ANALYSIS

Melissa Li
March 2026

When Citizens Mobilize: Urban Protests in African Democracies

The Cases of Senegal and Kenya

GPPi
GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

International Cooperation
Africa Department

Imprint

Publisher
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
Germany
info@fes.de

Responsible Department
Africa Department, International Cooperation Division
https://www.fes.de/en/africa-department

Responsible for content
Dr Henrik Maihack, Head of the Africa Department
henrik.maihack@fes.de

Contact
svende.eickhoff@fes.de

Design/Layout
Rohtext, Bonn

Front page picture
picture alliance / Anadolu | Gerald Anderson

March 2026

ISBN 978-3-98628-823-5

Further publications of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung can be found here:
↗ www.fes.de/publikationen

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Melissa Li
March 2026

When Citizens Mobilize: Urban Protests in African Democracies

The Cases of Senegal and Kenya

Contents

Introduction 3

Senegal's 2024 Electoral Crisis Protests 5

- Context and Trigger Points 5
- Protest Actors and Strategies 5
- Engagement with International Actors 8

Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill Protests 10

- Context and Trigger Points 10
- Actors and Strategies 11
- Engagement with International Actors 12

What Can We Learn from the Cases of Senegal and Kenya? 15

How Can International Actors Engage? 17

Introduction

No other region has seen as many large-scale protest movements in the twenty-first century as the continent of Africa.[1] Mass uprisings in authoritarian states such as Egypt, Sudan, and Tunisia have long attracted attention, but now protest movements in democratic African states such as Senegal and Kenya – and more recently Madagascar and Tanzania – are gaining visibility. These protests are driven largely by young, urban populations concerned about social inequality, democratic regression, corruption, and a lack of economic prospects.

These protests often take place in urban areas, in which high population density aggravates competition for public goods and services and can fuel grievances. At the same time, urban areas are more conducive to successful mobilization, as it is a lot easier to achieve critical mass there than in rural areas.[2] Rapid urbanization has intensified public demand for better living conditions, social mobility, and access to state services. In this context, Africa's urban populations are increasingly turning to protest to articulate political demands. While protests are a central element of liberal democracy and can serve as a democratic corrective, this trend also signals growing dissatisfaction with conventional, institutional channels of political participation, such as engagement in political parties, which many perceive as unresponsive or ineffective in driving change.

International actors committed to democratic governance – including foreign governments, international governmental organizations, bilateral development agencies and international NGOs, as well as private and political foundations – face a strategic dilemma. On one hand, they aim to support democratic participation and civil society movements, both for normative reasons and because more inclusive politics make for better long-term partners for core strategic interests. Governments of this kind are more stable, stronger trading counterparts, more capable of securing their regions, and more likely to find common geopolitical ground with European democracies. On the other hand, poorly calibrated engagement can undermine local dynamics or trigger accusations of foreign interference. Their room for maneuver is further constrained by the need to maintain diplomatic relations and protect strategic partnerships with governments that see protest movements as a threat to their power. These constraints complicate efforts to engage meaningfully with protest movements, even for external actors whose longer-term interests align strongly with their demands.

Although theoretically democratic settings provide more space for constructive engagement than authoritarian regimes, this space is shrinking. Governments under pressure have reacted by restricting civic freedoms, imposing crackdowns on protest leaders, or fueling ostensibly anti-imperialist narratives against foreign actors. In the context of heightened geopolitical competition, foreign governments may also hesitate to confront partners they consider strategically important. These dynamics make it particularly relevant to examine both the limits and the opportunities of external engagement in democratic contexts, in which expectations of support are often higher, but the political costs of action remain significant.

Against this background, the goal of this study is twofold. First, it seeks to deepen the understanding of contemporary protest dynamics in African democracies. It does so by examining the 2024 Finance Bill protests in Kenya and the 2024 protests against the postponement of the presidential election in Senegal. These were two of the most significant protest waves of the year in terms of scale and political impact.[3] Senegal and Kenya are also key partner countries for foreign governments on the African continent. The analysis focuses on how and why protests unfolded, who mobilized, and how international actors' engagement was perceived by protest actors. Second, the study develops recommendations for international actors on how to respond in ways that may strengthen democratic rights and civic space without increasing risks for the movements or jeopardizing their partnerships.

The study's findings draw on a review of media reports, relevant policy and academic literature and protest groups' strategy documents. It is complemented by 22 online interviews conducted in October and November 2025 with protest actors and international actors in Kenya (12 interviews) and Senegal (10 interviews).[4] Most of the inter-

1 Marks, Zoe, 2024, "African Popular Protest and Political Change," Journal of Democracy, John Hopkins University Press 35, no. 3, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/african-popular-protest-and-political-change/.

2 Dorward, Nick and Sean Fox, 2022, "Population pressure, political institutions, and protests: A multilevel analysis of protest events in African cities," Political Geography 99, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102762.

3 In fall 2025, large-scale protests erupted in Tanzania and Madagascar. While both are also relevant in terms of scale and impact, they developed only at the time of writing. Thus, they could not have been selected as case studies.

4 Most of the interviews for the Senegal case study were held in French. All direct quotes were translated by the author.

views (73 percent) were conducted with protest actors – including individual activists, local civil society groups, grassroots initiatives, social and feminist movements – all of whom were directly involved in protest mobilization and organization. Centering these perspectives allowed the study to develop a detailed understanding of protest dynamics and how activists perceive international engagement. The remaining interviews (27 percent) with political foundations and diplomats provided an external perspective, offering additional insights into the opportunities and limitations shaping international action during periods of mobilization.

Drawing on the comparative analysis, the study highlights six key findings:

1. Broad, inclusive protest mobilization is key to success.
2. Protest mobilization reflects generational and organizational shifts.
3. Digital spaces matter but they depend on access and offline networks.
4. "Spontaneous" movements are built on prior networks and experiences, often previously supported by donors.
5. Diplomatic signals shape how protestors interpret international credibility – and often diverge from their expectations.
6. International donor support is risky but helpful and welcome outside of protest cycles.

Based on these findings, the study develops five recommendations for international actors that have an interest in pro-democratic protest movements.

1. Private foundations and INGOs should rapidly provide support during peak protests and prepare for mis- and disinformation risks.
2. International actors should use international fora to amplify local voices to deter repression and strengthen democratic rights.
3. Foreign governments should balance public pressure with backdoor diplomacy against repression based on context.
4. Donors should strengthen civic infrastructure as a long-term investment.
5. Donors should prioritize partners based on legitimacy, mobilization experience, and openness to international support.

Senegal's 2024 Electoral Crisis Protests

Context and Trigger Points

In 2024, Senegal, long viewed as the most stable West African democracy, was hit by an unprecedented political crisis. In early February, then President Macky Sall signed a decree indefinitely postponing the presidential election that had been scheduled for 25 February 2024. A few days later, the National Assembly set a new date of 15 December 2024, prolonging Sall's presidency beyond the constitutional two-term limit.

A broad range of people across Senegalese society opposed this decision, widely seen as an attempt by Sall to cling to power. Sall justified the postponement by citing alleged corruption among Constitutional Council judges, whom he accused of manipulating candidate eligibility, claims that critics viewed as politically convenient. Civil society groups and political actors called him out for perpetrating a "constitutional coup," emphasizing that only the Constitutional Court is authorized to delay elections.[5]

None of this emerged in a vacuum. Since 2021, Sall's administration has been tightening its grip on civic space and political opposition. In particular, the prosecution of prominent opposition leader Ousmane Sonko – initially charged with rape and disrupting the public order, later convicted for "corrupting young people" – was widely viewed as politically motivated to block his candidacy.[6] This triggered waves of protests on which security forces repeatedly cracked down violently, leading to at least 60 deaths, 1,000 injured people and 2,000 arrested protestors by February 2024, according to Amnesty International.[7] Sall's administration responded by banning demonstrations, dissolving Sonko's political party PASTEF, tightening media regulation through a controversial new press code, and repeatedly shutting down the internet.[8] These measures engendered widespread perceptions of democratic backsliding against a backdrop of persistent economic hardship in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and massive youth unemployment.[9]

In these circumstances, the announcement that the presidential election would be postponed was a tipping point. Protestors demanded that elections be held before April 2, 2024, when Sall's mandate was set to expire under the constitution.[10] In a country that – unlike many of its neighbors – has not experienced a coup since independence the move triggered alarm, domestically and internationally.[11] The Constitutional Court intervened on February 15, 2024, declaring the postponement unconstitutional and urging the government to organize elections as soon as possible.[12]

Finally, Bassirou Diomaye Faye won the election on March 24, 2024, becoming president with Sonko as prime minister. This was considered an important win for democracy in West Africa, where the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Gabon, and Guinea in recent years have increasingly divided the region. The mobilization that forced the restoration of constitutional order was not merely a protest movement, but an act of collective democratic defense.

Protest Actors and Strategies

Joining forces in two major coalitions: *Aar Sunu Election* and F24

The postponement of the presidential election in early 2024 marked a turning point in Senegal's political trajectory. This unprecedented move was widely perceived as a direct threat to the country's democratic foundations and provoked condemnation from across society. Established civil society groups, political parties, presidential candidates, and social movements were quick to join forces and mobilize against Sall's apparent grab for power. Two major

5 CIVICUS, 2024, "Senegal's Democracy Passes Crucial Test," CIVICUS LENS, https://tinyurl.com/2hpy3bb3; Rich, David, 2024, "How Senegal's presidential election was postponed, reinstated and moved up," France24, https://tinyurl.com/e5rmj5xj.

6 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022, Senegal," https://freedomhouse.org/country/senegal/freedom-world/2022.

7 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022, Senegal," https://freedomhouse.org/country/senegal/freedom-world/2022; Amnesty International, 2024, "Senegal: Authorities must investigate killings and police brutality against protesters," https://tinyurl.com/34rwk28w.

8 Dione, Ngouda, 2024, "Senegal cuts internet again amid widening crackdown on dissent," Reuters, https://tinyurl.com/yza62x5h; Access Now, 2024, "#KeepItOn: Senegalese authorities must immediately reinstate mobile internet access to all," https://tinyurl.com/2b6sytwa.

9 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022, Senegal," https://freedomhouse.org/country/senegal/freedom-world/2022.

10 NEWS WIRES, 2024, "Thousands of Senegalese march in first authorized protest since election postponement," France24, https://tinyurl.com/bypetzcn.

11 Council of the European Union, 2024, "Senegal: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union," https://tinyurl.com/3nnvvb4e; Miller, Matthew, 2024, "Postponement of Election in Senegal," U.S. Department of State, https://tinyurl.com/5352htz5; Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, 2024, "Sénégal - Déclaration du porte-parole adjoint du ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères (4 février 2024)," https://tinyurl.com/4jmkc24s.

12 The Economist, 2024, "Senegal's judges stand up for the constitution," https://tinyurl.com/3ewnue7a.

coalitions were key to the mobilization in early 2024: *Les Forces Vives du Sénégal* (F24) and *Aar Sunu Election*.

In response to growing uncertainty about a possible third term, F24 was launched in April 2023. Bringing together more than 250 organizations, including political parties, trade unions, civil society organizations, social movements, and independent figures, F24 became the most inclusive platform then existing. Concerns about political co-optation led to the creation of a new, explicitly non-partisan civil society platform, *Aar Sunu Election* ("Let's Protect Our Election" in Wolof, the most spoken language in Senegal), formally launched on February 8, 2024, a few days after the postponement was announced.

Reframing as a threat to democracy, enabling broad mobilization

Arguably, a key reason the two broad coalitions were formed so effectively was the shift from mobilizing in defense of Sonko to a broader, existential defense of democracy. This reframing enabled a highly diverse set of actors to rally behind a common goal. The protests from 2021 to 2023 had centered largely on Sonko's arrests and prosecution, which many already viewed as violations of democratic rights, aimed at preventing his participation in the 2024 presidential race. But this ultimately changed when Sall decided to postpone the presidential election indefinitely, an act widely denounced by protest groups as a "constitutional coup" and a direct threat to Senegal's democratic order. Notably, the demographic profile of protestors also shifted: while Sonko, with his anti-establishment narrative and youth-centered political agenda, largely attracted young supporters, the 2024 electoral protests also drew older generations to the streets.[13]

This shift elevated the struggle from a partisan contest to a systemic defense of democracy, drawing in the broader and more heterogeneous range of actors who joined forces in the two major coalitions, F24 and *Aar Sunu Election*. The F24, for example, stated in its declaration that Senegal is in "the most serious and complex democratic crisis [...] in its political history," which it considered to encompass "serious threats to the country's stability."[14] In a public statement in response to the election delay, *Aar Sunu Election* called upon Senegal citizens who are "concerned with preserving democratic gains" to engage in mass mobilization via offline and online channels.[15]

Professionalized civil society organizations, political actors and experienced activists were able to mobilize quickly

The protest groups mobilizing in early 2024 drew on rich prior experience and dense existing ties from earlier fights against presidential overreach. These longstanding networks enabled rapid coordination when the election postponement was announced.

The initiative *Aar Sunu Election*, for example, emerged from rapid coordination among established organizations with longstanding relationships, including the NGO *Plateform des Acteurs Non Étatiques* (PFAnE), the initiative *Mobilisation national pour l'Engagement citoyen, la Souveraineté, l'Unité et la Refondation* (MESURE),[16] and the *Collectif des Organisations de la Société Civile pour les Élections* (COSCE). PFAnE provided office space for the headquarters of the new coalition; MESURE immediately issued a statement to condemn Sall's announcement to postpone the election in early February 2024; and COSCE mobilized organizations with electoral expertise. Independent figures such as the F24 coordinator, Samba Berry, a lawyer, and Abdoulaye Bousso, a prominent figure in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, were part of the founding group.[17] Within weeks, *Aar Sunu Election* brought together over 200 organizations and 80 independent figures, representing a diverse spectrum of civil society. Various unions, NGOs, youth associations, women's and citizens' movements, religious leaders and organizations, as well as academics participated in the collective action against the postponement of the presidential election.[18]

F24 brought together an even more heterogenous coalition of civil society groups and political actors. Its membership included presidential candidates such as Sonko, former mayor of Dakar Khalifa Sall and former prime minister Aminata Touré, all of whom had prior experience in mobilizing. According to an F24 representative, former unionist Mamadou Mbodj, who was a key figure in the previous protest movement M23 against a third mandate for the then-president Wade in 2012, he became the coordinator of the coalition to avoid undermining it with a partisan agenda.

F24's strength was based on more than a decade of accumulated mobilization capacity. Social movements such as *Y'en a marre*, central to resisting former President Abdoulaye Wade's third-term bid in 2011–2012, had since expanded their networks and professionalized their structures by increasingly implementing programs to enhance citizen improvement, notably with the help of international

13 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online; BBC, 2021, "Senegal protests after opposition leader Ousmane Sonko arrested," https://tinyurl.com/2s3jb4mv; Ba, Selly, 2021, "Die einzige Lösung für den Senegal ist, den Raum der Demokratie auszuweiten," Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, https://tinyurl.com/yc8e7mjr.

14 F24 Memorandum, internal document.

15 Facebook page of *Aar Sunu Election*, https://tinyurl.com/27xsu85d; Al Jazeera, 2024, "Civil society urge nationwide strike, protest in Senegal after vote delay," https://tinyurl.com/477s9th4.

16 MESURE is an initiative launched in February 2023 by several civil society organizations such as LEGS Africa, NGO 3D and think tank network SENRTT to provide a platform for public debate to strengthen unity in Senegal ahead of the presidential elections in 2024. See for more information: PressAfrik, Présidentielle 2024: une nouvelle initiative dénommée « Mesure » lancée par les organisations de la société civile," https://tinyurl.com/mrbe93zv.

17 *Aar Sunu Election*, 2024, "Le pouvoir citoyen, rempart de la démocratie," https://tinyurl.com/4heks4pv.

18 *Aar Sunu Election*, 2024, "Le pouvoir citoyen, rempart de la démocratie," https://tinyurl.com/4heks4pv.

donors, who have since invested in programs on citizen engagement.[19] Many activists involved in 2024 had also mobilized during the 2021–2023 protests linked to Sonko's prosecution, organized largely by the Movement for the Defense of Democracy, in which PASTEF and *Y'en a marre* played key roles. These experiences provided both coalitions with seasoned organizers, trusted networks, and a rich repertoire of contention that proved critical for rapid and coordinated action in 2024.[20]Importantly, both coalitions were thus driven by highly professionalized civil society organizations and political groups, representing older generations in a country that has a very young population.

Pragmatic collaboration with political forces to strengthen mobilization

As already mentioned, *Aar Sunu Election* initially took the deliberate decision to bring together only civil society groups and to exclude presidential candidates and political parties. The policy was adopted to ensure that they "would not fall victim to their shenanigans,"[21] as an *Aar Sunu Election* representative emphasized. Thus, the group wanted to prevent political interests from meddling with the group's overall goal of getting the electoral calendar back on track.

During the mobilization phase, however, debate on this policy was re-opened, as some argued that collaborating with political actors might help them to obtain a bigger impact. For example, as a symbolic act, *Aar Sunu Election* organized a farewell party for Sall, at which the turnout was very low ("No one came. It was just us"[22]).

Recognizing the constraints on mobilization, however, they eventually collaborated with political forces mobilizing for the same cause.[23] This was not a unified decision but rather reflected the perceived urgency of boosting the strength of mobilization.[24] On February 29, 2024, *Aar Sunu Election* held a joint press conference with the *Front des Candidats à l'Élection Présidentielle du 25 Février*, representing 16 of the 19 presidential candidates, F24 and the *le Front pour la Défense de la Démocratie*.[25]

Diversifying tactics under repression

Both F24 and *Aar Sunu Election* combined street protests with other, less risky protest activities. Since its formation on April 16, 2023, F24 had called for several peaceful protests. Their changes in strategy evolved in response to growing repression.[26]

F24's tactical evolution illustrates this shift clearly. After its formation on April 16, 2023, the coalition organized several peaceful protests, beginning with a large demonstration on May 12, 2023, which reportedly drew thousands onto the streets.[27] Even though the government soon banned all demonstrations, they at first continued to organize them.[28] However, according to an F24 representative, after the security forces dispersed a banned demonstration with tear gas, the group instead adopted symbolic forms of protest, reducing the risk of violent repression.[29] From then on, they held press conferences and organized other protest tactics, such as wearing white clothes on Fridays. Some members also continued to organize street protests, but not as part of a collective F24 effort.[30]

Aar Sunu Election adopted a similar mix of tactics. In a public statement issued on February 8, 2024, the coalition demanded "the restoration of the republican electoral calendar,"[31] called upon the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court to act accordingly, and called for a mass mobilization of Senegalese citizens. They asked Muslims to wear white and the colors of the Senegalese flag to signal their anger on February 9.[32] Notably, the tactic of wearing white on Fridays mirrors a strategy that F24 also adopted after their demonstrations were banned.

At the same time, *Aar Sunu Election* organized a silent march reportedly with thousands of participants on February 17, 2024, two days after the decision of the Constitutional Court.[33] They also organized symbolic voting on

19 Folarinwa, Brice, 2024, "La Métamorphose de Y'en a marre," SenePlus, https://tinyurl.com/5d6efbky. See for more information: Y'en a marre, "Nos Projets," https://tinyurl.com/2vkcs7td; Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* member organization, October 22, 2025, online.

20 Mwakideu, Chrispin, 2021, "Senegal protesters back Sonko despite rape charges," https://tinyurl.com/5dbnkkd4; Ba, Selly, 2021, "Die einzige Lösung für den Senegal ist, den Raum der Demokratie auszuweiten," Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, https://tinyurl.com/yc8e7mjr; Prause, Louisa, 2012, "Y'en a marre: Wer sind sie, wie mobilisieren sie und was fordern sie?," Standpunkte International 02/2012, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/Standpunkte/Standpunkte_international/Standpunkte_int_02-2012.pdf.

21 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online.

22 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online.

23 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online.

24 *Aar Sunu Election*, 2024, "Le pouvoir citoyen, rempart de la démocratie," https://tinyurl.com/4heks4pv.

25 Le Monde, 2024, "Crise au Sénégal : création d'un front commun pour une présidentielle avant le 2 avril," https://tinyurl.com/3yucapk2; Facebook post by *Aar Sunu Election*, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/2s4j9rn4.

26 Research on social movements shows that such tactical diversification is common when repression escalates, allowing groups to sustain mobilization through symbolic protest, stay-at-home actions, and dispersed activities. See for more information: Chenoweth, Erica and Stephan, Maria J., 2012, "Why Civil Resistance Works. The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict," https://cup.columbia.edu/book/why-civil-resistance-works/9780231156837/.

27 Churm, Philip Andrew, 2024, "Protesters take to the streets of Dakar against Senegal President Sall," africanews, https://tinyurl.com/2d3nfdpp; Idrac, Charlotte, 2023, "Sénégal: des milliers de manifestants à Dakar contre une éventuelle 3e candidature de Macky Sall," RFI, https://tinyurl.com/3ww747aw.

28 La Vie Senegalaise, "Interdiction de la Manifestation à Dakar de la plateforme F24," https://tinyurl.com/yc7z8vd5.

29 Interview with a F24 representative, October 22, 2025, online.

30 Interview with a F24 representative, October 22, 2025, online.

31 Facebook page of *Aar Sunu Election*, https://tinyurl.com/27xsu85d.

32 Facebook page of *Aar Sunu Election*; Al Jazeera, 2024, "Civil society urge nationwide strike, protest in Senegal after vote delay," https://tinyurl.com/477s9th4.

33 NEWS WIRES, 2024, "Thousands of Senegalese march in first authorized protest since election postponement," France24, https://tinyurl.com/bypetzcn; Jeune Afrique, 2024, "Opposants libérés, marche dans le calme… Au Sénégal, un week-end dans l'appraisement," https://tinyurl.com/3fx5zvch.

February 25, when the presidential election was initially scheduled to take place.[34] Besides mobilizing citizens to maintain public pressure, *Aar Sunu Election* also targeted national and international media (for more on this, see below) to shed light on what was happening in Senegal in order to hold the government accountable for their actions.[35]

Engagement with International Actors

Keeping it a Senegalese affair

The mass mobilization against the postponement of the presidential election was first and foremost a Senegalese matter. Nearly all protest actors and international interlocutors emphasized this in interviews conducted for this study. A representative of *Aar Sunu Election* further emphasized: "This initiative was a Senegalese affair [...] it was created to solve a specific problem affecting Senegalese people. It is preferable that the Senegalese themselves organize to deal with it."[36]

Safeguarding their ownership also continues to be a priority, regardless of how open protest groups are toward international engagement. Most interlocutors expressed a general openness to engagement with external partners, if it served their own objectives. A representative of a F24 member organization stressed: "We are very open, but to be clear, no donor, no partner, no organization [...] has any say in what we should do and how we should do it."[37] It is important to note that groups such as *FRAPP – France Dégage*, whose identity is based on anti-imperialism takes a very critical stance toward international actors.[38] Thus, FRAPP and similar groups may reject any form of international engagement to avoid foreign influence.

Outreach to international actors to amplify voice

Protest groups strategically reached out to international actors to amplify Senegalese voices and ultimately to increase pressure on Sall's administration to organize elections as soon as possible. Many interlocutors mentioned that they especially targeted international media and diaspora to attract international attention to "keep an eye on what was happening."[39] Some also contacted international diplomats to urge them to use their channels to the government to convince them to respect the electoral calendar.[40] Others reached out to public figures who collaborated with Sall's administration, such as politicians but also organizations from other countries, pursuing a policy of "name-shaming or name-dropping,"[41] calling them out for their collaboration.

Disappointment with foreign governments except for the United States

Protest actors appreciated the pick-up in international media and international solidarity from the Senegalese diaspora. The picture was a lot more mixed with regard to foreign governments. While many pointed positively to the United States' strong and quick reaction, public statements by other foreign governments have been perceived as comparatively weak. One interviewee, for example, asked: "Can you speak up like the US government did?"[42] The United States indeed applied stronger language in its February 6 public statement, in which it emphasized that the decision to delay the election "cannot be considered legitimate," and "urge[d]" Senegal's government to abide by the constitution.[43] In contrast, the European Union, for instance, used more diplomatic and cautious language.[44] Moreover, others have also criticized foreign governments for acting more decisively in relation to military coups in the Sahel than in the case of the delayed presidential election, which was perceived as a constitutional coup. A representative of *Aar Sunu Election* explained that "a coup [was] being prepared here. It [was] not military, but that doesn't change the nature of it being a forceful way of depriving us of our constitutional rights."[45] As a consequence, many would have appreciated a stronger reaction from foreign governments.

No donor support during mobilization but needed outside of protest cycles

Almost all interviewees emphasized that there had been no donor support during the mobilization phase. This reflected both the need to preserve Senegalese ownership of the protests and the risks associated with external involvement, including the possibility of undermining the movement or provoking accusations of foreign interference.[46] Research also indicates that donors are often neither able nor

34 Chemam, Melissa, 2024, "Symbolic votes replace real polls as Senegalese declare a day of 'mourning' for democracy," RFI, https://tinyurl.com/4pyzrrnx; *Aar Sunu Election*, 2024, "Le pouvoir citoyen, rempart de la démocratie," https://tinyurl.com/4heks4pv.

35 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* coordinator, October 17, 2025, online.

36 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 17/ 2025, online.

37 Interview with a F24 member organization, October 23, 2025, online.

38 See for more information: Frapp website, https://frappsn.org/.

39 Interview with a Senegalese journalist, October 17, 2025, online.

40 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online.

41 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* member organization, October 30, 2025, online.

42 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online.

43 Miller, Matthew, 2024, "Postponement of Election in Senegal," U.S. Department of State, https://tinyurl.com/5352htz5.

44 Council of the European Union, 2024, "Senegal: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union," https://tinyurl.com/3nnvvb4e.

45 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online.

46 Interview with an F24 representative, October 22, 2025, online.

willing to intervene quickly at such moments.[47] Moreover, there was little practical need for funding at this stage: protest coalitions mobilized their members' resources, relied on existing infrastructure, and depended on volunteer work.[48] Some interviewees also noted that donors could have played a useful role by supporting rapid response mechanisms, such as legal aid for those arrested or subjected to police harassment.[49]

Generally, donor support was deemed especially helpful before and after protest mobilization. Some key civil society organizations have benefitted from collaboration with international donors. PFAnE, which hosted *Aar Sunu Election* in its offices, for example, received grants from the European Commission to facilitate exchanges between non-state actors and with the state.[50] According to interviewees, such long-term support should also be invested in civic education and strengthening of civil society so that they are "empowered to act ... in times of crisis."[51] Donors have strengthened the capacities of some protest groups, but not as a deliberate attempt to support potential protests. Furthermore, they also underscored the strategic importance of cross-country learning, noting that exchanges with peers confronting similar forms of repression or democratic backsliding help activists to learn "the art of mobilization" and sharpen their impact.[52] Existing initiatives in this space were viewed as highly valuable.

47 Hensing, Jakob, Melissa Li, Julia Friedrich and Philipp Rotmann, 2023, "Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises," Global Public Policy Institute, https://gppi.net/2023/03/14/supporting-civil-society-in-acute-crises.

48 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 17, 2025, online.

49 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online; Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* member organization, October 30, 2025, online.

50 Plateforme Des Acteurs Non-Étatique, https://www.plateforme-ane.com/apropos/.

51 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* representative, October 23, 2025, online.

52 Interview with an *Aar Sunu Election* member organization, October 22, 2025, online.

Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill Protests

Context and Trigger Points

In 2024, Kenya experienced one of the most significant waves of mass mobilization since the post-election violence of 2007–2009. That year's Finance Bill – containing an unprecedented set of tax increases on essential goods and services – sparked nationwide protests. Mobilization was driven by a digitally savvy generation of young Kenyans who organized on TikTok and X under the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024. These protests – also commonly known as Gen Z protests given the young age of the activists – drew a lot of regional and international attention, as they precipitated the country into a serious political crisis.

The initial trigger point for the demonstrations was the 2024 Finance Bill.[53] The tax increases proposed in the Bill on essential goods significantly increased the cost of living at a time when Kenyans were still suffering from the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.[54] One respondent explained that a young student with no stable income saw these measures as the government "taxing the basics they [have to] survive on."[55] Young people felt especially targeted because taxes were also imposed on the digital space.[56]

Thousands of young Kenyans took to the street on June 18, 2024 when the Parliament held the second reading of the Finance Bill. After that there were a series of protests before a demonstration on June 25 became extremely chaotic and violent, and protestors stormed the Parliament, set the building on fire and destroyed offices.[57] Activists claimed that "hired goons" had infiltrated the protest movement.[58] The Kenyan security forces responded with live ammunition, leaving 39 people dead.[59] This was the most serious death toll at a protest event in this wave, which overall resulted in over 60 deaths, 80 abductions and 2,000 arbitrary arrests in related protests of December 2024.[60]

On June 26, 2024, the day after the storming of the Parliament, Kenyan President William Ruto announced that he would withdraw the Finance Bill. But although it was the Finance Bill that initially catalyzed mobilization, the grievances quickly expanded. Protestors denounced police brutality, corruption, rising living costs, and worsening youth unemployment. The hashtag #RutoMustGo gained traction on social media platforms,[61] reflecting an escalating loss of trust in the administration and frustration with broken promises, especially Ruto's pledge to make life easier for "hustlers," hard-working Kenyans, in his 2022 re-election campaign. Instead, he was accused of burdening Kenyan citizens while giving government officials free rein, as they were to keep their lavish lifestyles.[62]

The street anger was also directed against the International Monetary Fund (IMF), criticized as wielding Western influence, also perceived as a form of neo-colonialism, over the Kenyan government.[63] Initially part of a COVID-19 response IMF program, the 2024 Finance Bill was supposed to raise 2.7 USD billion in additional revenues to repay a 3.9 USD billion IMF loan.[64] According to interlocutors, the prevalent narrative among the protestors was that they had to carry the burden of the immense public debt even though they had not benefitted from it and had to cope with high youth unemployment.[65]

In mid-July 2024, Ruto dissolved almost his entire cabinet amid sustained nationwide demonstrations. Only the Foreign Minister and Deputy President remained, while

53 ACLED, 2024, "Anti-tax demonstrations spread nationwide and highlight Kenya's structural challenges," July 2024, https://tinyurl.com/8z82ctpf.

54 Liverseed, Claudia, 2025, "Kenya Finance Bill Protests," The Nonviolence Project, https://thenonviolenceproject.wisc.edu/2025/04/29/kenya-finance-bill-protests/; Interview with a donor representative, October 16, 2025, online.

55 Interview with donor representative, October 15, 2025, online.

56 Interview with a protest actor, October 21, 2025, online.

57 Elias, Meron, 2024, "What is Behind Kenya's Protest Movement?," International Crisis Group, https://tinyurl.com/4jfwatcz.

58 X post by Boniface Mwangi, https://x.com/bonifacemwangi/status/1805671120936616336?s=48.

59 Mule, Daniel, 2024, "Update on the Status of Human Rights in Kenya during the Anti-Finance Bill Protests, Monday July 1, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/2dzxndnb.

60 Amnesty International, 2025, "2024 Annual Report: Still Here," https://www.amnestykenya.org/2024-annual-report-still-here/.

61 Chenrose, Ali, 2024, "How Kenya's tax bill protests spread online," DFRLab, https://tinyurl.com/yj6akm45.

62 Elias, Meron, 2024, "What is Behind Kenya's Protest Movement?," International Crisis Group, https://tinyurl.com/4jfwatcz; Chenrose, Ali, 2024, "How Kenya's tax bill protests spread online," DFRLab, https://tinyurl.com/yj6akm45; Wanderi, Kamau and Herald Aloo, 2024, "Kenya: How opulence of Ruto's allies sparked public anger before protests," The Africa Report, https://tinyurl.com/scf46bav.

63 Kaboub, Fadhel, 2024, "Why are the US and IMF imposing draconian austerity measures on Kenya?," The Guardian, https://tinyurl.com/kmmecv2a; Interview with a protest actor, 29 October 2025, online.

64 Human Rights Watch, 2024, "Kenya/IMF: Align Economic Reform with Rights," https://tinyurl.com/2ve4peb9; Eickhoff, Karoline, 2025, "Crisis of Debt or Crisis of Confidence? Kenya's Contested Fiscal Outlook," https://tinyurl.com/z5vk2xwk.

65 Interview with a protest actor, October 21, 2025, online.

Ruto announced plans to form a "broad-based government."[66] This decision came shortly after a political deal was struck between Ruto and opposition leader Raila Odinga – who recently passed away – widely viewed as the culmination of an ongoing process of opposition cooptation.[67]

Overall, the Finance Bill protests showed the power of civic activism. The Gen Z-driven mobilizations marked a turning point: they exposed the depth of economic grievances and dissatisfaction with the government, challenged traditional alignments with international actors and, most importantly, brought a new generation of protestors and strategies to the forefront.

Actors and Strategies

From opposition-led mobilization to a new protest logic: "leaderless, tribeless and partyless"

Until recently, large-scale protests in Kenya were typically organized and driven by the political opposition. In earlier protest cycles, opposition leader Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement, who served as prime minister from 2008 until 2013, played a central role. As one interviewee put it, he "had become synonymous with protest [...] He could call for protest anytime and people would show up. So, he was synonymous with protest. He was our father of protest."[68]

The 2024 Finance Bill protests broke with this. Protestors embraced a new protest logic with the slogan: "leaderless, tribeless and partyless" to protect the movement from repression and political co-optation. As one interlocutor explained, "there was nobody the government could pinpoint and say, if we call this one to the table and negotiate with him, it's going to work for us."[69]

While the word "leaderless" implies that the movement rejected any form of leadership, interviewees who were involved in protest mobilization painted a more nuanced picture: protestors overwhelmingly rejected hierarchical leadership, that is, directed by an individual person or group. Instead, the 2024 Finance Bill protests were structured in terms of "horizontal leadership,"[70] whereby multiple organizations and individuals pursued decentralized actions.[71] In this way, the movement broadened ownership and reduced vulnerabilities. In short, the protest movement was "leaderful, not leaderless."[72]

From tribal- and ethnic-driven politics to issue-based mobilization

The absence of a leader from a specific ethnic community, tribe or political party also helped to garner public support across the different communities. Several interlocutors emphasized that Kenyan politics is usually driven by ethnic or tribal belonging. In the 2024 protests, however, they "adopted a collective kind of thinking where everybody [...] is equal, all tribes are equal."[73] Mobilization thus explicitly shifted from tribal- and ethnic-driven politics to issue-based politics centering grievances on the cost of living, governance and accountability. This reframing helped to expand the protests' reach and legitimacy across constituencies that usually do not protest together.[74]

A young and female movement

The mass participation of young people also gained national and international attention, challenging the long-standing narrative of political apathy among Kenyan youth. Although widely labeled "Gen Z protests," many millennials also joined in, especially young professionals, students and recent graduates.[75] Many young women also played significant roles in the mobilization efforts.[76] One woman who was arrested remembered that police officers wondered that "these are not [the] usual culprits, [...] they are usually men."[77] This arguably also played a role in why the video of her clinging to a fence when police officers approached her, went viral on social media, making her a prominent face of the movement.[78] Several of these women had prior organizing experience in the feminist movement, including the large anti-femicide protests in 2024, which provided them with important skills and networks for the 2024 Finance Bill protests.[79]

66 Deutsche Welle, 2024, "Kenya's Ruto dismisses Cabinet after protests," https://tinyurl.com/3whxcffj.

67 Voice of America, 2025, "Kenya's Ruto, opposition veteran Odinga sign deal to form broad-based government," https://tinyurl.com/3x2uwxaa; Interview with two protest actors in October 2025.

68 Interview with two protest actors in October 2025, online.

69 Interview with a protest actor, October 29, 2025, online.

70 Interview with a protest actor, November 6, 2025, online.

71 Interviews with four protest actors in October and November 2025, online.

72 Interview with a protest actor, November 6, 2025, online.

73 Interview with a protest actor, November 6, 2025, online.

74 Interview with a donor representative, October 15, 2025, online.

75 Interview with a protest actor, October 29, 2025, online.

76 Interview with a Kenyan civil society organization, October 24, 2025, online; Interview with two protest actors in October and November 2025; Siundu, Godwin, 2024, "How Gen Z women are now rewriting power playbook," https://tinyurl.com/3m9nwwh7.

77 Interview with a protest actor, October 29, 2025, online.

78 Wafula, Shakira and Katharina Wilhelm Otieno, 2024, "Ich bin wütend, weil Kenia für viele nicht funktioniert," E+Z Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit, https://tinyurl.com/5n6evnjc.

79 News Agencies, "'Stop killing us!': Thousands march to protest against feminicide in Kenya," Al Jazeera, https://tinyurl.com/hnppekhh.

Organized civil society groups and social movements provided the backbone

Despite the emphasis on decentralization, more established Kenyan civil society actors provided the organizational backbone of the 2024 Finance Bill Protests. Non-governmental organizations, student groups, feminist networks, and the Social Justice Movement – a collective of grassroots, community-based, and youth-led initiatives – played a key stabilizing role. They established communication channels to monitor arrests, injuries and security risks, and coordinate rapid response, as many protestors "were not seasoned human rights defenders,"[80] and could thus benefit from pre-existing organizational infrastructure.

Specific organizations focused on legal support by deploying lawyers to assist detained protestors. Others developed explanatory materials on the Finance Bill, translated into local languages to broaden outreach.[81] Infographics and posters were circulated widely, amplified by anonymous digital activists – one interviewee called them "keyboard warriors"[82] – further expanding the reach. Anonymity was crucial, as individuals perceived as protest leaders faced abduction, forced disappearance, and torture.[83]

Individual activists gained prominence – but were not accepted as leaders

Although the movement rejected hierarchical leadership, certain individuals nonetheless gained visibility. Hanifa Farsafi Adan, for example, organized a crowd fundraising campaign to support mobilization efforts and successfully raised 31 million shillings – over 200,000 euros – from Kenyans in the country and abroad, supporting the legal response and transportation.[84] Others, such as Boniface Mwangi, Morara Kebaso and Kasmuel McOure, also became recognizable figures.

However, attempts by some to position themselves as leaders were strongly rejected, as several interviewees pointed out. Protestors accused them of "trying to be our leader and we are leaderless,"[85] reflecting the movement's commitment to collective leadership as a safeguard against co-optation. This concern did not seem far-fetched, as McOure later joined the ODM party, now aligned with Ruto's government, an act widely interpreted as co-optation and betrayal.[86]

Social media platforms played a central role

Equally striking was the decentralized, digitally enabled mode of organization, which broke with earlier patterns of top-down mobilization. Expanding internet connectivity allowed social media to become a central tool for online mobilization.[87] Social media platforms, predominantly X and TikTok, were used not only to call for protest but to demystify the Finance Bill, debate its implications, provide safety tips, and coordinate mutual aid.[88] X Spaces hosted real-time deliberations, while creative formats – including challenges and video explainers – helped to mainstream protest narratives and build political consciousness among previously disengaged groups.[89] Online mobilization was successful despite attempts to restrict internet access.[90]

Engagement with International Actors

The role of the IMF fueled Gen Z's skepticism of international financial institutions

The IMF's role in shaping the 2024 Finance Bill deeply influenced protestors' perception of international financial institutions. As outlined above, IMF loan conditions were widely seen as driving the tax hikes embedded in the bill. Protestors therefore criticized the IMF – and, by extension, the World Bank – for exacerbating economic hardship for Kenyans. An interviewee reflected on this prevalent narrative as follows: "these institutions are here to destroy Africa and to destroy us because they would not even implement some of these regulations in their own countries."[91]

Interviews further indicate that this distrust has expanded to encompass a broader range of international actors, particularly Western governments and, by extension, institutions. The perceived Western hypocrisy, they added, made it "hard for activists to be around foreign missions," prompting them to be cautious about publicly disclosing their participation in EU events.[92] In some instances, this

80 Interview with a protest actor, October 21, 2025, online.

81 Interviews with five protest actors in October and November 2025, online.

82 Interview with a protest actor, October 28, 2025, online.

83 Madung, Odanga, 2025, "Tortured over a tweet: how the war between Kenya's Gen Z and their president has moved online," The Guardian, https://tinyurl.com/546ddhaa.

84 Amnesty International Kenya, 2024, "Hanifa and Lenolkulal: A tale of two leaders," https://tinyurl.com/55kh3jcw.

85 Interview with a Kenyan civil society organization, October 24, 2025, online; Interview with a protest actor, 28 October 2025, online; Arjon, Brian and Didacus Malowa, 2025, "UoN Students Warn Kasmuel Mc Oure Against Masquerading as Gen Z Leader: "Kuna Watu Walikufa," Tuko, https://tinyurl.com/a7x9u5jm.

86 Chemam, Melissa, 2025, "Kenya protests reignited by custody death, but 'Gen Z' movement remains divided," RFI, https://tinyurl.com/2b9bzprd; Muthoni, Davin, 2025, "Kasmuel McOure: Gen Z protest hero who dared to play politics," The Nairobi Law Monthly, https://tinyurl.com/5ysa893s; Noyes, Alexander, 2025, Kenya's Shaky Handshake Deals, https://tinyurl.com/2e8hsmd4.

87 Ardebili, Shaghayegh Arzani, 2025, "Tweets of Resistance: Social Media and Mobilization in Contemporary Kenya," Lund University – Faculty of Social Sciences, https://tinyurl.com/yeyjuszr.

88 Nendo, 2024, „The #Reject Revolution: When Tweets Take to the Streets. The Story of 25 Million Posts Powering Kenya's #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests," https://tinyurl.com/2fff4ja5.

89 Interview with a donor representative, October 15, 2025, online; Interview with a Kenyan civil society organization, October 24, 2025.

90 Access Now, 2024, "Authorities in Kenya must immediately restore internet access and #KeepItOn throughout protests and unrest," https://tinyurl.com/mswp84bk.

91 Interview with a protest actor, November 6, 2025, online.

92 Interview with a protest actor, November 6, 2025, online.

shaped how both activists and international donors weighed risks, visibility, and modes of engagement during the protests.[93]

Unjustified accusations against the Ford Foundation

International engagement became even riskier after Ruto publicly accused the Ford Foundation – a US philanthropic organization – of sponsoring violence in Kenya in the context of the 2024 Finance Bill protests.[94] This accusation was widely interpreted as a strategic move to shift the blame for the mass protests onto a foreign actor, diverting attention from the Ruto administration's own failures of governance.[95] While the foundation does support independent civil society to strengthen democracy in Kenya, the government could not provide any evidence to prove their allegations. A few months later, Ruto backpedaled and thanked the foundation for its support for democracy in Kenya.[96]

While it did not appear to have impacted the movement's mobilization, it did have severe consequences for Kenyan civil society groups, as they were intensively investigated.[97] This illustrates how accusations against external actors can become a tool of intimidation, used to pressure or weaken protest groups at crucial political moments.

International solidarity was crucial

Despite the general skepticism toward international actors, interlocutors who mobilized protests emphasized that international solidarity played an important role. Global media coverage was particularly important in holding the government accountable, especially regarding police brutality. One interviewee stated that "international media was also protective [...] because Ruto has this image outside and in trying to protect his image, he toned down how he dealt with dissent and how he was responding to people."[98]

The solidarity of human rights organizations was also positively highlighted. They were able to "create a lot of trust"[99] with protestors, as they provided legal support and publicly and frequently condemned the violent repression. The protest movement also received support from similar movements from other countries such as from #ENDSARS Nigeria or #FeesMustFall South Africa and the Kenyan diaspora.[100] This international solidarity energized the movement to sustain the momentum, as they knew that "the world was with us on the street."[101]

Disappointment with foreign governments

While interlocutors expressed appreciation for international solidarity, nearly all voiced disappointment with the perceived silence of foreign governments. Although some acknowledged the diplomatic constraints of intervening in domestic political crises, they emphasized that stronger public pressure was warranted. None of the interviewees referenced the public statements that had been issued,[102] probably because they were couched in such emollient, cautious language. Many believed that firmer, more explicit condemnations of human rights violations could have "instilled some kind of fear in the government [and thus] would have saved ourselves from a lot of bloodshed."[103] One interviewee also criticized the incoherent practice of foreign governments, which she perceived as evidence of double standards, as they continued business-as-usual with Ruto's administration, even though human rights were being massively violated.[104]

This was particularly frustrating because several interviewees also invested their time in exchanges with Western diplomats who had requested meetings to get a better sense of the protests. One interviewee shared this disappointment: "in the beginning, I was happy to engage with them, but as the days continued, I came to learn that they were not actually offering any practical or tangible support."[105] A Western diplomat highlighted that discreet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy can at times be more effective than public condemnation.[106] This divergence in perceptions highlights the persistent gap between diplomatic practice and activist expectations.

Donor support for civil society before and after the protests

Despite the tense political environment, interviewees underscored the continued importance of collaboration between international donors and Kenyan civil society. Importantly, interviewees did not express preferences regarding international donors when asked to distinguish between

93 Interview with a donor representative, October 15, 2025, online; Interview with a protest actor, November 6, 2025, online.
94 Mines, Priscilla, 2024, "Ruto falsely accuses Ford Foundation of funding violence in Kenya," Voice of America, https://tinyurl.com/yvdsv34b.
95 Jamal, Urooba, 2024, "Why is Kenya's Ruto accusing the Ford Foundation of stoking protests?," https://tinyurl.com/fpf6jxf7.
96 Musaddique, Shafi, 2024, "Kenya president U-turns on Ford Foundation attack," Alliance Magazine, https://tinyurl.com/yc4tv5xn.
97 Abuso, Victor, 2024, "Kenya investigates 16 civil society groups over alleged protest funding," The Africa Report, https://tinyurl.com/39emn6jv.
98 Interview with a protest actor, October 29, 2025, online.
99 Interview with a protest actor, October 23, 2025, online.
100 Interview with a protest actor, October 29, 2025, online; Interview with a protest actor, October 28,2025, online.
101 Interview with a protest actor, October 28, 2025, online.
102 British High Commission Nairobi, 2024, "Joint statement by Ambassadors and High Commissioners in Kenya on public protests," https://tinyurl.com/mrxhmkmz.
103 Interview with a protest actor, October 28, 2025, online.
104 Interview with a protest actor, November 6, 2025, online.
105 Interview with a protest actor, October 29, 2025, online.
106 Interview with an international diplomat, October 27, 2025, online.

different types of donors.

At the height of the protests, external support was largely absent. Activists instead mobilized domestic resources, and immediate financial needs remained relatively limited. They were focused primarily on rapid response measures, such as medical treatment, legal aid, and emergency coordination, which only a few human rights organizations supported during mobilization.

Where international engagement was viewed as most consequential was before and after the peak protest phase. Interviewees emphasized that donors could add more value by strengthening cross-country learning among activists, helping to sustain momentum once street mobilization dwindled, and supporting efforts to feed protestors' demands into institutional channels for political change.[107]

107 Interviews with three protest actors in October and November 2025, online.

What Can We Learn from the Cases of Senegal and Kenya?

In 2024, both Kenya and Senegal experienced major waves of mass protest, each unprecedented in its own way. In Senegal, the trigger – the indefinite postponement of the presidential election – was a new occurrence in the country's post-independence history. Kenya's protests, by contrast, were novel in formal terms: young, often female, digitally savvy citizens mobilized at scale through social media, in a decentralized manner and without identifiable leadership. The table in the annex provides a comparative overview of the core dynamics in the two countries. Both case studies highlight the two pathways through which mass mobilization emerged, evolved and interacted with international actors in each context. Building on this, the next section outlines five key lessons that help to explain how urban protest movements can unfold in African democracies and what they imply for external engagement.

1. Broad, inclusive protest mobilization is key to success

First, both cases show that protests gain significant strength when they unite groups across political, ethnic and social divides. However, the pathways to such inclusiveness differed. In Senegal, the civil society coalition *Aar Sunu Election* finally chose to collaborate with political parties and presidential candidates, which allowed them to gain mobilization strength, arguably contributing to the protests' impact. In Kenya, by contrast, activists distanced themselves from the traditional political opposition to avoid ethnic, tribal or partisan-led dynamics and instead adopted a non-partisan agenda. Instead, they gained mobilization strength by adopting a non-partisan stance, and also by developing a broader agenda moving beyond the 2024 Finance Bill and towards broader governance issues.

In both cases, broad-based inclusiveness in terms of protest groups and demands significantly expanded mobilization capacity and impact. This also resonates with research that argues that nonviolent movements are likely to succeed if they can draw a diverse group of protestors.[108]

2. Protest mobilization reflects generational and organizational shifts

Second, the two cases also reveal contrasting mobilization styles shaped by generational and organizational factors. Kenya's protests were driven largely by Gen Z and millennials, displaying features typical of recent so-called "Gen Z protests" (for example, in Nepal or Madagascar): decentralized, "leaderless" organizing designed to avoid political co-optation.[109] Senegal's mobilization, by contrast, was anchored in more established civil society organizations and political actors with older leadership and deeper institutional roots. These differences point to a generational shift in protest organization – visible not only in Kenya but across Asia and parts of Africa – suggesting that emerging youth-led movements merit close attention.

3. Digital spaces matter but they depend on access and offline networks

Third, while digital mobilization played a crucial role – particularly in Kenya – it proved necessary but not sufficient to sustain mass protests over time. In Kenya, digital platforms were essential for rapid coordination by young people who lacked prior organizing experience or ties to institutional structures.

In Senegal, by contrast, digital tools played a supportive but secondary role. Protest groups used social media to announce demonstrations, but the backbone of mobilization relied on strong, longstanding offline networks among civil society organizations, unions, political parties, and social movements. These networks remained the primary channels for coordination and strategic decision-making. Moreover, Senegal's repeated mobile internet shutdowns – lasting several days – further limited the potential for sustained online organizing.[110]

For digital mobilization to flourish, protestors need access to the internet and social media. Although in Kenya there were also sporadic reports of slowed connectivity and targeted disruptions, these were far more limited than in Senegal,[111] allowing for mass online mobilization. However,

108 Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan, Why civil resistance works: the strategic logic of nonviolent conflict, Columbia University Press, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/chen15682.

109 Forus, 2025, "The Flashpoint Generation: How Gen Z is rewriting the rules of protest the world over – a cross-country analysis of a rising wave of youth-driven protests around the world," https://tinyurl.com/3mtrxtm9.

110 Access Now, 2024, "#KeepItOn: government of Senegal must ensure open and secure internet access throughout the 2024 presidential elections," https://tinyurl.com/wudrue9v.

111 Access Now, 2024, "Kenya must obey court orders and #KeepItOn during protests," https://tinyurl.com/3cnfsn94; Access Now, 2024, "Authorities in Kenya must immediately restore internet access and #KeepItOn throughout protests and unrest," https://tinyurl.com/mswp84bk.

even in Kenya, the movement's continuity depended on offline networks, including legal aid networks, feminist organizations, community centers, and established civil society groups that provided the organizational backbone. Ensuring access to these networks and digital spaces therefore becomes crucial.

4. "Spontaneous" movements are built on prior networks and experiences, often previously supported by donors

Fourth, although protest movements sometimes appear to emerge "out of nowhere," they build on longstanding experiences and networks. In several cases, civil society organizations and social movements were able to draw on capacities and networks strengthened through earlier collaborations with international donors, including funding that supported their core activities.

The experiences of the 2024 protests in Senegal and Kenya differ significantly. In Senegal, mobilization drew almost entirely on highly professionalized infrastructures: organized civil society, political parties, and presidential candidates all had prior experience, resources and networks that they could immediately activate. In Kenya, by contrast, the early spontaneous wave of mobilization was driven largely by young people who initially relied on social media communities. More organized grassroots, social and feminist movements became increasingly involved, helping to coordinate and sustain the movement while preserving its decentralized character. These cases reflect a consistent finding in social movement research: even when protests begin spontaneously, some degree of organizational support and coordination is essential to sustain mobilization over time.[112]

5. Diplomatic signals shape how protestors interpret international credibility – and often diverge from their expectations

Fifth, while protesters often recognize the diplomatic constraints that international diplomats must consider when engaging in a foreign country, most expected that clearer public positions would be adopted when democratic norms and rights were violated. In Kenya, activists often described the reactions of Western partners as overly cautious, even when statements were made. Even though Senegal's crisis prompted clearer public statements by the United States, reactions by other foreign governments were considered too timid.

This gap is not simply a matter of "protestors wanting more." Rather, it reflects a deeper structural mismatch: diplomats may prioritize long-term partnerships and access, whereas protestors judge credibility through visible, unequivocal support for democratic and human rights. When reactions to democratic backsliding are milder than reactions to military coups – though there may be legitimate reasons, such as following ECOWAS' positions –[113] this perceived incoherence undermines trust and affects how protestors interpret the broader democratic commitments of international actors.

6. International donor support is risky but helpful and welcome outside of protest cycles

Sixth, international donor support is risky. In Kenya, former President Ruto's accusation that the Ford Foundation was financing the protests – an allegation he later walked back – illustrates how governments under pressure can scapegoat international donors. Such claims, even when unfounded, can expose local civil society groups with donor ties to the risk of repression. In Senegal, actors expressed a different concern, namely that foreign involvement might undermine the objectives of the mobilization, and they therefore insisted that any donor support should pursue only the protestors' interests.

At the same time, both cases highlight that donor engagement before and after protest cycles is welcome and helpful. Long-term support helps to nurture political consciousness, strengthen mobilization capacity, and sustain momentum so that protest demands can be translated into concrete political agendas.

112 Edwards, Bob and John D. McCarthy, 2004, "Resources and Social Movement Mobilization," The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements, https://tinyurl.com/5n97s-ff8.

113 Sow, Djiby and Melissa Li, 2025, "Reforming ECOWAS: A Case for Institutional Resilience in a Changing Era," Global Public Policy Institute/Institute for Security Studies, https://tinyurl.com/47ayp269.

How Can International Actors Engage?

Governments generally rightly push back against international interference in contentious democratic politics. No democratic government would tolerate foreign meddling within its own borders. At the same time, democratic governments and human rights organizations have rightly called out the massive increase in so-called "foreign agent laws." These are implemented to deliberately criminalize independent civil society groups who are key players for holding governments accountable and central to safeguarding democratic norms. In recent years, such laws have spread globally. Zimbabwe's adoption of the "Private Voluntary Organizations Act" in April 2025 is the most recent example on the African continent.[114]

This environment may not only put international actors but also their local partners in a vulnerable position, as the accusation against the Ford Foundation in Kenya has forcefully shown. However, doing nothing is not a neutral option either. Pro-democracy movements in Senegal and Kenya have repeatedly stressed the value of international solidarity, and external actors committed to democratic principles have a strong longer-term interest in democratic resilience and more sustainable stability. Not engaging therefore risks disappointing key local partners who call for stronger reactions from international partners, and at the same time undermining their own strategic interests.

Engaging in African democracies arguably makes it more difficult. Diplomatic considerations and the desire to maintain strong partnerships may make external engagement more delicate than in more authoritarian settings. But precisely because partner governments have themselves committed to democratic norms and human rights protections, international actors can also legitimately insist that these commitments be upheld.

Building on the evidence from Senegal and Kenya, this study presents five recommendations outlining how international actors can respond responsibly and effectively to pro-democratic protest movements.

1. Private foundations and INGOs should provide rapid support during peak protests and prepare for mis- and disinformation risks.

During peak protests, financial and technical support should be limited to rapid responses to protect the safety of protestors and activists. To understand when the peak mobilization phase is reached, protest researchers' metric of at least 1,000 observed participants is useful.[115] This should of course be treated as a very rough rule of thumb, as this number of course also depends on other factors, such as size of population and broader context.

Private foundations and INGOs – especially those with a focus on defending democratic and human rights – are best placed among international actors to provide this type of assistance. They can act relatively quickly, take higher political risks, and because they do not represent foreign state interests, they are somewhat less vulnerable to accusations of foreign meddling. This is not a guarantee, as the Kenyan case illustrated, but it still puts them in a better position than bilateral development agencies or foreign embassies.

These actors can discreetly provide logistical support, legal aid for detained protesters, and medical aid for injured people, and also track human rights violations. This is particularly relevant for contexts in which protests are violently repressed, as was the case in both Kenya and Senegal.

To limit the risk of false accusations, donors engaging during protests must be prepared for strategic mis- and disinformation campaigns. As seen in Kenya, false accusations – in this case against the Ford Foundation – can be weaponized in an attempt to delegitimize activists and justify repression. Addressing this requires proactive communication strategies, sensitive and well-coordinated engagement with local partners, and additional protection measures to avoid unintentionally increasing their exposure.

2. International actors should use international fora to amplify local voices, deter repression and strengthen democratic rights.

International actors should, if protest actors are open to this, help to connect protest groups and activists to international fora. In practice, this includes UN bodies and international media, as well as relevant institutions in foreign countries, such as parliaments (or individual politicians), foreign ministries, development agencies, NGOs and foundations.

While INGOs and private foundations are best suited

114 Pousadela, Inés M., 2025, "Cutting Civil Society's Lifeline. The global spread of foreign agents law," CIVICUS, https://tinyurl.com/hm7zxcu4.

115 Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan, 2021, "The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?," International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, https://tinyurl.com/4vc7429b.

to discreetly fund potential travel and convening of meetings, foreign embassies and political foundations typically have more direct access to political decision-makers, which they can activate to facilitate meetings and briefings. Such connections can amplify local voices and increase international visibility around the developments and concerns raised by protest movements.

Importantly, international actors should take measures to protect activists from potential backlash, including ensuring confidentiality, assessing risks, and coordinating discreetly when public visibility could endanger them. If done sensitively, increased international attention can help to deter repression and increase pressure on governments to respect democratic freedoms and fundamental rights.

3. Foreign governments should balance public pressure with backdoor diplomacy against repression, depending on the context.

Foreign governments should adopt a firm and coherent stance when civic space and democracy are at risk, and when protest groups and activists face intimidation, violence or other forms of repression. Although interviewees in both Kenya and Senegal felt that foreign governments did not respond forcefully enough, they also stressed that international media attention and advocacy by human rights organizations helped to deter further repression, especially in Kenya. This can, arguably, be amplified if foreign governments also speak up against repression.

The democratic state of the respective country arguably shapes the potential impact of international pressure. In more democratic contexts, governments are more sensitive about reputational costs, which can enhance the leverage of foreign partners and deter repression. This perhaps applies even more in countries regarded as regional "democratic champions," such as Senegal and Kenya, where political considerations can increase the impact of international pressure. However, it is also important to note that African partners increasingly seek to emancipate themselves vis-à-vis Western partners, which heightens the risk of Western governments alienating needed democratic partners on the continent.

If the risks of delineating key partners are deemed particularly high, foreign governments may need to reduce public pressure and increase backdoor diplomacy. However, public pressure through public statements or high-level engagement should still clearly condemn repression and human rights violations. This is not only key to upholding normative commitments but also to remaining credible in the eyes of other international or civil society partners. More forceful messages can then be delivered discreetly through diplomatic channels, allowing governments to press their concerns with a lower risk of alienating long-standing partnerships.

4. Donors should strengthen civic infrastructure as a long-term investment.

There is broad agreement that long-term investment in civic infrastructure – the ecosystem of organizations, networks and skills that enable people to mobilize, coordinate and sustain collective action – is essential for democratic governance. This is also where bilateral development organizations, international government organizations, as well as political and private foundations have particular strengths: providing sustained support, capacity building, and predictable resources that matter most outside moments of acute crisis. The findings of this study reaffirm this as effective protest movements drew on civic infrastructures that were built long before a crisis hit and have continued to matter afterwards.

More concretely, many interviewees emphasized the need for more opportunities for cross-learning between activists and social movements facing similar struggles in other countries. Private foundations, INGOs and political foundations that also have an interest in supporting such movements are well placed to facilitate and fund such exchanges discreetly.

Importantly, such support should not depend on protest cycles: civic actors need sustained opportunities for learning and coalition-building, not only before and after instances of mass mobilization. Continuous investment ensures that civil society organizations, activists, grassroots initiatives and social movements are equipped and connected when political crises arise, and thus able to play a central role in protest mobilization.

5. Donors should prioritize partners based on legitimacy, mobilization experience and openness to international support.

A key question for donors[116] is therefore who the "right" partners are. Across the board, donors should prioritize partners with demonstrated legitimacy, mobilization experience and openness to international support. Local partners must be able to credibly represent relevant segments of the population to ensure legitimacy. Moreover, international support is most effective when it builds on pre-existing mobilization capacity and experience; without this foundation, external support is difficult to scale and may have limited impact. Finally, partners must be willing to engage with international actors, as support is neither feasible nor appropriate where it is not wanted.[117]

116 When speaking generally about donors, we apply the following definition: "The term 'donor' – with its altruistic connotations – may generally be considered problematic in a political context such as [external democracy support] but remains the most suitable shorthand for the variety of actors (including but not limited to governments) that provide funding and other types of support to civil society actors." See for more information: Hensing, Jakob and Melissa Li, Julia Friedrich and Philipp Rotmann, 2023, "Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises," Global Public Policy Institute, https://gppi.net/2023/03/14/supporting-civil-society-in-acute-crises.

117 Hensing, Jakob and Melissa Li, Julia Friedrich and Philipp Rotmann, 2023, "Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises," Global Public Policy Institute, https://gppi.net/2023/03/14/supporting-civil-society-in-acute-crises.

The cases show that the question of the "right" partners closely depends on the context. In Senegal, professionalized civil society organizations and political actors formed the core of the protest coalitions. Because many of the civil society actors primarily work on issue-specific agendas – such as workers' rights or energy scarcity – this suggests that donors should continue to invest in such issue-based NGOs and membership organizations. These actors are generally legally registered and established, making them suitable partners for a wide range of donors, including those with lower risk tolerance or less flexibility in their funding instruments, such as bilateral development agencies or international governmental bodies. German political foundations, given their partisan political mandates and longstanding relationships with political parties, are well positioned to strengthen the capacities of political counterparts, on top of the civil society actors aligned with their thematic priorities.

The Kenyan case points to a different challenge. Here, informal networks, grassroots initiatives, individual activists and social movements formed the backbone of early mobilization. These actors are typically less visible and harder for donors to reach. As mobilization was decentralized and structured by horizontal leadership, identifying credible and representative partners became more difficult. This underlines the importance of looking beyond the usual, easily accessible NGO partners and finding ways to support emerging civic actors who play central roles in moments of democratic contestation. For this, continuous actor mapping and frequent exchanges with other donors and their national staff are key elements.[118]

118 Li, Melissa, Jakob Hensing and Philipp Rotmann, 2023, "Strategy and Planning Tool for Civil Society Measures in Acute Crises," https://gppi.net/assets/Li_et_al_Manual_GPPi_2023.zip (download); Hensing, Jakob and Melissa Li, Julia Friedrich and Philipp Rotmann, 2023, "Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises," Global Public Policy Institute, https://gppi.net/2023/03/14/supporting-civil-society-in-acute-crises.

Table 1

Comparative Overview: 2024 Protest Dynamics in Senegal and Kenya

	Senegal (2024 Electoral Crisis Protests)	Kenya (2024 Finance Bill Protests)
Context and trigger points	*Triggered by democratic backsliding:* indefinite postponement of the presidential election, widely seen as a "constitutional coup." *Built on earlier grievances:* shrinking civic space since 2021, prosecution of Sonko, bans on demonstrations, internet shutdowns. *Outcome:* Constitutional Court intervention restored the electoral calendar; elections held within constitutional timeframe.	*Triggered by socio-economic injustice:* the 2024 Finance Bill's tax hikes amid rising cost of living. *Underlying grievances:* youth unemployment, IMF conditionalities, public debt, corruption, inequality between population and elite. *Outcome:* Withdrawal of 2024 Finance Bill, dissolution of cabinet.
Actors and strategies	*Actors:* Broad coalitions (F24 and Aar Sunu Election) including civil society organizations; unions; political parties; presidential candidates; religious actors; social movements. *Strategies:* • Strong pre-existing networks with decades of mobilization experience. • Rapid activation of established structures and leadership. • Mix of demonstrations, silent marches, symbolic tactics. • Tactical adjustment in response to repression; heavy reliance on offline organizing.	*Actors:* • Primarily Gen Z and millennials; many young women. • Decentralized networks of civil society groups, grassroots initiatives, social and feminist movements provided the backbone for coordination. *Strategies:* • Initial mobilization spontaneous and digitally driven via X and TikTok; lacked hierarchical leadership. • "Leaderful," decentralized organization, issue-based rather than ethnic or partisan. • Heavy use of creative digital content, X spaces, and viral videos.
Engagement with international actors	*Foreign governments:* • US reaction perceived as timely and strong. • Other foreign governments' reactions viewed as too soft. *Donor support:* • Protest groups neither distinguished nor preferred specific donor types. • No donor support during mobilization – seen as too risky and potentially delegitimizing. • Protestors emphasized need for long-term civic education and cross-country learning before and after protest cycles. *Other:* • Protest actors emphasized ownership; specific anti-imperialist groups' rejection of any international involvement.	*Foreign governments:* • Foreign governments perceived as silent. • Activists cautious around Western foreign mission due to "neo-colonial" narrative. *Donor support:* • Protest groups neither distinguished nor preferred specific donor types. • No visible donor support during peak protests due to high political risk. • Key need was rapid response (legal/medical aid). • Donor support viewed to be most useful between peak protests to sustain momentum and feed demands into institutional channels for political change. *Other:* • High distrust of international financial institutions (IMF and World Bank). • International solidarity displayed by international media, diaspora, social movements and human rights organizations valued.

About the Author

Melissa Li is a Research Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), where she contributes to the institute's work on peace and security. Her work focuses on the role of civil society actors and protest movements in crisis contexts, stabilization, conflict analysis, and development financing.

Acknowledgements

The views expressed in this study are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the FES. I'd like to thank Andreas Quasten, Christian Denzin, Henrik Maihack, and Svende Eickhoff for their constructive and fruitful collaboration on this project.

The research for this report would not have been possible without the generous support and time of many people. Most importantly, I would like to thank the many Senegalese and Kenyan activists and members of protest groups, diplomats, and representatives of political foundations who kindly offered their time and insights during the interviews that became the foundation of this research.

I would also like to thank my FES colleagues Andreas Quasten, Christian Denzin, Bastian Schulz and Elisabeth Bollrich, as well as my GPPi colleague Philipp Rotmann for their extensive and valuable feedback on a draft study.

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

In cooperation with:

GPPi
GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE