

Kenyan government violently suppresses student play critical of state violence and corruption

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The violent suppression of *Echoes of War*, a political play by Kenyan students from Butere Girls High School, has laid bare the ruthless authoritarianism of President William Ruto's regime, and the growing discontent among youth. What began as a national arts festival has devolved into a chilling display of censorship, police brutality, and the criminalisation of opposition.

Set in the fictional Royal Velvet Emirates, *Echoes of War* portrays a kingdom on the brink, torn between a tyrannical ruler and a defiant new generation. The protagonist, Anifa, symbolically "pregnant" with change, becomes the face of youth resistance. Her confidante, Mustafa, is abducted for mobilising dissent on social media. The play features scenes of unrest, resistance, and the collapse of a regime that refuses to listen to the youth until it is too late.

The parallels with Kenya's recent history are unmistakable. Last year, mass protests erupted as youth and workers rose up against the brutal tax hikes imposed by Ruto at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, in the midst of soaring living costs. The state responded with unrestrained violence. Over 60 were killed, hundreds arrested, many abducted. Some remain missing, while others were later found dead. On the eve of the one-year anniversary, the memory of these protests remains alive.

Echoes of War was to play in the Kenya Schools and Colleges National Drama and Film Festival in Nakuru, a widely popular annual competition regarded as a platform for students' artistic expression and social critique. But this year's festival was overshadowed by the Ruto government's interference to stop the play's performance.

The play from Butere Girls, the alma mater of First Lady Rachel Ruto, had become a political liability. Had *Echoes of War* won, it would have been performed at State House before the president himself. The realisation of this looming public humiliation triggered the regime to intervene in its usual thuggish manner.

In early April, the school's principal, following orders from the government, sent the student-performers home, denying them their right to perform. But on April 3, the High Court

ruled against the ban, which affirmed the students' constitutional rights of freedom of expression and right to education and participation in cultural life and ordered the students reinstated.

The Ruto regime then proceeded to undermine the court's directive.

Days later, police arrested the play's scriptwriter, Cleophas Malala, after he attempted to enter Kirobon Girls High School where the students were rehearsing. Police then fired tear gas to disperse journalists who had gathered to cover the unfolding standoff. Journalists were blocked, assaulted, and chased away. At least six were injured. Some were even forced to dive into drainage ditches to escape the gas.

The crackdown continued the next morning. Riot police sealed off the venue. Journalists were denied entry, and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, which had been live-streaming performances on Edu TV, was ordered to cease all filming. "No audience, no video, no photography and no shooting at all," reported a media crew. "Even local productions for partners have been barred from shooting."

Denied a sound system, a proper audience, or the presence of their scriptwriter, the Butere students boycotted the event. Escorted out of the hall by police, they stood in defiance and sang the national anthem through tears.

Supportive students and residents who attempted to protest were met with more tear gas. Police dispersed everyone, journalists, students, and bystanders alike.

In the following days, the Ruto government made clear it would escalate state censorship. "Matters of education should not be dragged into politics," Interior Cabinet Secretary Kipchumba Murkomen said, "Our parents and the government have a duty to teach our children properly and to separate politics from education". Art and education, in the eyes of the Ruto government, are acceptable only so long as they serve as instruments of indoctrination and obedience.

Ruto's crackdown on *Echoes of War* is a stark warning to artists, youth and workers across Kenya and internationally: any expression of opposition, no matter how symbolic or restrained, will be met with brute force. It follows a long line of

state attacks on politically charged art, literature, theatre, and music across the world, because ruling elites understand that art can articulate, concentrate and ignite the sentiments of the masses. What terrifies the Ruto government is not just a school play, but the social reality it reflects: the simmering anger of millions of young people who are fed up with capitalism and its ills such as war, inequality, corruption, environmental degradation and exploitation.

Comparisons have been drawn with *I Will Marry When I Want*, the 1977 play by renowned Kenyan author Ng'g' wa Thiong'o. Banned by the Jomo Kenyatta regime after just six weeks, the play exposed the betrayal of the anti-colonial struggle by the post-independence Kenyan bourgeoisie. It follows a poor farmer whose life is upended when a wealthy Christian couple, under the guise of organising a church wedding, attempt to force him to sell his land.

But a more apt comparison may be Ng'g's later fictional novel, *Matigari*. Written in exile and immediately banned upon publication in Kenya in 1987, *Matigari* tells the story of a man returning from liberation struggle only to find the same injustices persisting under new rulers.

So powerful was its message that President Daniel arap Moi—the brutal, Western-backed dictator who ruled Kenya from 1978 to 2002 and served as Ruto's political mentor in the 1990s—believed *Matigari* to be a real underground revolutionary. Convinced that the character of the novel was leading a subversive movement, Moi dispatched state security agents to track him down. When they failed to locate the fictional figure, Moi ordered the next best thing: a nationwide seizure of all copies of the book.

The absurdity of Moi's reaction, mobilising police to hunt a fictional character, spoke volumes about the regime's fear of the masses. In the same vein, the Ruto government's violent suppression of a school play has only further exposed its fear and fragility.

Malala, however, is no dissident playwright in the tradition of Ng'g' wa Thiong'o. In the 1970s, Ng'g' was stripped of his academic posts at the University of Nairobi for his leftist views and was detained without trial for nearly a year in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison following the staging of *I Will Marry When I Want*. Ng'g' then paid a heavy personal price for giving voice to the oppressed and spent much of his life in exile, targeted by successive regimes for his leftist opposition to the Kenyan bourgeoisie.

Malala, on the contrary, was until recently a propagandist for Ruto's state repression. In the midst of last year's Gen Z-led protests, which saw over 60 youth murdered in cold blood, Malala was serving as general secretary of Ruto's UDA party. He personally smeared the demonstrations as hijacked by NGOs and "rejected political figures," urging peace even as the regime unleashed terror. Subsequently, Malala fell out with Ruto and was expelled from UDA following internal disputes and allegations of misconduct.

Kenya's so-called opposition is utterly incapable of mounting any serious challenge to state censorship. Kalonzo Musyoka, now the most outspoken opposition figure, has denounced Ruto's repression of the Butere students, yet his own record betrays deep complicity in similar attacks on democratic rights.

As Minister of Information and Broadcasting under the Moi dictatorship, and later as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Education, Kalonzo oversaw and defended repressive laws such as the Books and Newspapers Act and the Broadcasting Act, used to intimidate journalists and suppress dissent. His ministry routinely justified media crackdowns under the guise of "national security" or the defence of so-called "African values."

Edward Sifuna, Secretary General of the former opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), stated, "Of all the evidence we have of this regime's lack of focus, none is more damning than its attempt to silence young girls in school uniform." But ODM is now part of the government and fully complicit in its crimes, despite periodic attempts to feign opposition.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Kenya (CPM-K), for its part, offered nothing but sectarianism and confusion. Its general secretary Booker Omole dismissed the play as reformist and refused to come out in its defence.

Omole stated on X: "Butere Girls' play *Echoes of War* is far from radical or revolutionary. Its author @Cleophasmalala is a typical corrupt bourgeois liberal politician, and the play merely advances reformist ideas. So why would @WilliamsRuto attack children over it?". To his own question he replied, "Ruto is just rogue! If we don't stop him, he will not stop! All our dead are still not accounted for, we need a much more radical solution."

Their call for a "more radical solution" rings hollow, given the party's track record of loyalty to the Kenyan bourgeoisie, its open support for the Chinese capitalist police-state regime, and its key role in demobilising opposition during the Gen-Z protests.

Echoes of War must be understood not as an isolated artistic expression but as the cultural reflection of a broader social upheaval in the making. The real lesson of this episode is that the ruling class is afraid and it has every reason to be.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) insists that the struggle against dictatorship, censorship, inequality, and repression cannot be waged through appeals to the ruling elite or its opposition. It requires the political mobilisation of workers and youth on the basis of socialist internationalism.



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