

Spreading protests demand Kenyan president “Ruto must go!”

Kipchumba Ochieng
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Yesterday, Kenya’s anti-austerity protesters staged the #OccupyEverywhere shutdown of Nairobi and other major cities.

In Nairobi, where schools and most of the central business district remained closed, thousands of youth engaged in running battles with police while chanting “Ruto must go.” Early in the morning, protesters placed coffins along Moi Avenue to hold a vigil for those killed in last week’s protests.

Capital FM crew witnessed several demonstrators and bystanders being abducted by undercover police officers, who bundled them into unmarked cars.

The main highway between Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya’s main port city, remained closed throughout the day. In Mombasa, thousands of protesters marched in the morning. The protest was disrupted by knife-wielding gangs infiltrating the crowd, attacking and robbing people in front of the police. According to *The Standard*, “three groups of knife-wielding gangs were ferried by a well-known woman political activist in Kisauni.” These gangs roamed freely, attacking people and businesses.

There is a widespread belief that Ruto and his allies are mobilizing goons.

In Kisumu, the largest city in Western Kenya, thousands of protesters marched to Kisumu State Lodge, the president’s official residence in the region. Outside the major cities, hundreds marched in Nakuru, Nyerti, Homa Bay, Kisii, Kajiado, Migori, Mlolongo and Rongo, cutting across tribal lines. In the southwestern town of Migori, protesters barricaded the Migori-Rongo highway and lit bonfires. In Nakuru police officers lobbed teargas.

One person was shot dead in Rongo and nine were admitted to hospital with gunshot wounds. One person died in Emali, Makueni County after slipping from a moving truck.

The protests were a determined rejection of Ruto’s “dialogue” initiative last Wednesday, repeated on Sunday in an interview at State House with questions from the country’s three main television stations, *KTN News*, *NTV*, and *Citizen*. The initiative involves the formation of a 100-member National Multi-Sectoral Forum to discuss unemployment, debt, and corruption. This was exposed as a cover for state repression and austerity the following day, when police gunned down three

protesters in Rongai, including a child, and the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) were deployed on the streets.

Ruto’s Sunday interview ignited mass anger. Showing indifference to the mass killings over the previous week, he expressed more concern for the loss and damage of private property than for human life: “I have no blood on my hands. According to the record I have from security agencies, nineteen people are dead. Very unfortunate. As a democracy, that should not be part of our conversation. 2.4 billion worth of property has been destroyed. The office of the Chief of Justice has been burned, City Hall has been burned, and parliament has been burned. This is the situation.”

According to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), at least 39 people have been killed, and another 361 injured in clashes with the police. KNCHR said this was not a final count.

Ruto defended the police and blamed the violence on “criminals”. He ludicrously argued that protesters were stealing weapons from the police and shooting at other protesters: “I have told you one situation where somebody accosted the police, took over their firearm, and started to shoot at people.”

He refused to acknowledge abductions, saying, “If there is any arrests by the police, that doesn’t amount to an abduction.” KNCHR has counted 32 cases of enforced or involuntary disappearances and 627 instances of arrests of protesters. Opposition party Azimio la Umoja claims over 40 abductions.

The protests, unlike those controlled by opposition parties over the past decades, are being coordinated primarily through social media by activists, tapping into broad anger against soaring prices, mass youth unemployment and corruption. Kenya’s economic turmoil is the sharp expression of a global economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the intensifying US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the imperialist backing of Israel’s genocidal war against the Palestinians.

The Ruto government is responding with a three-pronged strategy. First, Ruto withdrew the Finance Bill 2023, initially aimed at raising \$2.7 billion through regressive tax hikes, to buy time. He plans to make equivalent austerity cuts, affecting education, healthcare, social welfare, housing, infrastructure, and county funding.

Ruto has utilised the East African Community (EAC)—an economic integration organisation composed of eight East African countries—to implement tax increases behind the backs of the population. New EAC-approved import duties yesterday will raise the price of crude oil, refined oils, baby diapers and mobile phones and will result in higher prices on many essential items.

Ruto and the Kenyan capitalist class intends to put the full burden of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated austerity on the backs of workers and rural toilers.

Second, Ruto is attempting to channel political discontent back within the political establishment relying on the opposition coalition Azimio la Umoja and the trade union bureaucracy.

Yesterday, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) —the leading party in Azimio la Umoja—signalled its readiness to work with Ruto to impose austerity. After denouncing Ruto for police killings and abductions, calling on him to expedite investigations, ODM Secretary General Edwin Sifuna said, “The ODM party will support credible austerity measures in the executive and parliament. These two institutions have been expressly indicted by the people as citadels of largesse and wastage.” ODM would support, Sifuna said, “measures to lessen the taxpayers burden.”

ODM said nothing about opposing the IMF, or demanding the withdrawal of the KDF from the streets. By focusing on the lavish expenses of the political class, ODM hopes to divert attention from the real austerity being demanded.

The Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU) Secretary General Francis Atwoli yesterday proposed to initiate dialogue from Kenya’s 47 county parliaments, rather than from the national government “so that this country remains peaceful”. Atwoli refused to oppose the IMF, or the military deployment.

Third, Ruto is continuing with the use of mass police state repression, including gunning down protesters, mass arrests, and abductions. The KDF remains deployed across Kenya, the first time the military has been deployed against unarmed protesters.

The repression has received the full backing of the United States and European Union. The deployment took place soon after a call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and days after the European Union announced it was providing €20million (\$21.4 million) in military supplies and other support to the KDF. The major imperialist powers see Kenya as a dress rehearsal for their own repression of social and anti-war struggles.

The scale of protests were smaller than last week, reflecting a growing sense among youth involved that their protest is at an impasse, with nothing being advanced other than demands for Ruto to resign, appeals to revoke and substitute MPs, and to continue protests.

Ruto is only the ugly face of a corrupt and reactionary system that is organised to secure the wealth and interests of the

capitalist class and perpetuate the exploitation and impoverishment of the workers and rural toilers.

Workers must turn to their class brothers internationally, where there is also overwhelming popular hostility to the IMF, the imperialist powers and the banks and corporations across Africa.

Calls for similar protests are already spreading. In neighbouring Uganda, youth are organising a protest for July 23 on social media platforms under the hashtags #March2Parliament, #StopCorruption, and #FreeAllPoliticalPrisonersInUganda. The Western-backed dictator, Yoweri Museveni, took the unusual step of declining to sign the 2024-25 budget, directing parliament to reassess 'irrational' spending. Last week, Museveni held an impromptu meeting with the newly appointed Inspector General of Police, Abbas Byakagaba, at State House Entebbe.

In Malawi, one of the poorest countries on earth, “Malawi shutdown demonstrations” against the high cost of living and currency devaluation have been called for July 10 in major cities of Lilongwe, Blantyre and others.

In all these struggles, the basic questions of programme and political perspective have to be addressed. What is posed above all is the necessity for the independent social and political mobilization of the urban working class and the salaried rural workers, together with them small-holder farmers and petty traders. Every factory, plantation, workplace and neighbourhood must become a centre of resistance to the policies of the IMF and its stooges in the ruling class and its political representatives.

This demands the building of a new political party and a new leadership that will fight for the social interests of working class and a young generation that has no future under the existing set-up. The International Committee of the Fourth International, its sections across the world and the *World Socialist Web Site* are dedicated to the establishment of such parties in Kenya and across Africa.



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