese control was always tenuous, and by the late seventeenth century, a coalition of African and Omani forces successfully expelled the Portuguese from the coast.

The formal colonisation of Kenya began after the 1884-85 Berlin Conference. With little regard for indigenous societies, Britain claimed Kenya as part of its East African sphere. The creation of the British East Africa Protectorate in 1895 was not intended to develop the local economy for Africans.

Colonial infrastructure projects, especially the Kenya-Uganda Railway (1896-1901), further entrenched British control. This railway was a vehicle for the extraction of resources, the movement of troops, and the consolidation of settler agriculture. Indigenous communities were dispossessed of their land, especially in the fertile central highlands, which were handed to European settlers under the 'White Highlands' policy. The British colonial state's machinery of accumulation and repression laid down the economic and political architecture that continues to shape Kenya's structural dependency today.

## Resistance to Colonialism: From Early Struggles to Revolutionary Currents

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### ***COLONIAL DOMINATION IN KENYA WAS NEVER UNCONTESTED.***

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Resistance took many forms – from armed struggle to passive defiance – and unfolded in waves, reflecting both the resilience of Kenyan communities and the intensification of colonial repression.

One of the earliest and most prolonged armed resistance was by the Nandi people under the leadership of Koitalel Arap Samoei. From 1895 to 1905, the Nandi mounted a fierce opposition to British expansion and infrastructure projects, particularly the Kenya–Uganda Railway.<sup>2</sup> This resistance was not simply about territorial sovereignty – it was a defence of economic autonomy, cultural integrity, and political self-determination. The movement was ultimately suppressed through betrayal and violence, with Samoei assassinated during peace negotiations.

Kenya's role as a settler colony meant that land alienation and racial segregation were implemented with particular brutality. Despite the presence of a significant number of squatters and wage labourers, the colonial settlers in Kenya were still facing a labour shortage on settler farms because of the resistance movement. To address this gap, the colonial government implemented a range of coercive measures to ensure a steady supply of cheap labour. These included the forced recruitment of men for labour on settler farms, taxation policies that pressured people to seek wage labour, and the restriction of land ownership for indigenous people, making it difficult for them to sustain their livelihoods without working for the settlers.<sup>3</sup>

By the early twentieth century, broader political and ideological currents began to influence the resistance movements in Kenya. The 1917 Russian Revolution and the formation of the Third International resonated deeply across the colonised world.<sup>4</sup> Anti-colonial activists in Kenya, as elsewhere, began to draw inspiration from socialist and anti-imperialist ideas, laying the ideological groundwork for future revolutionary struggles including organised trade unionism.

## **Workers' Struggles and Radical Trade Unionism (1940s-1950s)**

As colonial capitalism deepened its grip on Kenya, the working class increasingly emerged as a pivotal force in the struggle for liberation. The 1940s and 1950s marked a new phase shaped by organised labour, mass strikes, and the rise of radical trade unionism. They provided a collective platform for workers – drawn from plantations, railways, ports, and urban centres – to challenge the colonial labour regime.

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### ***TRADE UNIONS BECAME CRITICAL INSTRUMENTS OF MOBILISATION AND POLITICAL EDUCATION.***

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The African Workers Federation (AWF) was at the forefront, articulating demands not only for better wages and conditions but for structural transformation of the colonial economy. Between 1940 and 1946, a wave of strikes led by the AWF spread across various sectors, disrupting colonial economic activity. The 1947 general strike stands out as a watershed moment. It galvanised thousands of workers across Nairobi and other urban centres, marking a shift from isolated workplace grievances to unified political mobilisation. By 1950, the formation of the East African Trade Union Congress (EATUC) brought a new level of co-ordination and militancy to the movement. That year's general strike, involving over 100,000 workers, represented one of the most significant acts of defiance against British colonialism.<sup>5</sup> The strike demonstrated the potential of class solidarity across ethnic and occupational divisions, challenging the colonial tactic of divide and rule. The radicalisation of trade unions was deeply ideological. Trade unionism in this period must therefore be understood as part of a revolutionary continuum – one that directly fed into the armed struggles that would soon follow.

## **The Mau Mau and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA)**

The radicalisation of the working class and peasantry in Kenya during the 1940s and 1950s set the stage for the later Mau Mau uprising. Known formally as the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), the Mau Mau under the leadership of Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi emerged as a powerful articulation of the structural violence that defined colonial capitalism.<sup>6</sup> It was not merely a Kikuyu ethnic revolt,

as colonial propaganda attempted to portray it, but a class-based rebellion rooted in deep material grievances. It was, above all, an anti-imperialist war for sovereignty.

The KLFA organised itself through a network of guerrilla fighters, rural support structures, and underground urban cells. Fighters operated from forest bases in the Aberdare and Mount Kenya regions, launching coordinated attacks against settler farms, colonial administrators, and loyalist collaborators. Colonial authorities responded with brutal counter-insurgency campaigns including mass detention, torture, forced villagisation, and widespread executions. More than 1.5 million people were interned in concentration camps or resettlement villages during the Emergency Period (1952–1960).

Despite its military defeat, the Mau Mau uprising shattered the myth of colonial invincibility, exposed the brutality of the British Empire to the world, and radicalised a generation of activists and political organisers. It also forced the British to accelerate constitutional reforms, leading to the eventual independence of Kenya in 1963. Today, the legacy of the KLFA lives on as a reminder that genuine liberation cannot be achieved through negotiation with colonial powers alone. It must be fought for – through struggle, sacrifice, and the collective will of a people determined to reclaim their future.

## **The Contradictions of Kenya's Neo-Colonial Economy**

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### ***IF COLONIALISM WAS OUTRIGHT THEFT, THEN NEO-COLONIALISM IS PROFESSIONAL THEFT.***

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The colonial flag may have been lowered in 1963, but the economic structures of imperial domination remained firmly in place. Kenya, like many newly independent African states, emerged from colonial rule with the promise of political and economic sovereignty. That same year, the government Sessional Paper No. 10 'African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya' was introduced – a masterstroke of ideological misdirection. Framed in the language of African socialism, it was in fact a capitalist blueprint, drafted with the full backing of the United States and the United Kingdom, designed to steer Kenya away from any genuine path of economic redistribution. It asserted that 'foreign investment is likely to be a growing sector rather than a shrinking one' (Section 39), while conceding that domestic savings and taxation were insufficient to fund national growth (Sections 56–58).<sup>7</sup> Rather than placing

restrictions on foreign capital, the document assured investors of a favourable climate, with no meaningful mechanisms to regulate capital flight, repatriation of profits, or foreign ownership.

The tax system incentivised private capital formation, offering tax benefits and restructuring revenue collection to stimulate private investment (Sections 93–98). Property rights were firmly upheld, with an emphasis on formalising land titles to ease credit access and promote commercial agriculture (Sections 28–30, 50). Even where state intervention was mentioned, it was framed as complementary to private capital. Industrial development and tourism were to be driven by private sector participation, with the government offering guidance, not authority or control (Sections 121–124). The commercial and retail sectors were to be liberalised through market competition, while agricultural development was to include private farms and cooperatives under market logic (Section 101 and 123).<sup>8</sup>

While the paper ostensibly claimed to promote broad-based ownership as a means to prevent wealth concentration, in practice, it facilitated the entrenchment of economic power within the hands of the political elite and foreign capitalists. Rather than pursuing genuine collectivisation or state-led industrialisation, the policy of 'Africanisation' merely replaced colonial rulers with an emerging African bourgeoisie. Land reform policies, instead of redistributing wealth equitably, left the peasantry marginalised and economically disempowered.

The post-colonial state, led by Jomo Kenyatta, inherited not only the administrative apparatus of the British colonial state but also its class logic. A new elite – composed of Kenyatta's close political allies and beneficiaries of land patronage – entrenched themselves as custodians of imperial interests. Oginga Odinga, in his seminal work *Not Yet Uhuru*, warned:

*The stage following on independence is the most dangerous. This is the point after which many national revolutions in Africa have suffered a setback, for there has been a slide back into complacency... National governments have left too much in their countries unchanged... Internal elements of exploitation are closely related to reactionary external pressures.*<sup>9</sup>

This was no accident. The colonial power's obsession with cultivating a loyal African middle class was not a postscript to empire – it was its very continuation. At the centre of this betrayal stood the unresolved land question. When Kenya's elite seized the opportunity to accumulate land for themselves, they reproduced old patterns of dispossession with Black hands. Land, the very symbol of freedom, became a site of renewed exploitation.

Figures such as Pio Gama Pinto, Bildad Kaggia, and Oginga Odinga who pushed for socialist transformation and economic emancipation were sidelined, repressed, or eliminated. Pio Gama Pinto, assassinated in 1965, had issued a prophetic warning:

*Kenya's Uhuru (Independence) must not be transformed into freedom to exploit, or freedom to be hungry and live in ignorance. Uhuru must be Uhuru for the masses – Uhuru from exploitation, from ignorance, disease, and poverty.*<sup>10</sup>

Yet by the early 1970s, agriculture, infrastructure, and finance remained dominated by British and multinational corporations, such as Unilever (formerly East Africa Industries until 2000), who operated freely under the protection of the post-colonial state. In the late 1970s, multinational firms controlled most of Kenya's key economic sectors, with profits repatriated abroad while the working class bore the costs of stagnating wages and rising inequality.

Several underground organisations began to spring up, the most prominent being the December Twelve Movement (DTM), which later became MWAKENYA (MK). These formations carried forward the anti-imperialist flame. Marxism-Leninism gained traction in universities and trade unions, with militant students and lecturers forming study circles, producing political pamphlets, and engaging in revolutionary theatre. In the face of severe repression by the Daniel arap Moi regime, these underground networks became the intellectual and political vanguard of resistance.<sup>11</sup>

## **From Structural Adjustment to Neoliberal Capture: Kenya's Journey Through Professional Theft**

The introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank in the early 1980s marked a new phase. SAPs were introduced in response to Kenya's growing external debt and balance of payment crises. The prescription was textbook neoliberalism: privatisation of public enterprises, reduction in government spending, liberalisation of markets, and deregulation of the economy. In practice, healthcare, education, housing, and food subsidies were gutted. Kenya became emblematic of the post-colonial state Frantz Fanon warned against, subject to the 'pitfalls of national consciousness' and a vehicle for elite and imperialist interests.

The social consequences were immediate and devastating. The introduction of user fees under the cost-sharing policy in public hospitals turned healthcare into a privilege rather than a right. Medicine shortages, rising maternal mortality, and

untreated diseases became commonplace. Education too was commodified. The imposition of tuition fees in public universities effectively shut out a generation of poor youth from higher education.

The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed the mushrooming of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), largely funded by Western donor agencies. These NGOs promoted liberal democracy and human rights within the framework of capitalist hegemony. While some NGOs contributed to expanding civic space and advancing political reforms – particularly during the multi-party struggle of the early 1990s – most operated within the bounds of neoliberal orthodoxy. The NGO-industrial complex depoliticised struggle, transforming grassroots activism into donor-dependent project cycles.

The culmination of these liberal democratic reforms was the 2002 General Election, which saw the end of the Kenya African National Union's 40-year rule and the rise of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) under President Mwai Kibaki. Civil society actors, reformist intellectuals, and former opposition figures were absorbed into the new government, raising hopes for a new era. Despite constitutional reforms and anti-corruption rhetoric, the anti-poor and anti-working-class economic system remained intact.

Under President Uhuru Kenyatta's rule (2013–2022), Kenya's public debt ballooned to \$72.6 billion by 2021, driven by mega-infrastructure projects and elite rent-seeking.<sup>12</sup> Corruption scandals – such as the National Youth Service and Eurobond debacles – highlighted the merger of state power with speculative capital. The debt-fuelled economy failed to generate meaningful employment or improve livelihoods, but it enriched a class of politically connected contractors and consultants.

## **The June Uprising: From Protest to Political Reawakening**

In 2022, William Ruto was elected president on a populist platform dubbed the 'Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda'. He promised to prioritise the informal sector, empower small traders, and reverse the elitist trickle-down economics of previous regimes. Yet these promises quickly unravelled. The Finance Bill 2024 proposed new taxes on essential commodities and services including a proposed 16% VAT on financial transactions and basic goods.

In the shadow of this bill were stark inequalities highlighted in a 2022 Oxfam report: just 0.1% of Kenyans own more wealth than the remaining 99.9%.<sup>13</sup> Kenya's super-rich are expected to grow by 80% over the next decade, even as 2.6 million people fall into poverty each year due to illness. On top of that, 'Kenya is losing

\$1.1bn a year to tax exemptions and incentives – almost twice what the government spent on its entire health budget in 2015/16, in a country where mothers face a 1 in 40 chance of dying in childbirth.<sup>14</sup> Nearly one million children remain out of school, while the state allocates only 6% of its budget to health, leaving 25% of the population without adequate healthcare.<sup>15</sup>

What began as economic frustration evolved into a full-fledged political revolt. The June 2024 movement, led primarily by youth under the banners of 'Occupy Parliament' and 'Reject Finance Bill', became one of the most sustained and widespread uprisings in Kenya's recent history. Placards and slogans carried the sharp clarity of political analysis and expressed moral indignation: *Kenya is not an IMF lab rat, Reject, not amend the bill, The Finance Bill is too dark to be taken lightly, Our voices are our weapons, and We are saying no to economic dictatorship.*

The protests challenged not just a piece of legislation, but an entire economic model. Protesters also demanded the resignation of corrupt officials, the removal of unconstitutional Chief Administrative Secretaries (CAS), an end to police brutality, and cuts to wasteful public spending such as lavish budgets for the offices of the First and Second Ladies.

While many of the protestors were not even born during the SAP era of the 1980s and 1990s, they marched with historical consciousness. This intergenerational transmission of political clarity represents an important rupture in the cycle of economic oppression. More than anything, the protests revealed a rapidly developing political consciousness among ordinary people – an understanding that tax policy, debt burdens, healthcare collapse, and education exclusion are not disconnected crises but symptoms of a deeper systemic problem.

What distinguished the June 2024 uprising was the centrality of youth political agency. Just two years prior, the 2022 elections had recorded the lowest youth voter turnout in 15 years, with many young Kenyans expressing disillusionment with electoral politics. But the Finance Bill protests saw a reversal of this apathy. Social media platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook Live, and X Space Live became powerful organising tools. Protesters circulated multilingual explainer videos breaking down the Finance Bill, held live discussions, broadcast street actions in real time, and flooded the timelines of members of parliament with criticism and demands. Songs such as 'Anguka Nayo' ('Fall With It') and protest posters added emotional and aesthetic force to the movement. Activists even shared MPs' personal phone numbers, encouraging mass messaging and direct pressure from constituents.

Crucially, the movement was also tribeless, leaderless, and partyless as a tactical rejection of Kenya's corrupt, ethnically mobilised, patronage-driven political system. The National Coordinating Committee of the People's Assemblies (NCCPA) framed this clearly: tribalism in Kenya is not an inherent identity, but an elite weapon to divide the working class. Rejecting this manipulation was a revolutionary act in itself.

Similarly, the rejection of mainstream political parties was a reaction to their role as vehicles of elite self-enrichment rather than mass emancipation. Protesters were clear: this was not about partisan politics, but systemic transformation. The movement's 'leaderless' form also reflected a deep mistrust of traditional leadership structures, including both political and religious elites, who have consistently failed to deliver material change and are increasingly seen as complicit in elite capture.

We have traced the factors that gave rise to the uprising, however, spontaneity is not strategy, and if this uprising is to evolve from revolt to revolution, it must be grounded in long-term political organisation.

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## ***AS THE EUPHORIA OF THE PROTESTS FADES, THE RISK OF DEMOBILISATION AND CO- OPTION REMAINS.***

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There must be deliberate building of grassroots structures – people's assemblies, co-operatives, social justice centres and networks that not only contest state power but begin to construct alternatives from below.

Furthermore, popular political education must become a core strategy. The slogans, placards, and art of the June movement already reveal a profound intuitive grasp of class dynamics and imperialism. But these must be connected to a wider process of political training that links lived experience to systemic critique, helping communities understand not only what is wrong, but why it is wrong, and how it can be changed collectively.

In the slogans of the youth and the rhythms of resistance, we hear echoes of a new ideological terrain: one that questions debt, critiques foreign dependency, challenges elite accumulation, and reclaims public resources as a collective right. If Kenya's post-colonial history has been defined by the continuity of structural subordination, then this current moment challenges that continuity. The fact that the

state responded with repression, tear gas, arrests, and extrajudicial killings that left over 60 young people dead shows that the current system, which only responds to peaceful dissent with violence, is a system with nothing left to offer.

Yet, as Frantz Fanon reminded us, 'Each generation must discover its mission, full-fill it or betray it.'<sup>6</sup> This generation of Kenyan youth, born in the shadow of structural adjustment, austerity, and unfulfilled promises, is now stepping into its mission. It is discovering that liberation is not an event but a process, and that professional theft can only be defeated by professional organisation of the working class, of the poor, of the dispossessed, and of the politically committed. The struggle continues – and this time, the people are not merely resisting theft. They are naming it, confronting it, and searching for alternatives.

## About the author

Nicholas Mwangi is a writer, organiser, and member of the Ukombozi Library in Kenya. He contributes regularly to *People's Dispatch*. Nicolas has co-edited *The Breaking of Silence in NGO Discourse* and *Reflections on Pio Gama Pinto*. He is currently working on a forthcoming book titled *The Crisis of Capitalism in Africa* with the Organic Intellectuals Network in Kenya.

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Interventions is a collaboration between Inkani Books  
and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.