

Kenya's Ruto regime suppresses anti-fuel hike protests

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22 April 2026

The suppression of anti-fuel hike protests by the “broad-based unity” government of President William Ruto in Nairobi this week is one of the first results in Africa of the deepening global social crisis triggered by the US-Israeli led war against Iran.

On Tuesday, the Ruto regime, uniting the United Democratic Alliance (UDA) and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) founded by the late political fixer Raila Oding, moved to crush planned anti-fuel price protests organised by youth under the hashtag #RejectFuelPrices. Anti-riot units sealed off central Nairobi, at least 11 demonstrators were arrested, and the city centre was placed under lockdown. Outside the capital, in Embu, hundreds of youths took to the streets and burned tires, blocked roads and forced small businessmen to close their shops. In Kiritiri town, youths blocked the major Embu-Kiritiri highway.

The protests, dubbed “Total Shutdown Tuesday,” were called in opposition to a sharp fuel price hike, raising petrol from 178 Kenyan shillings (\$1.30) to as high as 206.97 shillings (\$1.60) per litre—an increase of over 16 percent—while diesel surged by more than 24 percent. Although prices were later marginally revised down, the hike, driven by disruptions to global oil supplies by the US-Israeli war against Iran, has sharply increased the cost of transport and basic goods.

The government’s response testifies to its deep fears of a renewed eruption of the Gen-Z protests that shook the regime in 2024 and 2025, when millions of workers and youth opposed International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed regressive tax hikes and privatisations.

In the days leading up to the protest, senior Ruto officials issued anxious warnings. Deputy President Kithure Kindiki dismissed the demonstrations, insisting that “going to the streets... won’t be a solution,” while government spokesperson Isaac Mwaura urged organisers to call them off. Mwaura asked, “Will it benefit Kenyans? Will it even lower the price of fuel?” He appealed for “dialogue rather than confrontation.”

Francis Atwoli, secretary-general of the Central

Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU) nominally representing 1.5 million workers across 36 affiliated unions, denounced the protestors, saying that if we “supported it blindly, we [workers] would be the losers”. Atwoli is a determined backer of the Ruto regime, calling for social media censorship to prevent protestors from organising and defending violence against them, demanding “firm measures to curb the unrest.”

Over the weekend, Nairobi Regional Police Commander Issa Mohamud declared the protests “unlawful,” insisting they would not be tolerated. Hundreds of uniformed and plainclothes police across Nairobi and other towns were mobilised to block the planned demonstrations. Among them were units from the elite General Service Unit—established by British colonial authorities to suppress the Mau Mau anti-colonial uprising in the 1950s—and the notorious Administration Police Rapid Deployment Unit.

According to *The Daily Nation*, the Ruto regime prepared extensively, arranging reinforcements from neighbouring counties of Nairobi, and instructing police commanders across the city to closely monitor their areas and disperse any gatherings, particularly in working-class slums of Nairobi, such as Mathare, Kawangware, and Kibera. Deputy Inspector General Eliud Lagat established a command centre to monitor CCTV footage across the city and major roads, while police intensified overnight surveillance of social media platforms.

The pre-emptive crackdown ensured that the mass protest anticipated by the government did not materialise. This also reflects a degree of weariness after years of mass protests, despite the widespread support expressed online for the #RejectFuelPrices mobilisation. However, this should not be mistaken for stability. The underlying anger is only growing, as fuel and food prices rapidly escalate.

The recent experience of the Gen-Z protests also demonstrates how quickly the situation can change. In the lead-up to the July 2024 uprising, protests were initially small, involving only dozens of participants, before rapidly escalating into mass demonstrations involving millions.

What was contained on Tuesday can erupt again on a far broader scale.

However, political lessons must be drawn. Over the past four years, Gen-Z-led movements have broken out in Kenya, across Africa and internationally expressing deep anger at inequality, corruption, and rapidly deteriorating living conditions. Young people have demonstrated immense courage and a willingness to confront the capitalist state.

However, spontaneity and protest politics aimed at pressuring the bankrupt political establishment is not enough. Kenya's 2024–2025 protests showed that even the largest and most militant demonstrations in the post-independence period can be contained when they lack organisation, coordination, and a clear strategy.

Moreover, social media mobilisation cannot substitute for rooted organisation. Hashtags and online calls to action can rapidly gather support, but without structures in workplaces and neighbourhoods, they lack coordination, and the capacity to resist and take power.

None of the existing political forces offer a way forward. The entire political establishment is stained with blood. Kalonzo Musyoka was a leading figure under Daniel arap Moi's dictatorship, which built the repressive apparatus now used against workers and youth. Martha Karua defended Kibaki's stolen 2007 election, which triggered violence leaving over 1,200 dead. Rigathi Gachagua served as Ruto's deputy while protesters were being shot during the Gen-Z demonstrations.

The United Opposition withheld support for Tuesday's protests out of fear that they might ignite forces they would be unable to control. At the same time, they issued limited gestures of "solidarity," positioning themselves to step in should the movement develop, in order to contain and redirect it, as deceased ODM leader Odinga did during the 2024 Gen-Z protests.

These forces fear an independent movement of workers and youth more than they oppose Ruto. They share the same fundamental class interests and are equally committed to defending the capitalist order.

As for what passes as "left", the Communist Party Marxist—Kenya (CPM-K), did not even bother to comment on Tuesday's protests. The CPM-K functions as a political firewall for the regime, working to disorient radicalising layers of youth and workers while keeping opposition within safe, nationalist and pro-capitalist channels.

Its programme is based on the "National Democratic Revolution" perspective—a two-stage theory that subordinates the working class to the bourgeoisie by calling first for the completion of "democracy," postponing socialism indefinitely. During the Gen-Z protests, this meant vacillating between appeals for Ruto to reverse austerity

measures and calls for his replacement by a vague "pro-poor" government. This perspective served to block the development of an independent revolutionary movement of the working class.

The decisive force in this struggle is the working class. The Gen-Z protests have mobilised broad layers of youth, but their power can only be realised through a conscious alliance with the working class, acting independently with its own demands. It is the working class—whose labour sustains the economy and who has the capacity to bring it to a halt—that must take the lead.

Workers must see themselves as an international class, not bound by colonial imposed borders. They must reach out across the continent, where the same conditions are provoking mass opposition. In South Africa, protests against fuel prices have erupted in townships amid worsening living conditions, while the government has responded by deploying thousands of troops domestically. In Mauritania, anti-fuel protests earlier this month were met with repression, resulting in dozens of arrests.

This demands the building of a revolutionary leadership rooted in the working class and armed with an international socialist programme. It means the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in workplaces, universities, and working-class neighbourhoods—democratic organs of struggle, controlled by workers and youth themselves and independent of the union bureaucracy and all factions of the political elite. These committees must serve as the basis for unifying struggles across sectors, tribes and borders, linking up nationally and internationally in a common fight against austerity, repression, and war.

The construction of a Trotskyist party in Kenya, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to provide the political leadership necessary to unite workers and youth in a conscious struggle against capitalism, imperialism, and war is the central task.



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