POLICY BRIEF

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Melissa Li, Global Public Policy Institute

Silence Is Not Neutral: International Actors and Urban Protests in Kenya and Senegal

Why This Matters

In the twenty-first century, Africa has become a global epicenter of protest movements.[1] Much of it is concentrated in rapidly growing urban areas, in which population density heightens competition over resources, but also makes mobilization easier.[2] In this context, protests have become a key channel for making political demands.

This creates a strategic dilemma for international actors. They have an interest in supporting democratic participation and vibrant civil societies. Inclusive politics make for more stable and reliable partners. However, visible engagement can undermine local dynamics or strain relations with partner governments that view protest movements as a threat. At the same time, democratic governments under pressure are increasingly restricting freedoms, imposing crackdowns on protest leaders, or fueling anti-imperialist narratives against foreign actors. These tensions complicate meaningful support, even where international and protestors' interests overlap.

This policy brief examines two major 2024 protest waves: the Finance Bill protests in Kenya and the electoral crisis protests in Senegal. It analyzes how they unfolded, who mobilized, and how international engagement was perceived.[3] It also develops recommendations on how international actors can respond to protest movements without increasing risks to protestors or jeopardizing their partnerships.[4]

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 This policy brief is based on a more detailed study, "When Citizens Mobilize: Urban Protests in African Democracies – The Cases of Senegal and Kenya," 2026, FES.

4 The findings are based on desk research and 22 online interviews with protest actors and international actors in Kenya (12 interviews) and Senegal (10 interviews), conducted in October and November 2025. Some 73% of the interviews were conducted with protest actors.

What Happened in Senegal and Kenya

Senegal's 2024 Electoral Crisis Protests

In early 2024, former President Macky Sall plunged Senegal into a constitutional crisis by indefinitely postponing the presidential election originally scheduled for February 25, 2024. Parliament set a new date in December, effectively extending Sall's mandate beyond the two-term limit. Against a background of shrinking civic space, prosecutions of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, banned demonstrations and internet shutdowns, the postponement was widely denounced as a "constitutional coup."[5]

Mass protests emerged rapidly, picking up the protest wave that started in 2021, leading to over 60 deaths.[6] Two broad coalitions – F24 and *Aar Sunu Election* – brought together professionalized civil society organizations, trade unions, social movements, religious actors, and eventually, political parties and presidential candidates. The Constitutional Court ultimately declared the postponement unconstitutional, elections were organized within a revised timeframe, and opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye won the presidency on March 24, 2024.

Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill Protests

In mid-2024, Kenya experienced some of its most intense urban protests since the post-election violence of 2007–2009. The trigger was the Finance Bill 2024, which proposed substantial tax hikes on essential goods and on the digital economy at a time of deep socio-economic strain and high youth unemployment.
Young Kenyans organized under the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024, primarily via X and TikTok. A turning point came on June 25, 2024, when protestors stormed Parliament, leading to dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries and arrests. President William Ruto subsequently withdrew the Bill and later dissolved much of his cabinet. Grievances evolved beyond taxation to encompass police brutality, corruption, and a broader call for accountability, expressed in the slogan #RutoMustGo.

The Kenyan mobilization adopted a strategy characterized as "leaderless, tribeless and partyless," driven by young and female activists. It was enabled by digital tools but sustained by networks of NGOs, grassroots initiatives, feminist groups, and human rights organizations, which provided legal and logistical support.

What We Found

In 2024, both Kenya and Senegal experienced major waves of mass protest. 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.

1. Broad, inclusive mobilization is key to success.

In both countries, protest movements gained leverage when they brought together diverse groups and demands. In Senegal, *Aar Sunu Election* – a broad civil society coalition – initially tried to exclude political parties and presidential candidates. Eventually, they opted for pragmatic collaboration and framed protests as a broad defense of democracy, not a partisan struggle, which strengthened mobilization. In Kenya, by contrast, activists deliberately distanced themselves from traditional opposition parties and from political alignment based on ethnic and tribal associations. They framed the protests around cross-cutting grievances and insisted on non-partisan, issue-based mobilization.

2. Protest mobilization reflects generational and organizational shifts.

Both cases reveal contrasting mobilization styles shaped by generational and organizational factors. Kenya's protests were driven largely by Gen Z and millennials, and displayed features typical of recent so-called "Gen Z protests": they were involved through decentralized, "leaderless" organizing designed to avoid political co-optation.[7] 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,[8] suggesting that emerging youth-led movements merit close attention.

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

Digital mobilization played a crucial role, particularly in Kenya, but it was not sufficient. In Kenya, social media was central to mobilization and coordination for young Kenyans with little prior organizing experience. In Senegal, by contrast, digital tools primarily amplified mobilization rooted in dense offline networks of civil society organizations and

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

6 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.

7 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.

8 Fong, Clara, 2025, "How Global Gen Z Protests Have Shocked and Transformed Governments," Council on Foreign Relations, https://tinyurl.com/37tnywmn.

political parties. Repeated internet shutdowns in Senegal limited online organizing.[9] In both contexts, offline networks were needed to sustain mobilization.

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

Protests did not arise "out of nowhere." 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 activate immediately. In Kenya, by contrast, the early spontaneous wave of mobilization was quickly stabilized by organized grassroots, social and feminist movements. Previous donor[10] support for civil society organizations and social movements often helped in building this underlying infrastructure, although they focused on supporting their core activities, and not protest activity per se.

5. Diplomatic signals shape the perceived credibility of international actors.

Protest actors in both countries viewed international solidarity achieved via media, diaspora, and social movements as valuable, but were often disappointed by foreign governments. In Senegal, the United States' reaction to the electoral delay was seen as strong, while those of other foreign partners, including the EU and European governments, were considered too cautious. In Kenya, activists often described the reactions of Western partners as "silent" or too soft, especially compared with the severity of police violence.

Diplomats may prioritize long-term partnerships and access, whereas protestors judge credibility through visible, unequivocal support for democratic and human rights. However, when reactions to democratic backsliding are milder than reactions to military coups,[11] 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.

Both cases show that donor engagement during protests is highly sensitive. In Kenya, former President Ruto's unfounded public accusation that the Ford Foundation had financed protests illustrated how easily international actors can be scapegoated, exposing local partners to repression. In Senegal, key actors insisted that the mobilization remain a "Senegalese affair," wary of the risk that overt external involvement could delegitimize the movement, which is why they insisted that any donor support should pursue their interests.

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.

What International Actors Can Do

Governments understandably resist foreign interference in contentious domestic politics; no democracy would accept external meddling. However, the rapid spread of "foreign agent laws" aimed at criminalizing independent civil society – and Kenya's use of such accusations against the Ford Foundation – shows how easily these narratives can be weaponized.[12]

However, doing nothing is not neutral. 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. By not engaging, international actors risk disappointing key local partners while undermining own strategic interests.

Engaging in African democracies arguably makes it more difficult. Diplomatic sensitivities and strategic partnerships constrain the options of foreign governments and multilateral organizations. Development agencies often face bureaucratic limitations, while INGOs, private foundations and – to a lesser extent – political foundations often have more flexibility, although they still face risks. 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 policy brief outlines five recommendations on how international actors can better respond to pro-democratic protest movements.

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

Private foundations and INGOs focused on democracy and human rights are best positioned to act quickly during peak

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

10 Generally, when talking 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 support for democracy] 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.

11 There may be legitimate reasons, such as following ECOWAS' positions; see for more information: 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.

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

protests.[13] They can discreetly provide legal aid for detained protestors, medical support for injured demonstrators, and secure documentation of human rights violations.

Their distance from state interests enables swifter action and somewhat reduces the risk of being portrayed as foreign meddler, though not entirely, as Kenya demonstrated. These actors must be prepared for coordinated mis- and disinformation campaigns, requiring careful communication and strong protection measures for local partners.

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

International actors can open doors to international fora such as UN bodies, international media, parliaments or foreign ministries. While INGOs and private foundations are best suited to fund potential travel and meetings discreetly, foreign embassies and political foundations typically have more direct access to political decision-makers, which they can activate to facilitate meetings and briefings.

Importantly, international actors should ensure confidentiality and risk assessments to avoid backlash against activists. 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 and multilateral bodies should balance public pressure with backdoor diplomacy against repression based on context.

When protest groups and activists face violent repression or democratic rights are at risk, foreign governments and multilateral bodies (EU, UN, AU) should issue clear messages condemning repression and democratic backsliding. Sharper signals can be delivered privately through diplomatic channels when public confrontation risks alienating strategic partners. Speaking up consistently against repression and human rights violations is crucial, also in order to remain credible in the eyes of other international or civil society partners.

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. Bilateral development agencies, international governmental organizations, as well as political and private foundations should prioritize long-term support in order to strengthen civil society organizations, grassroots initiatives and social movements. More concretely, private foundations, INGOs and political foundations should invest in cross-country learning exchanges between protest groups and activists. In both cases, effective protest movements drew on civic infrastructures that were built long before a crisis and have continued to matter afterwards.

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

A key question for donors is therefore who the "right" partners are. Across the board, donors should prioritize partners with demonstrated legitimacy, mobilization experience and openness for international support.[14] The cases showed that the question of the "right" partners depends heavily on the context. In Senegal, professionalized civil society organizations and political actors were central. Many of the civil society actors work primarily on issue-specific agendas, such as workers' rights or energy scarcity, suggesting that donors should continue to invest in such issue-based NGOs and membership organizations.

In Kenya, 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. Donors should look beyond the usual, easily accessible NGO partners and find ways to support emerging civic actors who play central roles at moments of democratic contestation. For this, continuous actor mapping and frequent exchanges with other donors and their national staff are key.[15]

13 To understand when the peak mobilization phase is reached, protest researchers' metric of at least 1,000 observed participants is useful. 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 the broader context. See for more information: 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.

14 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.

15 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.

Comparative Overview: 2024 Protest Dynamics in Senegal and Kenya

Table 1

	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

This study was funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). The views expressed 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 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.

Imprint

Published by
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
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

Image Credits
P. 1: picture alliance / Anadolu | Gerald Anderson

March 2026

ISBN 978-3-98628-824-2

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

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
International Cooperation
Africa Department

GPPi
GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE