

# Kenyan trade union leader demands social media censorship ahead of Gen Z protest anniversary

**Kipchumba Ochieng**  
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Prior to the one-year anniversary of the mass protests led by Kenya's youth, widely known as the Gen Z uprising, Francis Atwoli, Secretary General of the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU), has called on the government to impose sweeping censorship over social media and emerging Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms, warning that unchecked misuse could destabilise the ruling class.

Speaking at a COTU shop stewards meeting in Nairobi on Saturday, Atwoli, in his typically incoherent blusters, urged the "broad-based" government of President William Ruto—now in alliance with the former opposition Orange Democratic Movement led by billionaire Raila Odinga—to crack down on online opposition. He launched a tirade against "social media" users, meaning youth opposing government austerity, corruption, and police abductions, stating: "Social media [users], it is time you stopped propaganda. You must love your country. If you are not patriotic, even investors will exit. Otherwise, we will plunge into chaos."

"If you leave this country, where else will you go? We plead with our social media users, refrain from propaganda. You must love this country or else, employers will exit." He added, "Now, we will be forced to ask the government to regulate social media. Things that happen on TikTok are shocking. Social media must be regulated."

He seized on the excuse of pornography: "These children are watching immoral content online. TikTok and similar platforms must be monitored. We must act now," he insisted.

This is in line with the pretexts for censorship manufactured by the Ruto government. Last January, ICT Cabinet Secretary William Kabogo, confirmed the government was actively exploring ways to censor social media. Justifying the move under the pretext of protecting children, Kabogo declared, "On the issue of hate speech and harmful content, this is a matter of every country having its

own regulations. It is true that when you look at TikTok, Facebook, and X, you will find all sorts of pornography available to children."

Such claims are a smokescreen for a broader assault on democratic rights.

Atwoli urged youth to stop criticising the Kenyan political establishment: "Engage leaders on issues, not on hate. Talk about shortages, things that I cannot be able to deliver; inequities and capacity. Do I have integrity? Don't hate me as a person. Don't wish others bad. Pray for others. Celebrate others who have done well," he said.

His call to silence opposition is part of a global turn toward authoritarianism by capitalist regimes facing mounting unrest, imperialist war, and deepening economic crisis. It demonstrates the key role played by the trade union bureaucracy in facilitating this assault.

From North America to Europe, governments are accelerating repressive measures: Trump's administration has escalated economic warfare and state repression while deporting migrants and targeting students who oppose Israel's genocide in Gaza. In Germany and France, protests against the Gaza onslaught have been banned, as Europe is rearming at breakneck speed and reviving conscription, preparing for direct imperialist conflict.

Atwoli's call comes amid a surge of anti-Ruto sentiment. The slogan "Ruto Must Go" echoes across rallies, music festivals, and social media, even as the state intensifies abductions and extrajudicial killings. Just days ago, the Stalinist Communist Party of Kenya–Marxist (CPM-K) reported that their vehicle, typically used by party leader Booker Omole, was riddled with bullets—months after Omole narrowly survived an assassination attempt. Kenyan Defence Forces commander Charles Muriu Kahariri recently issued public threats against youth using the "Ruto Must Go" slogan.

Ruto's unpopularity has reached such extreme levels that his government must pay hundreds of people to attend his

rallies, spending tens of thousands of dollars to fill roads and markets with staged crowds.

Even these desperate attempts at political theatre backfire. According to *The Sunday Standard*, many of the hired attendees are never fully paid, fuelling greater resentment. In one instance, a group of women were recruited to perform traditional Kikuyu songs in cultural attire to welcome the president. They were promised 1,000 Kenyan shillings (about \$7) each, only to receive just 700 shillings (\$4), a symbol of the contempt with which the Kenyan bourgeoisie treats those it exploits.

The censorship now openly discussed in Kenya was made explicit in Atwoli's endorsement of China's model. Beijing's regime mandates real-name registration for Internet users, compels companies to remove "illegal" content, and blocks global platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It tightly monitors online discourse and suppresses searches on banned topics, including officials' names.

COTU's role as a bulwark of the Kenyan capitalist state is nothing new. Despite its claim to stand for 36 trade unions, representing more than 1.5 million workers both in the public and private sectors of the economy, COTU is not a workers' organisation but a corporatist institution that acts as an appendage of the Kenyan state and big business.

During the Gen-Z protests, Atwoli openly backed Ruto as he gunned down dozens of protesters and left hundreds of injured, concerned above all that the demonstrations were damaging Kenyan profits. "Kenya is a hub of economic activities in this region, and we must protect it at all costs. We must support the President and the government to ensure that this country remains peaceful," he said.

When hundreds of thousands of teachers, health care workers, airport staff, county civil servants and lecturers took part in strike action to oppose budget cuts, privatisation schemes and broken promises over wages and staffing, trade union leaders deployed by Atwoli worked to scale down strikes and sow illusions that the Ruto government could be pressured to change course.

At the end of last year, Atwoli declared that Ruto would be re-elected as president again in 2027 and called for the extension of presidential term limits from five years to seven, citing autocratic president Yoweri Museveni in Uganda as an example. Museveni has ruled for 40 years as the head of a police-state dictatorship.

Atwoli is a trade union bureaucrat embedded in the capitalist order. He is a millionaire whose fortunes are secured by his loyalty to the Kenyan elite and their Western backers. In power for over two decades, he sits on numerous government and international boards. He flaunts his wealth—gold jewelry, Franck Muller watches worth over

\$2,000, a Mercedes Maybach 6 Cabriolet valued at nearly half a million dollars—and owns a lavish estate in Ildamat, Kajiado County, reportedly with a helipad. He holds homes in Nairobi, Nakuru, Kilifi, and his rural base in Khwisero.

Atwoli, speaking for the entire Kenyan ruling class, knows well the power of social media, having seen its role in the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and the global protests against Israel's genocide and Western complicity. His remarks come ahead of commemorations of the 2024 Gen Z protests, which mobilised millions of youth and workers through platforms like X, TikTok, and WhatsApp to oppose Ruto's IMF-driven Finance Bill, widespread corruption, and unbearable economic conditions.

AI was used to create educational and media content, while platforms spread information in local languages. Viral hashtags, crowdfunding, website hacks, and the release of officials' contacts all helped mobilise protestors. A "wall of shame" named pro-Bill MPs. In response, the government began slowing down Internet access and discussing how to impose sweeping digital censorship.

The youth who led these protests represent a new generation of workers, students, and unemployed no longer willing to accept the status quo. Their use of social media reflects the understanding that no change will come from the capitalist parties, institutions, or "dialogues."

The platforms developed over the last two decades have become essential tools of resistance, allowing workers and youth to expose repression, share oppositional content, and organise across tribal and national lines. This is what terrifies the ruling elite.

The fight against censorship must be waged alongside the fight against capitalist exploitation and imperialist war. What is urgently needed is a new revolutionary leadership, rooted in the working class, armed with a socialist programme, and committed to internationalism, that can transform the spontaneous anger of the Gen Z uprising into an organised struggle to overthrow capitalism and liberate humanity.



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