

African protests met with savage repression

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Protests called in Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and Tunisia against high costs of living, corruption, authoritarianism, fraudulent elections and unemployment have been met with savage repression.

The regimes in four geopolitical and economic nodal points of the continent, with a combined population of 343 million, have launched mass arrests, teargassed protestors, arrested major opposition leaders, and killed at least two protestors.

The scale of the savage repression demonstrates that more is at stake than curbing the activities of capitalist opposition parties. The ruling elites are intent on suppressing massive opposition within the working class to deplorable living conditions across the continent, intensified by the ruling classes' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the soaring of prices due to the ongoing US-NATO war against Russia in the Ukraine.

Kenya

In Kenya, the government of President William Ruto turned his electoral “bottom-up” economic model supposedly geared towards bringing down the cost of living, eradicating hunger, creating jobs into a top-down savage police crackdown.

He outlawed the first mass protest under his rule called by billionaire opposition leader and former prime minister Raila Odinga of the Azimio la Umoja–One Kenya Coalition Party, ludicrously arguing that the demonstrations were filed too late for authorization. 5,000 heavily armed police officers and the notorious paramilitary, the General Service Unit (GSU) were deployed.

Nairobi was converted into a fortress. The city woke up to a mass police presence. Roads leading to key government buildings in the capital had been blocked and the president's official residence, State House, sealed off.

Police teargassed hundreds of protestors that had been able to bypass police cordons in Nairobi's Central Business District, from where Odinga had called for a march towards the president's residence. At least four members of parliament and dozens of protestors were arrested, including National Assembly Minority Leader Opiyo Wandayi, Senator Stewart

Madzayo and MPs Amina Mnyazi and Richard Chonga. Other lawmakers were teargassed.

“We came here peacefully but they tear gassed us,” Nairobi protestor Charles Odour told French news agency AFP. “They lie to us every day. Where is the cheap maize flour they promised? Where are the jobs for the youth they promised? All they do is hire their friends.”

Some of the fiercest clashes took place in Kibera, the largest urban slum in Africa, and one of Odinga's strongholds. Police officers in full-riot gear fired teargas and used water cannon against hundreds of protestors, as they set tyres ablaze, blocked roads and chanted “Ruto must go,” some of whom were throwing rocks. One protestor was seriously injured after being shot by police. Some reports state he has died.

The chants were reminiscent of the demands of working people and rural masses in Sri Lanka in July last year: “Gota [Prime Minister Rajapaksa] has got to go!”

When Odinga emerged in midday from a Nairobi hotel to lead the march and to hold a press conference, his motorcade was fired on with tear gas and water cannon. Azimio spokesperson Makau Mutua said Odinga's vehicle had been hit by a bullet. In a tweet, Mutua shared a photo of a shattered windscreen online.

Demonstrators were dispersed in other parts of the country, including Kisumu in western Kenya, the third-largest city and an Odinga stronghold. A third-year university student was shot dead.

Kenyans are struggling as prices for basic necessities soar and the value of the shilling has dropped sharply over the past year against the US dollar—3.5 million face starvation due to a prolonged drought in the north. Latest data from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics shows that households spent 13.3 percent more on food compared to a year earlier. Food accounts for nearly a third of the shopping basket for Kenyan families.

South Africa

In South Africa, the African National Congress government deployed 18,000 police and 3,500 soldiers to suppress a threatened “national shutdown” by the opposition Economic

Freedom Fighters (EFF) against the electricity crisis, to call for President Cyril Ramaphosa to resign and for the high level of unemployment to be addressed.

“This is an attempt to overthrow the government. This is not a shutdown, but it’s anarchy,” KwaZulu-Natal Police Commissioner, Lieutenant-General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, said on Friday.

The day before the protest, in a 12-hour period that stretched over Sunday night and Monday morning, police arrested 87 people across the country.

Protests broke out in Braamfontein on Sunday night. Police used stun grenades to disperse the demonstration. In Cape Town during early hours of Monday morning, a group of around 100 people were dispersed when police fired gas canisters.

During the day, EFF organised protests in Sandton, Cape Town, Pretoria and across provinces. Under a heavy escort and with a police helicopter overhead, 2,000 protesters marched in the capital Pretoria to Ramaphosa’s official residence, passing the seat of government, the Union Buildings. In Sandton, over 30 protesters were arrested after they tried to block clothes retailer Woolworths. Groups varying in size from dozens to hundreds gathered in other parts of the country.

EFF leader Julius Malema recognised that the turnout was less than expected, blaming ANC Transport Minister Sindisiwe Chikunga for sabotaging the party’s plans to ferry protesters by bus to Pretoria. He told protesters that over 1 million rand (55,000 dollars) had been spent to hire buses to ferry EFF supporters to Tshwane, but bus contractors had withdrawn their services at the last minute.

With an unemployment rate of 33 percent, many have lost their income. Youth (aged 15-34 years) have an unemployment rate of 45.3 percent. Adding to workers’ fury, the regulatory authorities have allowed Eskom, the state-owned electricity company that generates that 90 percent of South Africa’s power, to raise its prices by up to one third over the next two years as it faces insolvency. This comes as South Africa’s annual inflation rate is running at 6.9 percent in January, while food price inflation hit a 14-year high at 13.4 percent.

Nigeria

In Nigeria, protests are ongoing citing fraud during elections held in 28 states. Some states, like Anambra, Bayelsa, Edo, Ekiti, Imo, Kogi, Ondo, and Osun are conducting governorship elections off-cycle.

In Lafia, the Nasarawa State capital, protestors clashed with the police with one person allegedly killed while several others were injured. In Enugu State, protestors marched onto the streets of Independence Layout, Enugu, protesting the delayed

announcement of the governorship election and stormed the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

The Kano State government has imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew. State Commissioner for Information and Internal Affairs Malam Muhammad Garba, threatened people to remain indoors as police “would not spare anyone or group bent on causing trouble”.

Tunisia

In Tunis, the capital, thousands of Tunisians rallied to protest President Kaïs Saïed’s rule, nearly a year after he dissolved parliament and assumed dictatorial rule last July. Over the past months, Saïed has arrested opposition politicians, trade union members, judges, a prominent businessman and the head of an independent radio station.

In a speech Saturday to commemorate the departure of French troops and Tunisia’s 1956 independence, he threatened to expel “all who want to undermine independence”.

Over the past weeks, the regime has instigated pogrom-like attacks against Black African migrants across Tunisia which started in early February and accelerated following Saïed’s racist speech February 21. The aim is to divert attention from the devastating effects of rising inflation and food shortages on living standards. In February, inflation reached 10.4 percent, up from 8.3 percent in 2022. Youth unemployment stands at 40 percent.

Saïed had said that “hordes of irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa” had come to Tunisia, “with all the violence, crime, and unacceptable practices that entails”. This was part of a criminal plan designed to “change the demographic make-up” and turn Tunisia into “just another African country that doesn’t belong to the Arab and Islamic nations anymore”.



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