

# Psychosocial Drivers of National Security Dynamics amid Gen Z Resistance to Finance Bill 2024 in Kenya

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## Abstract

The protests in Kenya following the passage of the Finance Bill 2024 posed a national security threat. The incident prompted an assessment of mental health issues among Generation Z, popularly known as Gen Z. The gradual process that began with agitation to reject the Bill escalated into full-blown protests after Parliament endorsed it. The study aimed to evaluate the state of mental well-being among Generation Z before, during, and after the protests; to examine the underlying triggers that fueled the unrest; and to assess the post-protest consequences, including loss of life and property, economic disruptions, and existential stressors contributing to depression and a growing sense of collective dissatisfaction, all of which have implications for national security. A qualitative survey design was employed, targeting approximately 18.3 million Gen Z individuals. The sampling procedure involved a systematic review of protest-related coverage from three mainstream media outlets, Citizen TV, KTN News, and NTV, including live broadcasts, online streams, reports, and interviews. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach was applied to assess five key markers aligned with the existential dimensions of the Gen Z protests. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with a control group to explore the psychosocial factors underpinning the widespread violence. The findings indicate that the state of mental well-being among Gen Z contributed to the emergence of highly mobilised demonstrators advocating for socioeconomic transformation, with demands framed around perceived endemic corruption and government impunity. The evolving narratives shaping the discourse between the state and Gen Z, alongside concerns about mental wellbeing within an increasingly tech-savvy generation, raise critical questions about governance in Kenya. In conclusion, the study underscores the critical intersection between youth mental wellbeing, sociopolitical engagement, and national security, highlighting the need for responsive governance frameworks that address both the psychosocial and structural drivers of unrest in contemporary Kenya. The study recommends initiating an inclusive national dialogue to address emerging threats, particularly those associated with a growing and disaffected youthful population, both broadly and within Gen Z specifically, to safeguard future national security and social stability.

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## **Introduction**

State stability, as a fundamental pillar of national security, was significantly undermined in Kenya during the June 2024 Gen Z protests. Driven by a growing sense of disaffection among sections of the population, particularly among Generation Z, the scale and intensity of the destruction reflected deeper psychosocial undercurrents that shape youth participation in the unrest (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; World Bank, 2023). The events unfolded with an element of unpredictability, as security forces assigned to protect critical installations were overwhelmed by large numbers of demonstrators. Key state institutions, including the Parliament, the Judiciary, and City Hall, were targeted, with reported intentions to advance toward the State House. These actions were widely interpreted as a symbolic expression of youth dissatisfaction with prevailing economic conditions and a rejection of the Finance Bill 2024, as documented in the BBC Africa Eye Documentary (BBC Africa Eye, 2024).

The breach of national security stemming from internal dissent, particularly from an increasingly assertive and youthful population, poses a critical threat to state stability (African Development Bank, 2022). Against this backdrop, this paper examines the underlying drivers of the unrest, protests, and broader disruption of social order in the country. It interrogates the interplay between economic conditions, public financial management processes, and legislative policymaking within a constitutional democracy. In this regard, principles such as public participation, transparency, and accountability are essential safeguards for sustaining national security (Transparency International, 2023). Furthermore, the study emphasises the importance of mental wellness among the population, particularly among the technologically adept Gen Z cohort, in shaping perceptions of governance and civic engagement. Psychological well-being, alongside appropriate intervention mechanisms, remains a critical yet often underexplored dimension in maintaining social cohesion, order, and stability (World Health Organisation, 2022).

The trajectory of Kenyan politics between 2017 and 2022 provides an important contextual foundation for understanding the emergence of youth discontent. Persistent concerns regarding corruption, coupled with perceived deficits in accountability and transparency, created fertile ground for mobilisation (Freedom House, 2023). Within this environment, the Gen Z protests emerged as a significant platform for articulating demands for political and socioeconomic transformation, culminating in the nationwide demonstrations of June 2024. Kiprono (2024) observes:

*The rise of the “Gen Z” protests mark a significant shift in political expression. Unlike previous generations, which often engaged in or were influenced by ethnic-based politics, young Kenyans are increasingly rejecting this model. They are advocating for a political system characterised by greater transparency and inclusivity (Kiprono, 2024, p.6)*

This scenario illustrates how distinct attitudinal orientations among Generation Z, which contributed to the protests, may persist and potentially recur, thereby providing a basis for anticipating the trajectory of future, and potentially intergenerational, forms of civic unrest (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; African Development Bank, 2022). The dynamic interaction between established governance structures and an increasingly assertive

youth population underscores the importance of sustained and inclusive dialogue. Such engagement is critical in mitigating the risk of recurrent unrest and in strengthening national security frameworks (World Bank, 2023; Transparency International, 2023).

## Literature Review

According to the National Policing Institute and the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ, 2022), enhancing the mental wellness of law enforcement personnel is critical for effective protest management. The psychological well-being of officers not only affects their individual performance but can also influence overall institutional efficacy. Trauma-informed training is therefore essential to equip law enforcement agents with the knowledge to recognise signs of stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). First responders trained in trauma care, including clinicians, can provide support to officers and their families, helping them process stress and trauma arising from deployments and post-protest scenarios. A related study conducted among 636 youths at the UCLA Advocacy Institute (Conner, Greytak, Evich, & Wray-Lake, 2023) examined the psychosocial dynamics of activism, including its costs and benefits. The study found that sources of burnout among youth activists often include public backlash, the burden of being a “saviour generation” (i.e., Gen Z), and the slow pace of policy change. While activism can generate positive outcomes, such as sending a political message, fostering social bonds, and providing an outlet for frustration, it can also involve high psychological and physical costs, including repression, systemic resistance, and, in extreme cases, loss of life. Conner et al. (2023) emphasise that understanding these dualities is crucial for both policymakers and mental health practitioners engaged with youth activism.

Specifically, the most frequently endorsed costs were feeling guilty, tired, hopeless, and depressed because of one’s activism. Because these costs align with general understandings of burnout, we asked youth in the focus group to describe their experiences with burnout. What causes it, and what mitigates against it or sustains it in the face of it? Across the focus groups, three main themes surfaced regarding the sources of burnout: backlash, pressure to be the saviour generation, and the lack of progress or change. In addition, as youth discussed the factors that helped stave off or lessen burnout, peer support and belonging emerged as another central theme (Conner, Greytak, Evich, and Wray-Lake, 2023, p. 136).

A study conducted in New Zealand examined the relationship between engagement in and contemplation of protest activities and levels of psychological and subjective well-being among Māori, situating activism within the broader context of identity formation (Came et al., 2020; World Health Organisation, 2022). The findings suggest that the psychological effects of collective action on individuals remain underexplored, with evidence pointing to mixed outcomes. While participation in collective action can foster a sense of purpose, solidarity, and empowerment, its impact on subjective mental health remains inconclusive.

Although collective action is often associated with psychosocial benefits, the emotional and psychological burden of sustained activism may exert significant strain on individuals. In particular, qualitative findings from a study involving 22 Māori participants highlighted the enduring impact of what is conceptualised as “historical trauma.” Historical trauma is defined as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding experienced across generations, including throughout the lifespan, as a result of large-scale group trauma (Brave Heart, 2003; Sotero, 2006). These findings underscore the complex interplay between identity, activism, and

mental health, particularly among historically marginalised populations. A key concern in political science and social psychological literature on activism is identifying the factors that give rise to political protest. Previous research indicates people are motivated to protest when they (a) identify with a group; (b) perceive their group to be disadvantaged; and (c) believe that their group can be successful at effecting change. Recent literature also incorporates the role of ideology, noting that protests tend to occur in a context in which activists fight to either challenge or support the status quo. These conditions have been met for Māori in New Zealand, who have a complex history of political activism, which we now outline. Similarly, Chen and Gorski (2015) analysed data from interviews with 22 social justice and human rights activists on their experiences with, and observations of, activist burnout. All respondents reported burnout including (1) the deterioration of physical health; (2) the deterioration of psychological and emotional health; and (3) feelings of hopelessness (Houkamau, Stronge, Osborne, Sibley and Dell, n.d, p. 38, 40).

In comparison with the Kenya Gen Z protests, the Māori experience reflects both parallels and divergences. While Māori activism has historically been rooted in struggles for identity, recognition, and rights, the psychosocial drivers underpinning feelings of discontent and marginalisation exhibit notable similarities across contexts (Came et al., 2020; World Health Organisation, 2022). In the Kenyan case, the conduct of law enforcement agencies during the June 2024 protests has been interpreted, in part, as indicative of unaddressed occupational trauma. Evidence suggests that unprocessed trauma among law enforcement personnel can adversely affect decision-making and public engagement. In contrast, trauma-informed interventions can enhance operational effectiveness and foster community trust (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). Comparative insights can also be drawn from Tunisia, where studies on post-transition political dynamics highlight the centrality of economic conditions in shaping youth political engagement. The election of Kais Saied in 2019, for instance, reflected widespread youth disillusionment with established political systems and underscored how generational aspirations can influence political outcomes (Harvey, 2022). Emerging scholarship further indicates that gendered economic marginalisation, particularly among young women, has played a critical role in fueling dissatisfaction and mobilisation. These dynamics bear resemblance to the socioeconomic frustrations that preceded the Gen Z protests in Kenya. Persistent exclusion of young people from meaningful political participation may therefore contribute to the accumulation of grievances, potentially manifesting in cycles of protest and unrest over time.

A defining feature of Gen Z political identity appears to be a perceived dissonance with the political establishment, coupled with a strong sense of generational distinctiveness and agency. This orientation positions Gen Z as a critical social force advocating for socioeconomic and political reforms, often through collective action and digital mobilisation. However, the psychological dimensions of this engagement, particularly levels of hopelessness, resilience, and emotional fatigue, remain insufficiently examined. Key questions persist: What are the psychological effects of participating in protests on Gen Z in Kenya? Which psychosocial factors contributed to the attenuation or persistence of the protests? Moreover, how might these factors shape future political engagement and national security outcomes? Addressing these questions is essential for understanding the broader implications of youth-led movements on state stability. More broadly, the relationship between mental health and political processes remains underdeveloped as an area of inquiry. Mental health is often treated as a peripheral concern within public policy, frequently confined to clinical or epidemiological frameworks, with limited integration into analyses of political behaviour. This gap represents a significant oversight, particularly for political science and governance studies, where the psychological

well-being of populations plays a critical role in shaping civic engagement, social cohesion, and the trajectory of democratic processes (World Bank, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

Social movement scholars have depicted quite a grim picture of social movements' success in changing policy largely mediated or moderated by political opportunities. In this regard, public opinion can be an important ally for protesters. Research has identified an agenda-setting effect of protest (Bernardi, 2021, p. 4). Muya and Otiende (2025), in tracing the history of resistance in Kenya from the anti-colonial and post-colonial periods up to and including student unrest, and into the contemporary digital landscape of Gen Z protests, aid in evaluating the country's resilience in wading through challenging times. Perhaps the most critical aspect of this account is the application of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to the Gen Z and President Ruto's conversation on #EngageThePresident X Space arising from #RutoMustGo, #RejectFinanceBill2024 in opposition to initial proposed tax-hikes, grand corruption, and economic inequalities, among others. The grievances surrounding these protests were depicted in the #EngageThe President X Space. However, the state of mental health amongst Gen Z, as evident in the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, was evident in the conversation.

The #EngageThePresident dialogue was deeply effective, as grief, betrayal, fear, and rage came through strongly. The affective discourses constructed a moral economy of protest versus the state's bureaucratic logic. Gen Z's emotional testimonies counter-evidenced the technocratic framing of government, weakening discourses that sought to proceduralize dissent (Muya and Otiende, p. 57). In this regard, the dissatisfaction of Gen Z explains how brewing emotions aligned with what, in the view of the populace, especially Gen Z, reflects an autocracy and authoritarianism, which led to collective action against the state. The ensuing street protests that turned into an out-of-control, destructive engagement with law enforcement can undermine national security. Ouma et al. (2025) state that, over the years, technological advancements have led to increased social participation in political activism, for example, the widespread use of hashtags on X spaces during the 2024 anti-finance bill protests. This media advancement has created an opportunity for people to actively participate in the protests not only nationally but also globally. For instance, it was through X spaces that other Kenyan citizens in the diaspora learned what was going on, which led them to take part in the ongoing protests and keep track even while away from the country.

Research on youth activism does not always yield consistent results, as several variables are at play in determining the key factors that contribute to protests. However, both positive and negative results of youth protests exist. From a psychological standpoint, both positive and negative effects have been reported in interviews with participants who agreed to record their state of well-being after protests. Twinomurizi (2024), apart from downplaying police brutality during and in the aftermath of the Gen protests in Kenya over the anti-Finance Bill of 2024, also focuses on the digital activism that Gen Z leveraged to mobilise and garner support. The range of emotional responses, including negative, neutral, and positive, measured the discontent that led to the protests. The popularity of, especially, negative emotions in the responses was directly linked to the effect of digital activism in shaping public opinion. The sentiments and discontent among Gen Z that led to the unrest reflect a mass psyche that encompasses national security.

The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes (Amendment) Act (2025), which broadened the definitions of offences and attendant penalties, included powers to block content and clauses on data sharing, was construed in a bad light, especially in the aftermath of the Gen Z protests

in Kenya. The claim on the government's intent to clip Gen Z digital activism in the guise of fighting terrorism and cybercrime, among others, became prominent. In fact, as much as digital activism requires policy measures to safeguard the citizenry from attacks and abuse by cyber criminals, terrorists, and encroachment of fundamental rights and freedoms conferred by the Kenyan constitution, as catalysed by the civil society and interest groups, it becomes the background that fuels attitudes of the Gen Z, who often turn into a protest rampage.

### **Theoretical Basis**

Sen's Theory on Capability Approach (1979) which was later developed (1992) and popularized in his other works (1999) underpins the attitudes and ambitions of Gen-Z especially as it involves issues that go beyond the basic needs as an existential priority of life but seeks to measure the quality of life based on what in Aristotelian approach was called '*eudaimonia*' that is, what constitutes to human flourishing and development. Though human development tends to be erroneously associated with Gross Domestic Product, the Capability Approach outgrows such notions or qualifiers for measuring 'ultimate human flourishing' or the '*eudaimonia*' philosophical framework. A preoccupation with the Human Development Index tends to preoccupy the analysis of how existential threats can be allayed.

A relatively new and popular assessment tool that is heavily influenced by Sen's work and is a prime example of his theory in action is the Human Development Index. \

The HDI and similar indices use specific statistical indicators across dimensions such as education and health to create a broader picture of the circumstances in each measured region.... As a general framework, Sen provides five categories as a key foundation for operating with freedom: political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security (Harvey, 2022, pp. 9-10). The strength of this theory in this paper involves the ability of Gen Z to champion a dialogue that involves the government and public participation, which comprises the former being cautious of the plight of the latter, a case that Gen Z in Kenya clearly portrayed in the protest. On the flip side, the theory's weakness lies in the fact that economic drivers still determine human development in most contexts in the third world. However, this Sen's Model was chosen since it engages at least several of the five HDI markers, though it leans on an economic indicator [The Finance Bill 2024], which the global south tends to interpret as life, thereby setting the psychological and psychosocial frameworks arising from social contracting.

### **Methodology**

The study used a qualitative descriptive design, focusing on qualitative content analysis of available digital data and one-on-one conversations with those who were active in the protest. The target population was an estimated 8.3 million Gen Z members, representing 33% of the Kenyan population. The digital platforms, such as #EngageThePresident on X Space, #BBCAfricaEye, GeoPoll report, and open sources, which portrayed digital activism, provided data for critical analysis. The sampling procedure comprised Gen Z individuals who were vocal about the protests on these digital platforms. The leaderless Gen Z never meant a lack of a mobilisation strategy. The influencers in digital activism occupied a central space in the mobilisation and therefore provided data for analysis in this study. The tools for data collection involved in-depth interviews of a selected sample of ten (10) Gen Zs. Further, a BBC Africa

Eye Documentary dubbed Blood Parliament at #BBCAfricaEye provided candid data on the outcomes of the Gen Z protests.

### Analysis of Findings

The study depicted a dissatisfied Gen Z who opted to protest against the Finance Bill 2024 in Kenya. Like most economic constraints in the developing world, defined by youth unemployment, the rising cost of living, and pilferage issues, similar factors triggered the June 2024 Gen Z protests in Kenya. However, the passage of the Finance Bill 2024 explains the cause-and-effect relationship behind the country's restlessness. The dissatisfaction and mounting pressure to reject the Finance Bill (2024), which was considered punitive by Gen Z, escalated to a point that caused a security lapse in the country. Actually, such underlying factors as corruption and inequality, among others, caused anxiety that culminated in what became a threat to national security (Table 1).

Table 1

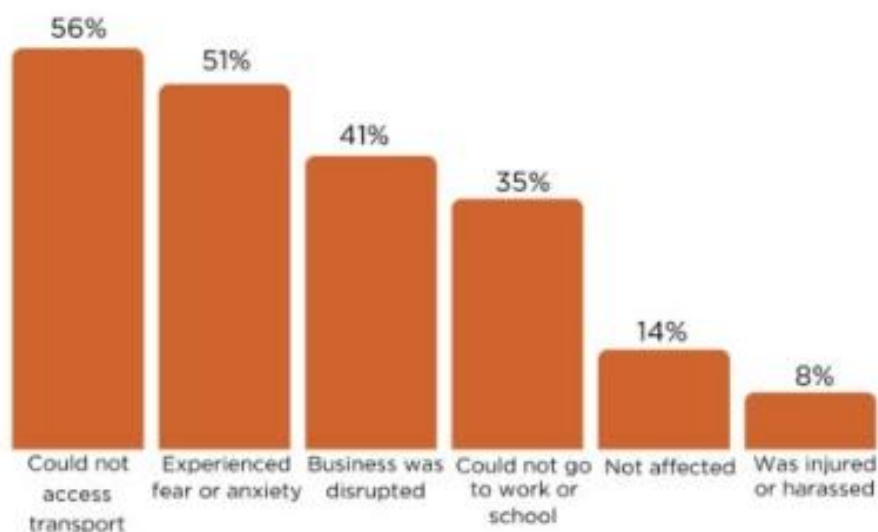
#### *Emotional State of Gen Z Before, During, and After the Protest*

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Emotional State</b>
Before the Protests	Sad, helpless, heightened fear, collective trauma
During the Protests	Heightened hopelessness, frustration, emotional drain, and emotional exhaustion
After the Protests	Deeper emotional strain, chronic stress and anxiety

Source: Open Source(s)

The issue of alleged infiltration of the Gen Z protests has featured prominently in public and political discourse. However, it was not substantively reflected in the empirical findings of this study because it was excluded within the study's delimitations. Notwithstanding this limitation, open-source accounts suggest that initially peaceful demonstrations were, at various points, infiltrated by criminal elements, thereby reframing segments of the protests as disorderly or violent (BBC Africa Eye, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024). Such narratives highlight the complexity of protest dynamics and the potential distortion of collective action through external interference. Regarding the effects of the Gen Z protests, a study by Adika (2025), based on a mobile survey of 915 randomly selected GeoPoll users aged 18 and over, reported significant levels of trauma and uncertainty among participants. The findings indicate that structural concerns, particularly unemployment, corruption, and the rising cost of living, remained salient both before and after the protests. Additionally, the protests were associated with notable disruptions to daily life, including interruptions to routine activities (41%), mobility challenges (56%), and reported psychological distress (51%), among other effects (see Figure 2). These outcomes underscore the multidimensional impact of protest activity on both individual well-being and broader socioeconomic functioning.

Figure 1

*The Effects of the Gen Z Protests in Kenya*

Source: Adika (2025)

The build-up to the June 2024 protests was closely associated with emerging patterns of psychosocial distress, as reflected in multiple reports documenting elevated levels of fear, anxiety, and emotional strain among young people. For instance, survey findings from GeoPoll indicated that approximately 51% of respondents reported heightened fear or anxiety, alongside evidence of chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and elements of collective trauma (Adika, 2025; World Health Organisation, 2022). Levels of dissatisfaction among Generation Z, driven by underlying structural factors, remain a significant concern. Data suggest that approximately 42% of respondents associated the protests with demands for leadership change, while others emphasised youth empowerment and employment (13%) and the need to address corruption (12%) (Adika, 2025). These grievances persisted into the post-protest period, where allegations of abductions and extrajudicial killings further intensified public debate and deepened collective anxiety.

Although questions regarding the ultimate fate of the Finance Bill 2024, the extent of policy transformation, and the long-term trajectory of Gen Z political aspirations fall beyond the immediate scope of this study, their broader implications are evident. The protests had measurable psychological effects on participants, their families, and the wider public, contributing to a climate of uncertainty that could have implications for national security. The political discourse following the events of 25 June 2024 reflected a heightened public dissatisfaction with governance, indicative of an emergent collective psychology that may challenge state stability. In the immediate aftermath of the protests, significant political

developments occurred, including the restructuring of the executive branch and the withdrawal of the Finance Bill 2024. Subsequent policy responses involved repackaging fiscal measures as alternative legislative instruments, such as the Tax Laws (Amendment) Act 2024. However, the formation of a broad-based government has not fully addressed Generation Z's concerns, as evidenced by ongoing mobilisation and commemorative protests into 2025. These developments underscore the enduring nature of youth-led dissent and its implications for national security.

## **Conclusion**

Civil society organisations and non-governmental actors often play a significant role in shaping public discourse, particularly regarding governance and human rights. In many instances, such actors frame narratives that amplify scrutiny of state actions, especially concerning alleged human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023). While this function is integral to democratic accountability, it also underscores the need for states to adopt proactive strategies that engage constructively with public discourse. Strengthening national stability and security, therefore, requires approaches that promote inclusive governance, enhance trust, and invest in human development indicators that foster resilience among Generation Z (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). The influence of activists and digital influencers on online platforms represents a critical dimension of contemporary political engagement. In a digitally connected democracy such as Kenya, these actors can shape public attitudes, mobilise participation, and amplify dissent, often reflecting diverse and sometimes competing interests.

Consequently, the role of interest groups—including civil society—remains significant in shaping Gen Z's perceptions and responses. Claims of external or foreign influence in the protests further highlight the need for proactive governance measures to safeguard state stability. At the same time, the enduring psychological and symbolic impact of the protests continues to shape post-protest discourse, with implications for national security and collective memory. The Gen Z protests in Kenya exhibit notable parallels with the Arab Spring, which were driven by widespread frustration over corruption, unemployment, rising living costs, perceived injustice, and state repression (World Bank, 2020). A pivotal moment in these uprisings was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia. This event symbolised deep-seated socioeconomic grievances among youth and catalysed mass protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. These historical parallels underscore the recurring role of youth-led mobilisation in contexts characterised by economic hardship, governance deficits, and social inequality.

## **Recommendations**

The prospect of national security in the wake of Gen Z protests and the disruption of civic and government operations has awakened the political leadership to the reality of digital activism and a new kind of resistance that, apart from capitalising on digital space for mobilisation, also possesses distinct characteristics and mindsets regarding authoritarian governance. The political discourse into the future cannot gainsay the netizen nature of Gen Z on statecraft. The Kenyan experience with Gen Z is cited as a call for the global south to grapple with emerging factors shaping future governance. The steady involvement in political processes, campaigns, manifestos, and actual accountability in meeting pledges defines the fluid landscape upon

which Gen Z can be engaged. In fact, the Foucauldian Critical Analysis model recommends that studies inform the country's political destiny in the era of an awakened Gen Z and digital activism. As a direct result, political processes during the electioneering period, with Gen Z as a moderating variable, define the state of national security at any given time and space.

The space occupied by digital activism in the mobilisation of Gen Z and the pull of youths from far-flung spaces into centers of demonstrations across the country opens new frontiers for mass action, protests, and unrest in ways incomparable to previous generations. Often, policy frameworks have to engage in dialogue on how to contain digital activism and encroach on the rights and freedoms of the citizenry. Closely related to political and digital activism is the burgeoning of an informed youthful population seeking to hold the governments of the global south accountable for upholding the rule of law, socioeconomic and political inclusion, and transparency, among others. At the end of the spectrum is the concern for national security arising from whipping emotions into protests, however genuine the causes may be. In this kind of scenario, preventive measures have to capture and restore public trust among Gen Z or an emerging tech-savvy populace that is informed and uses digital activism if state stability is to be assured. For example, controversial pieces of legislation are often criticised for lacking provisions on matters of public participation, such as the recent computer misuse and cybercrime law that gained notoriety, which is a space to consider in terms of managing mass psychology and restoring trust in governance.

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