

Kenya's President Ruto unleashes mass violence against austerity protestors

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Kenya's President William Ruto has drowned mass protests against International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures and high living costs in blood.

From Wednesday to Friday last week, successive protests called by the Azimio La Umoja (One Kenya Party), the main opposition party led by billionaire Raila Odinga, were attacked by police with live ammunition and teargas across Nairobi and other major cities, including port-city Mombasa and opposition stronghold Kisumu. At least six demonstrators were killed last week, hundreds left injured and over 300 arrested around the country.

Earlier in the month, police killed as many as 23 people during the crackdown on protests, and injured hundreds of others, including 53 children who required hospital treatment after tear gas was thrown inside their classroom by police.

Protests are now regularly outlawed, with police setting up blockades to stop marching demonstrators and refusing to provide details of the rising numbers of dead, injured and arrested.

According to the Independent Medico Legal Unit (IMLU), across twelve protests called by Azimio they have monitored since the beginning of the year, there were 68 injuries and 37 deaths due to the use of live bullets and suffocation caused by teargas. Amnesty International has documented at least 30 deaths by police action.

IMLU has warned about rising cases of "non-uniformed officers" using "vehicles with either distorted or no number plates" to "bundle protesters into car trunks and speed off to unknown locations."

The state has also escalated repression against the opposition. Last week, Babu Owino, an opposition MP, was arrested for "conducting subversive activities". The house of the son of former President Uhuru Kenyatta, associated with Odinga, was raided in a search for weapons. Azimio spokesman Kalonzo Musyoka is reportedly under house arrest as he held closed-door meetings with a group of imperialist diplomats from the European Union and the United States.

The two parties that make up Kenya's "official" left have also been savagely targeted. A member of the Maoist Communist Party of Kenya (CPK), Harris Ochieng, was shot dead earlier this month and 37 of its members were detained for

two nights. Members of the Kenyan Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), a section of the International Socialist League (ISL), were also arrested in protests.

The mass violence is reminiscent of the rule of pro-Western dictator Daniel Arap Moi between 1978 and 2002, when thousands of students, workers, peasants and left-wing opponents of the regime were tortured, killed and imprisoned.

Ruto's brutality is a signal to international finance capital that he will not back down from the IMF-austerity package he imposed last month.

His Finance Bill is opposed by 90 percent of Kenyans according to surveys. It includes raising the gross sales tax from one to three percent, doubling the rate of Value Added Tax on petroleum products from 8 percent to 16 percent, tripling taxes on sales to 3 percent for small businesses, and raising income tax for high-earning employees from 30 percent to a maximum of 35 percent. It includes a 1.5 percent housing levy on employees' pay supposed to fund housing construction for the less well-off.

These measures are being imposed on workers already suffering under the collapse of the Kenya Shilling, job losses and precariousness, and soaring inflation provoked by speculation in commodities by hedge funds, the profit gouging of major global corporations and NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine.

A third of Kenyans already suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition. Prices of key food products have risen over the past year, with staples maize, grain and flour increasing by up to 30 percent, rice and potatoes by nearly 20 percent and sugar by 60 percent.

In a cynical statement, the US, UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia and others, including their stooge Ukraine, posted a joint statement by ambassadors declaring themselves "saddened by the loss of life and concerned by high levels of violence, including the use of live rounds and the destruction of property, during the recent demonstrations."

It added, "We recognize the daily hardship faced by many Kenyans and urge all parties to table their concerns through a meaningful dialogue and resolve their differences peacefully to build the nation together, ensuring no further loss of life."

If the imperialist powers are crying crocodile tears over the violence in the streets of Kenya's major cities, it is only because they are concerned that the ruling class is losing control. These same countries are waging a de facto war against Russia in Ukraine that has intensified the soaring of costs of living across the world, particularly on the African continent. With its systematic military encirclement of Russia, NATO deliberately provoked the reactionary intervention of the Putin regime. Since then, it has continued to fuel the conflict, sending billions of dollars in weaponry to the Ukrainian army.

Over the past months, Germany, Japan and Washington, which seems to be sending a high-ranking representative of the Biden administration every month, concerned for its military bases in Kenya, have flocked to Nairobi to back Ruto in search of African energy and raw materials, lucrative sales markets and cheap labour. All of them are aggressively pursuing the goal of increasing their political, economic, and military influence on the resource-rich continent.

Azimio's aim in calling protests is to contain and control rising opposition. Odinga has been calling them under mounting pressure from below and then scrambling to call them off in backdoor negotiations with Ruto and the imperialist powers. There is now a sense that he is losing his grip, with former Police Spokesperson Charles Owino stating, "If you are calling citizens to go out and demonstrate, you must be able to control them. If Raila [Odinga] cannot control his support base, the country [will] break into anarchy and violence".

Odinga, with an estimated net worth of \$3.3 billion, has refused to present any concrete demands besides starting to collect signatures on the streets to express opposition to the Finance Bill and making vague calls for Ruto to reintroduce food and fuel subsidies. He has ludicrously asked Kenyans to walk to work to "deny Ruto the fuel tax."

He knows that more serious measures would impinge on the wealthy layers he represents and anger his imperialist backers, including the IMF, which he refuses to even mention in his speeches. Odinga is part of the 0.1 percent of the Kenyan population (8,300 people) which according to Oxfam own more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent (more than 48 million people). Not surprisingly, 28 MPs of his party openly supported the Finance Bill.

The allies of Kenyan workers are not Raila, Kenya's Supreme Court which has temporarily paralysed the Finance Bill, or the imperialist governments. A new socialist leadership must be built.

Parties like the CPK and the Revolutionary Socialist League are not socialist, but parties of the middle class that oppose socialist revolution. The CPK, whose leaders deserted the party and backed Ruto last year, are, like Odinga, making empty appeals to Ruto. Their main statement on the Finance Bill argues that he "must listen to the voices of the people and amend the Finance Bill 2023 accordingly. Failure to do so will only deepen the poverty and inequality that already exists in

our society."

The RSL, which supports the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, under the banner of a fight against "Russian imperialism" in defense of "democracy", attacked the bill from a nationalist perspective. The Bill, they stated, is "counterproductive as far as national development is concerned," promoting illusions in the Kenyan capitalist state.

In 1963, the emerging comprador bourgeoisie in the country worked with British imperialism to create a new capitalist state on the borders drawn by the imperialist powers at the end of the 19th century. First Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta promised "a country where every citizen may develop his talents to the full, restricted only by the larger aim we have of building a fair society. There will be no privileges for any minority. Equally, we shall see that no member of any group undergoes discrimination or oppression at the hands of the majority."

Sixty years later, the broad masses see this as a fraud. An entire generation born 20 years after the end of Moi's rule knows no life other than the gangster capitalist politics of all Moi's hirelings—Mwai Kibaki, Uhuru Kenyatta, Odinga and Ruto.

The failure of Kenya's independence, like that of other former colonial countries, demonstrates that the creation of nominally independent bourgeois states cannot fulfill the most basic democratic and social needs and aspirations of the working class and rural poor. The Kenyan working class, students and youth must now orient towards the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to lead the fight for socialism in Kenya and throughout the African continent as an essential component of the world socialist revolution.



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