

Kenyan Chief of Defence Forces threatens youth anti-austerity opposition

Kipchumba Ochieng
1 April 2025

Kenya's recently appointed Chief of Defence Forces, General Charles Muriu Kahariri, has publicly threatened youth who have voiced opposition to the government of William Ruto.

Speaking at the National Intelligence and Research University in Nairobi during a public lecture delivered by National Intelligence Service (NIS) Director-General Noordin Haji—widely suspected of orchestrating police abductions of anti-Ruto protesters, many of whom have later been found dead—General Kahariri issued a denunciation of young Kenyans who have taken up the chant “Ruto must go” during demonstrations and across social media platforms.

Before a gathered crowd of senior officers, Kahariri said:

We cannot have anarchy as a country. Even as people exercise their freedom, they must do so within certain limits. We, the military, are apolitical; we don't support any side. We defend the Constitution and the government of the day, duly elected by the people. So when people decide that they are tired of the current government, which they themselves elected, and start saying “must go, must go,” that must be done according to the Constitution.

In recent months, the chant of “Ruto must go” has echoed persistently across Kenyan public life, expressing the mounting anger of workers and youth. This defiant slogan has endured despite the formation of a broad-based alliance between President William Ruto and opposition-leader-turned-ally, billionaire Raila Odinga. Their coalition, an attempt to stabilise the capitalist order in the wake of last year's mass Gen-Z protests, rests above all on IMF-imposed austerity and police-state repression. Rather than pacify public dissent, the regime now faces intensifying outrage over brutal spending cuts, skyrocketing living costs, and the violent suppression of anti-austerity protests.

In Kisumu, once a bastion of support for Raila Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement, protesters took to the streets with the slogan following widespread disillusionment over Odinga's joining Ruto. During a March concert by Nigerian singer Burna Boy, thousands erupted into the chant. Weeks later, at Nairobi's Nyayo National Stadium—Kenya's second-largest—spectators took up the cry moments before a World Cup qualifying match, as both Ruto and Odinga looked on. In London, fans attending a concert by Kenyan artist Bien chanted, “Ruto must go”.

General Kahariri's insistence that young people “seek proper channels” to voice their grievances is cynical. Peaceful protests have

been violently dispersed by police and regime-hired goons; enforced disappearances continue, with families still searching desperately for their missing loved ones; prominent Gen-Z protest leaders, such as musician-turned-activist Kasmuel McOure, have been co-opted by the political establishment, joining ODM to make a political career out of the misery of Kenyans. With Odinga fully integrated into government, even the pretence of a parliamentary opposition has vanished.

Kahariri then defended the deployment of the military during the Gen-Z-led protests, declaring, “When people question why the military was deployed... we have a responsibility. We took an oath to defend the Constitution and the Republic.”

The heavily armed Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) soldiers were deployed across Kenya in armoured personnel carriers, Humvees, and military Land Cruisers to intimidate and crush the protests in order to impose IMF austerity. It marked the first time in Kenya's post-independence history that the army was deployed against unarmed civilians engaging in peaceful protest. Ruto authorised the deployment shortly after backroom discussions with the US and the European Union.

Kahariri's threat is made amid a global resurgence of authoritarianism, driven by the deepening crisis of world capitalism. In the United States, Donald Trump is proceeding with his plans to impose a presidential dictatorship, with the complicity of the Democratic Party, which refuses to mobilise any opposition. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has thrown the main opposition leader behind bars as part of his efforts to crush dissent and consolidate one-man rule. Across Europe, the ruling classes are rearming at a pace not seen since the 1930s, paid for by slashing pensions, wages, and social services.

The same capitalist contradictions driving war and dictatorship in the imperialist centres are playing out in Kenya. Ruto's use of the military against peaceful protesters, with the backing of Washington and Brussels, signaled the readiness of the Kenyan bourgeoisie to rely on brute force to enforce the demands of international finance capital.

In a revealing interview with the *Sunday Nation* last month, Odinga claimed that his decision to join the Ruto government was motivated by fear of an impending military coup. According to Odinga, an unnamed friend warned him of a possible handover of power to the military after Ruto called in the armed forces during the June 25, 2024 protests. The friend urged Odinga to intervene to avoid a takeover. “Ruto can be removed through the ballot,” Odinga said, “but once soldiers get out of the barracks, they never go back.” Odinga, who made no warning to the masses, then presented his pact with Ruto as a move to safeguard democracy and civilian rule.

Odinga has repeatedly invoked national stability and “democratic

responsibility” to justify his support for an unpopular capitalist government—from his rapprochement with Western-backed dictator Daniel arap Moi in 2001, to the power-sharing deal with Mwai Kibaki after the 2007–08 post-election violence, and the infamous “handshake” with Uhuru Kenyatta in 2018. Each alliance has served to defuse mass anger and preserve the capitalist status quo and maintain the imperialist stranglehold over the Horn of Africa.

Most revealing in Odinga’s interview was his reflection on the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The *Sunday Nation* paraphrased him as drawing “parallels between the Gen Z revolt and the situation in Egypt and other countries in North Africa, where popular uprisings 15 years ago toppled presidents, with no recognisable leaders left, yawning the chasms where either Islamic militants or military regimes moved in.”

Odinga recalled, “I was the last international leader to be hosted by Mubarak,” referring to his 2011 visit to Egypt as prime minister to discuss the Nile Waters Treaty. “Protests were already happening,” he said, “but he assured me that he had things under control. Two weeks later, he had been deposed.”

Odinga invokes the Egyptian revolution as a warning to the ruling class: even regimes that appear entrenched and stable, like Mubarak’s three-decade US-backed military dictatorship in 2010, can be swept away by mass uprisings. The real lesson of Egypt—and of Kenya today—is that it is precisely these bourgeois “opposition” figures like Odinga, posing as safeguards of democracy, who strangle revolutionary movements and pave the way for repression and the continuation of capitalist austerity by the return of military rule like under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

The Egyptian experience demonstrated the historic necessity of the building of a revolutionary Marxist leadership in the working class, as a prerequisite for socialist revolution.

With Odinga fully integrated into the state apparatus, a new layer of political figures is stepping forward to inherit his role as the “democratic” face of opposition. These efforts are being led by Martha Karua, leader of the People’s Liberation Party and Odinga’s running mate in the 2022 elections.

Karua denounced General Kahariri’s statements as an “assault on constitutionalism... It is disturbing that the head of an institution as disciplined as the armed forces should descend into the arena of partisan politics, and purport to direct Kenyans on how far they should exercise their hard-won liberties and rights.”

Her invocation of democratic rights is hollow. She is seeking to reassemble an opposition bloc with Rigathi Gachagua—a corrupt businessman who served as Ruto’s deputy president while the regime gunned down and abducted protesters—and Kalonzo Musyoka, a loyal servant of the police-state apparatus under former dictator Daniel arap Moi. Their opposition is not to dictatorship or capitalism, but to being excluded from its spoils.

Even more politically bankrupt was the public statement issued by the Stalinist Communist Party Marxist–Kenya (CPM-K) through its youth wing the Revolutionary Youth League on X.

In a public statement condemning Kahariri’s remarks, CPM-K said, “The role of the Kenya Defence Forces is not to protect a failing comprador regime but to safeguard the sovereignty of the people from external threats. When the military is weaponized against its own citizens, it ceases to be a national force—it becomes a tool of class domination.”

It added, “Kenya Defence Forces are proving themselves politically bankrupt and are threatening to defend personal interests over the

political life of the masses. This is the danger we now confront.”

Their lament over the military being “misused” implies that under different conditions the same repressive apparatus could serve “the people”—a deadly illusion. The KDF, like all capitalist militaries, exists to defend capitalist property and profits, from both internal and external threats. Its deployment against Gen-Z protesters was a naked expression of its essential class function.

The role of the CPM-K today mirrors that of the pseudo-left in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, particularly the Revolutionary Socialists (RS). At the very moment the Egyptian working class had entered into open revolt against the military apparatus that upheld Mubarak’s dictatorship in 2011, the RS glorified the army as a “people’s army,” insisting that “the interests of the soldiers and junior officers are the same as the interests of the masses.”

As the WSWs explained in its 2011 statement, “The counterrevolutionary role of the Egyptian pseudo-left”, “While it is true that soldiers and junior officers are often recruited from the working class and rural poor—layers to whom revolutionaries can appeal—the RS ignored the central reality: these soldiers remain under the command and discipline of the general staff, the very linchpin of the Egyptian capitalist state and its partnership with U.S. imperialism.”

“The basic task facing the revolutionary proletariat,” the WSWs explained, “is to shatter the discipline of the army and thus the hold of the generals over the soldiers.” The RS took the opposite position, sowing illusions that the army could play a progressive role, thus there could be no talk of breaking its discipline or winning soldiers to a socialist revolution. This served to disarm the working class and prevent it from breaking the army along class lines. It provided left cover for the transition from Mubarak to a new military regime, and ultimately paved the way for the counterrevolution led by el-Sisi who continues to rule after 12 years.

The task facing workers and youth in Kenya is not to “reclaim” the military, parliament, or presidency from alleged bad actors, but to abolish the dictatorship of capital these institutions serve. This requires a complete political break from all factions of the ruling class, including the Stalinist CPM-K. The fight for genuine democracy and social equality means building a new revolutionary leadership based on the principles of Trotskyism and international socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact