

In Kenya, rebels with a cause but no affiliations

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Kenya has seemingly inspired its neighbouring nations in the region. With an aggressively pro-capitalist economy, it was an eyesore for neighbours like Tanzania, where Julius Nyerere (anti-colonial activist who later became the Prime Minister) took the socialist path.



Protesters participate in an anti-government demonstration following nationwide deadly riots over tax hikes, in Nairobi, Kenya July 23, 2024. REUTERS

Kenya, an east African nation, is undergoing a series of protests against the William Ruto government. It all started with the government imposing a cess on income generated through social media. This increased income tax was within a plan for salaried middle class that increased household spending and reduced the capacity to save.

Gen Z, a major user of social media, did not take too well to the proposed plan to tax their revenue. They took to the streets to demand accountability from the government, especially since many are unemployed

despite having graduated from tertiary and higher education institutions. If anything, Kenya's Gen Z is proving that it is up for a rebellion despite the shiny life held in the claws of neoliberal capitalism.

Like many post-colonial nation states, Kenya saw strife between pre-colonial cleavages and the new Constitutional state. Both do not fully adhere to traditional ways of power exchange and contest the hegemony of power-broking social groups.

The story of Kenya's independence, especially the Mau Mau episode, is not a widely accepted phenomenon among a section of its people, who consider it a land issue that had no effect on regions outside the Central and Rift Valley areas. The post-colonial promise set a path of wealth creation opportunities for subsequent generations but that path and its true nature was forever hidden since the unification of the nation demanded priority.

Kenya has 43 tribes and barring recent entrants who are not ethnically African, the others have a strong form of identity. Usually, power is centred around the five dominant tribes who have formed into unique castes of their own — the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luo, Luhya, and Kamba people. There is nostalgia among post-colonial elites to direct attention to the colonial state as the reason for their current malaise. While partly true, it also invites us to hold to account the power that still lies with capital-owning groups running the world through banks located in former colonies.

A closer examination of post-colonial societies reveals that old divisions and power struggles are a cliché in democratic governance. Though tribal identity is not manifested through caste markers, it is marked in the way one Kenyan registers the other — a name or a dialect decodes one's tribal affiliations.

I was informed by Kathleen Anangwe, a sociologist at the University of Nairobi, that power struggle is often presented through ethnicities and diversities that accrue. When I encouraged her to think about the hierarchical distribution of power and simultaneous marginalisation of intra- and inter-tribal formations, she paused to think about a possible account of such a society.

A leading Kenyan law professor of Indian descent hosted a meeting for me to meet people from various social strata. Visibly proud of Gen Z's protests, a lawyer in her 50s claimed they had done in a month what it took the nation 30 years to express. Since Gen-Z protestors have no political or tribal affiliations, Kenyans like this lawyer support them financially in their spirited drive to demand `accountability.

Another participant came from an open forum with lawyers requested by Gen-Z protestors to guide them on constitutional provisions that would protect them against violations during their groundswell. Everyone at the dinner table was receiving updates on social media regarding a protest at Nairobi International Airport the next day.

Barring Ruto loyalists, the protest is widely embraced by many. What started as a grievance against the government, turned into a forum to scrutinise its inactions against growing corruption and lavish spending by officials. The ruling elite have formed political factions to advance their exploits. They, including Jomo Kenyatta, the first President, have always accumulated looted resources by taking turns to monopolise Kenya's crucial resources. The template was followed by successive governments, till it was Ruto's turn. In the wake of the latest protests, he dissolved his Cabinet, only to get most of them back into the fold under the guise of having conducted a reform to check corruption and embrace austerity.

Kenya has seemingly inspired its neighbouring nations in the region. With an aggressively pro-capitalist economy, it was an eyesore for neighbours like Tanzania, where Julius Nyerere (anti-colonial activist who later became the Prime Minister) took the socialist path. That approach seems to be working gradually in Tanzania's favour, because it seems more stable, less volatile, and is emerging as another important economic player in the region.

Suraj Yengde, author of 'Caste Matters', curates Dalitality, and has returned to Harvard University

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