DIGITAL DISQUIET IN THE SILICON SAVANNAH

How online activists are fighting for political accountability in the face of digital authoritarianism in Kenya

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This paper examines digital activism in Kenya, while emphasizing its critical role in promoting political accountability amid rising digital authoritarianism. With increasing internet access, especially among the youth, online platforms empower citizens to mobilize and amplify marginalized voices, as seen in movements like #RejectFinanceBill, which demands government responsiveness.

However, this empowerment is countered by government repression in the form of disinformation campaigns, surveillance and legal restrictions that threaten democracy. The cycle of activism fosters civic engagement but invites authoritarian reactions, with activists facing abductions and violence. This highlights the dangers of online dissent in an authoritarian society and the complexities of information manipulation. Ultimately, while the digital space holds promise for enhancing accountability in Kenya, as elsewhere, it nonetheless poses significant risks to democratic processes. This paper advocates for a comprehensive strategy involving legal reforms, secure and sovereign digital infrastructure and the strengthening of civil society to ensure that the benefits of digital democracy prevail over the threats of digital repression

Keywords
Digital activism, Digital authoritarianism, Political accountability, Social media, Disinformation

Introduction

In the digital age in Kenya, as elsewhere, access to the internet, data and artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the way activism and advocacy are conducted.[1] It has significantly influenced and disrupted how individuals communicate, access information and engage in social, economic and political discourse. The rise of online political engagement has been a game changer, shaping how citizens hold political leadership to account through the sharing of data and information on key governance issues and the amplification of hitherto marginalised voices, especially those of the youth. Policy discussions that had previously been limited to the ruling elite and urban professionals have been brought into the mainstream, allowing more people to engage in debate and form opinions on critical political issues, thus enhancing civic engagement.[2] However, the online space in Kenya, as elsewhere, remains a double-edged sword. While it is proving a powerful tool for democratic mobilization and accountability, it has also been used by nefarious actors, including the government, to pollute the information ecosystem through disinformation, surveillance and repression. In a context of deep ethnic and social fractures as that found in Kenya, online space is often used to propagate hate speech, social polarisation and fan electoral violence, all of which pose a significant threat to national integrity and democratic consolidation.[3]

This paper is structured into three sections and a conclusion for ease of analysis. The initial section, "Gen Z's digital awakening: fighting back against government excesses", examines how Kenyans, particularly the youth, leveraged online platforms to mobilize and amplify their voices against government overreach, notably exemplified by the 2024 Finance Bill. The following section, titled "Government response: digital authoritarianism takes hold", delves into the Kenyan government's escalating efforts to suppress online dissent and crack down on digital activists. This repression is contextualized within the broader rise of digital au-

thoritarianism, which is facilitated by a lack of platform accountability and the entrenchment of digital colonialism in Kenya. The subsequent section then broadens the scope to discuss the increasing prevalence of digital authoritarianism across the wider African region. The paper concludes by advocating for a multi-pronged strategy comprised of legal reforms, robust, sovereign and secure digital infrastructure and an empowered civil society, which are crucial for ensuring that the promise of digital democracy ultimately outweighs the threats of digital repression.

Gen Z's digital awakening: fighting back against government excesses

Digital activism in Kenya has been greatly aided by a relatively high rate of internet penetration, compared to other countries in the region: in 2024, it stood at 41%, and 25% of the population, mostly youths, used social media.[4] Kenya is popularly known as the Silicon Savannah due to its technological innovations, such as the mobile money platform M-Pesa, and its position as an African technology leader. Social media platforms such as TikTok, X, Instagram and Facebook have become vital for mobilizing citizens, disseminating information, coordinating activities and amplifying voices like those of the youth that have often been overlooked by mainstream media. Further, the use of AI chatbots have helped activists to reach and mobilize large numbers of people with personalised information and support in local languages, while short-form videos on Tiktok, Instagram and X have made it possible for ordinary Kenyans to access policy information that had previously been legal jargon or oversimplified by politicians.[5]

The full potential of digital activism in holding political power to account in the country was witnessed starting June 2024, when the government passed an unpopular finance bill that sought to incre-

ase taxes in the country against a background of diminished trust in governance institutions and perceptions of heightened corruption among the political elite.[6] The bill sparked widespread outrage and provoked the #RejectFinanceBill online movement. During the protests, hashtags like #RejectFinanceBill, #OccupyParliament, #RutoMustGo, #OccupyStatehouse, #OccupyChurches, #OccupyCBD and #AngukaNayo were pushed to trend and occupy prime time in the media and communication spaces, thus setting the agenda of national conversations.[7]

These hashtags, primarily pushed by the youth who were popularly called the *Gen Zs*, spurred real-time updates and information dissemination, thus attracting international attention and increasing pressure on the Kenyan government to respond to the protesters' demands. The protests and agitation also transcended social media, as the traditional media, including television, radio and newspapers, swiftly recognized and amplified the online outrage. This synergistic interaction effectively set the national agenda, driving widespread conversations across both digital and traditional platforms.

Unlike other traditional protests in Kenya, which are ordinarily organised by the elite and political class, the #RejectFinanceBill protests were primarily driven by young people outside the political sphere and who often described the movement as leaderless, tribeless and fearless. They used technology to mobilise and set the agenda, reaching both rural and urban populations in a coordinated, yet organic way. Beyond the traditional social media platforms like X and TikTok, other applications like Zello and other AI-driven tools allowed activists to coordinate protests and decode complex policies in real time, empowering even those without formal political training to engage effectively.[8] An AI-driven finance bill chat tool allowed users to ask questions and get information about the proposed bill, marking a significant shift in how Kenyans get their policy informa-

tion. In addition, Gen Z content producers used social media to show how politicians were living in opulence and flaunting their wealth, even as the majority of Kenyans were struggling with basic needs.

Through online campaigns and petitions, significant pressure was placed on lawmakers, urging them to reconsider the bill.[9] Additionally, digital activism enhanced transparency around the legislative process, exposing failures in public consultations.[10] Social media also helped overcome geographical barriers, enabling protesters across Kenya to unite and coordinate their efforts, thus creating a transnational movement as Kenyans in diaspora also joined.[11] Ultimately, the government was forced to drop the unpopular bill, signalling a major win for the protestors and Kenyans at large.

Subsequently and spurred by the wins from this campaign, online campaigns in Kenya have become mainstream, targeting both private and public sector actors who are seen as corrupt and going against the public interest. Following the finance bill rejection, an exposé of a controversial lease of the national airport to the Indian multinational Adani Group took centre-stage in the online transparency campaigns, eventually forcing the government to rescind the agreement.[12] Currently, under the hashtag #RutoMustGo, video snippets of the political elite and other online activism continue to fuel demand for political change in the country. Online political meetings bringing Kenyans from diverse geographies together, including the diaspora, have become a popular way of exchanging political information and advancing progressive political narratives. In turn, the government has been forced to be more responsive to citizen demands, including through engagement on online spaces. It is not just government bloggers who are engaging with netizens (internet citizens), but even key political actors, including the president and cabinet who have taken to @XSpaces (a feature on the X platform for live audio conversations) to explain and defend government positions.

Digital activism has not been confined to domestic affairs, as Kenyans have increasingly targeted, through online mobilization and strategic engagement, international actors and institutions that they feel have adversely affected the country. For example, a planned visit by the Dutch monarchy in March 2025 attracted a flood of emails and social media messages urging the monarchy not to visit Kenya due to human rights violations by the government. The Dutch monarchy reported receiving over 300 emails and thousands of social media messages from Kenyans.[13] Kenyans also flooded the social media sites of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) in 2024, nominating President Ruto as the most corrupt president in the world, with a record 40,000 nominations.[14] As a result, the organization ranked the president as the second most corrupt after Bashar Al-Assad of Syria.

The adaptation to digital activism has been evident, as protesters have leveraged technology to overcome challenges such as internet disruptions and government surveillance. The use of virtual private networks (VPNs) and decentralised communication apps like Zello has ensured secure and continuous communication, demonstrating the resilience and resourcefulness of digital activists. This proactive approach has allowed protesters to effectively coordinate and sustain their efforts despite external pressures and government disruptions.

Government response: digital authoritarianism takes hold

As expected, the rise of digital activism in Kenya has been accompanied by a concomitant rise in digital authoritarianism,[15] highlighting the complexities of online activism. Increasingly, the government is accused of seeking to control online narratives through various unconstitutional measures including legislation, internet shutdowns, online surveillance,

abductions and intimidation of online activists, data breaches and disinformation that deliberately manipulates and pollutes public discourse.[16]

Abductions and murders, traced back to the government, have tragically been used to silence digital activists.[17] Journalists, bloggers and activists who expose corruption, criticize the government or document human rights abuses face the risk of being abducted, often disappearing without a trace, or being found murdered. These acts of violence create a climate of fear, chilling online expression and dissuading others from engaging in digital activism. Between June and December 2024, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights reported 82 cases of abductions with at least 29 people still missing by the end of the year.[18] One of the most famous cases of the abductees was that of cartoonist Kibet Bull, who was abducted in December in relation to a series of silhouette images of President William Ruto that were shared across social media platforms.[19] In April 2024, the body of a popular political blogger was found dangling from a rope and his death confirmed as homicide. A similar death had occurred in December 2023, where a popular blogger's body was recovered from a river.[20]

Disinformation campaigns targeting journalists, bloggers, judges, civil society activists and other activists who are seen as anti-government have been on the rise, coinciding with the growth of digital activism. These campaigns are hosted on X whose algorithms virally amplify the disinformation.[21] Coordination of these campaigns involves WhatsApp groups and anonymous organisers who send influencers cash, content and instructions. Verified accounts are sometimes rented out for disinformation campaigns, enhancing their reach.[22]

Beyond physical attacks, the government has increasingly deployed legislative measures to restrict the internet and stifle online activism. This strategy involves both the repurposing and misapplication of existing

statutes, alongside the deliberate enactment of new, flawed laws designed to control digital spaces.[23] The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2019) in Kenya, despite its stated aim to combat cybercrime, has frequently been criticized for contravening the spirit and letter of the 2010 Constitution, particularly concerning fundamental rights to freedom of expression and access to information.[24] Its broad and vaguely worded provisions, such as those pertaining to "false publications" or "publication of false information", have been routinely deployed by authorities to silence and criminalize legitimate forms of online expression, dissent and investigative journalism. This has resulted in the arbitrary arrest and prosecution of online activists, bloggers and citizens expressing critical views or disseminating information. The Act was notably and frequently invoked to charge activists opposing the 2024 Finance Bill, among other state-led online crackdowns.

The Security Laws (Amendment) Act 2014 has also expanded surveillance capabilities of intelligence and law enforcement agencies without sufficient procedural safeguards and has often been accused of opening the opportunity for chilling internet freedoms by allowing blanket admissibility of electronic evidence in court.[25] The vague language and downright illegality created by these laws have been used to facilitate internet shutdowns in moments of sensitive political events, such as protests, in the guise of maintaining public order, even as these acts infringe on constitutional freedoms in Kenya.[26] Surveillance too has been aided by these laws, where telecommunications providers, especially Safaricom, Kenya's dominant operator, has been accused of sharing data with law enforcement agencies to facilitate the shadowing and abduction of online activists by the government.[27]

It is also important to acknowledge that the responsibility for the rise of digital authoritarianism is largely enabled by platforms' acquiescence or insufficient proactive measures to protect their users.[28] In Kenya, as con-

cerns about digital authoritarianism grow, there is a corresponding concern about the lack of platforms' accountability.[29] Civil society and other actors have continually demanded that platforms implement adequate trust and safety measures including robust content moderation, algorithmic transparency and user safety mechanisms. These measures would prevent inadvertent amplification of disinformation or harmful content and the abuse and exploitation of data by the state. This is because in Kenya, as elsewhere, platforms are not just benign enablers of communication; they too have a shared responsibility in safeguarding democratic spaces and preventing the weaponization of digital tools against citizens.

Furthermore, the lack of accountability of the platforms is a key manifestation of digital colonialism in Kenya and across the African continent.[30] Digital colonialism manifests as the continued dominance of global technology corporations, primarily based in the Global North, over Africa's digital infrastructure, data and discourse. This involves the extraction of vast amounts of African user data, the imposition of content governance frameworks that often fail to understand local socio-political nuances and the effective control of digital public spheres without adequate local oversight or redress mechanisms.[31] Consequently, when digital activism emerges to challenge power structures, the very platforms through which these movements coalesce can become unwitting, or even willing, enablers of repression.[32] The lack of accountability of these powerful platforms, especially to African users, means that they often acquiesce to state demands for data, content removal or even internet shutdowns, failing to adequately protect users' rights. This not only directly contributes to the repression of digital activism but also perpetuates a cycle where African digital spaces remain largely controlled by big international tech companies and platforms, hindering genuine digital sovereignty and democratic participation. This dynamic of platform compliance, rooted in digital colonialism, provides the critical infrastructure upon which the architecture of digital authoritarianism is being built and sustained in Kenya.

Troll territory: digital discord in the region

However, Kenya is not alone in the case of rising digital authoritarianism. Many governments on the African continent and elsewhere in the world are increasingly deploying tactics to surveil, censor and manipulate information and populations, especially in critical moments like elections and social unrest.[33] These illegal measures are largely aimed at silencing dissent and pre-empting democratic mobilisations. In 2022 alone, there were over 19 internet shutdowns across the continent.[34] The shutdowns, which occur during elections and moments of political protests, are aimed at creating a climate of fear, deterring individuals from speaking out against injustices and eroding the foundations of democratic participation. Some of the countries that have had shutdowns include Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Senegal, Nigeria and Kenya.[35]

In 2024, the "Year of Democracy", when over 20 African countries were scheduled to go to the polls, there was a marked rise in digital authoritarianism, with many of these governments seeking to control the electoral outcomes through the exploitation of biometric systems and social media controls.[36] According to the 2024 State of Internet Freedom in Africa Report, digital authoritarianism is a growing concern in Africa, as governments continue to deploy a combination of tools and tactics of repression such as internet shutdowns, censorship of news outlets, targeted surveillance and regressive laws to limit civic participation and suppress dissent.[37]

To combat digital authoritarianism and enhance digital activism in Kenya and elsewhere on the continent, a multi-pronged approach that addresses legal, technical and societal challenges is essential. This should be comprised of various pillars, including strengthening the legal and regulatory environment to ensure compliance with international human rights standards; fostering a resilient, secure and sovereign digital in-

frastructure that promotes the use of technologies that are open source, decentralized and decolonized, and finally, empowering civil society actors, including digital activists, to strengthen the democratic space and hold duty bearers, including governments and especially tech platforms, more accountable for online safety and security.

Conclusion

The digital space in Kenya as utilised by online activists is increasingly breaking down traditional barriers of access to political information, broadening the base for political activism and holding governance accountable in more creative and accessible ways, especially for the youth who are the major demographic group. However, while the space is increasingly seen as a powerful tool for democratic mobilization and accountability, it remains a double-edged sword, as the very spaces that amplify citizens' voices also serve as conduits for state-sponsored disinformation, surveillance and repression.

These challenges are not, however, unique to Kenya, but rather reflect a broader trend of rising digital authoritarianism across Africa and globally. Therefore, addressing this duality where the digital space is a force for both good and bad requires a multi-faceted approach based on both local and international collaboration that is supported by robust legal frameworks, a decolonised digital environment and an empowered civil society that continually widens the frontiers of democracy and holds governments accountable for violations of digital rights. Without such actions, the promise of digital democracy risks being overshadowed by the spectre of digital repression.

Notas

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