Youth Political Movements, Governance and Democracy in Kenya: Historical Evolution, Contemporary Influence and Future Implications

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Abstract

Since pre-independence days, the young people's agency has played a significant role, shaping Kenya's political landscape, reframing political and governance discourses and contributing to the deepening and expansion of the democratic governance spaces in the country. Post-independence efforts to integrate the youth political movements into the social, economic and political fabric of the country have achieved limited results with young people's agency largely remaining excluded, neglected, relegated and marginalized. Through a historical analysis of the young people's effective political agency in three main eras, this article generates insights into contemporary understandings and impacts of youth movements on democracy and governance in Kenya. Political process theory shades light on how the youth movements have capitalized on the existing political opportunities and sought to expand and create new ones to deepen Kenya's independence, stability and democracy. The effective organisation and mobilisation of young people's agency as active co-creators of the social, economic and political spaces in Kenya continues to have a meaningful impact in the constitutional institutionalization, governance and democracy in Kenya.

Key Words: Gen Z Movement, Governance and Democracy, Kenya, Youth Political Movement, Young Turks Movement.

Introduction

Debates on young people's political movements and their ability to shape the social, economic and political spaces through their active agency have continued to occupy the minds of academicians and policy makers alike. Significant efforts have been tried to institutionalize young people's agency for better understanding of their cause and effect, policymaking and academic insights. However, non-institutionalized youth organising and mobilisation has exhibited powerful means

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of redefining social, economic and political discourses in many jurisdictions. This is partly because of limitations in youth institutionalization and youth socialization processes by the state as well as due to the continued steady evolution of youth movements goals, tactics and strategies. The rapid evolution of youth movements has contributed to their active and participatory approach in shaping society including the means and methods of activism, which are getting more fun for the youth in the digital era but with powerful and transformative outcomes to democracy and governance (Earl et al., 2017).

Youth political movements in Kenya can refer to the recognized attempts to bring about societal change such as an end to gender based violence or efficient environmental conservation. The movements can also resist and challenge the status quo or seek to transform unwanted initiatives as witnessed during the finance bill 2024. They emerge from tensions and difficult relations especially with privileged status quo in the society. They have taken different forms including literary writings, sarcastic artisanship and musical cultural revolution to mobilise and spotlight the movements' action for historical change. The historical achievements and transformations of youth movements have overshadowed attempts to characterize the movements as a problem of adulthood in the literature. Youth movements are a formidable force for change and development through new codes of behaviour and emerging styles. Youth activism is not necessarily powered by age of the participants, its powered by a youth culture that is dynamic and characterized by the prowess of effectively utilizing and deploying evolving strategies and tactics for positive change (Carnegie, 2022)

Through a comparative historical analysis, the study focuses on the development of youth political movements and mobilisation in Kenya through three main phases. These historical phases include pre-independence, post-independence and contemporary period. This categorization cannot capture the entire efforts of the young people in addressing threats and pressing challenges of the country since independence. The categories are only meant to facilitate development of useful insights across different generations of Kenya's youth agency. The study analyses academic sources and relevant media reports on the youth movements across the periods to explore the tactics and strategies of the youth movements, the important issues they addressed and their achievements that shifted political contexts in the country. The study contributes by shining a spotlight on the unwanted, relegated and marginalized youth agency, which if effectively harnessed, contains the immense power for development and prosperity of the country. It helps in the understanding of youth political processes that are vital for the stability of Kenya, its governance, status and prestige as a democracy in Africa (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003).

The article proceeds as follows; after a brief discussion of youth movements in Kenya, it lays out the theoretical foundations guiding analysis of the youth political movements throughout the three historical periods, which include independence liberation, post-independence democratic institutionalization and the contemporary third wave of generation Z broadening and digital

activism. This is followed by discussions on the implications of youth movements to Kenya's democracy, governance, and insights into the future role of youth movements in anchoring the stability and independence of Kenya.

Youth Political Movements in Kenya

Africa's population is growing rapidly and the young people who are the majority remain largely marginalized by the existing political and governance structures. Youth movements are increasingly becoming a driving force in the political shifts and development of Africa. Earlier youth movements in the continent mobilised to thwart the colonial influence earning their countries the political independence and self-rule. Most pre-independence youth movements such as sections of the *Mau Mau* in Kenya and *uMkhonto weSizwe* in South Africa assumed armed politics and confrontational approach. The armed mobilisation and confrontation approach of the anti-colonial youth movements largely changed after independence with emerging youth movements, some of which institutionalized within universities, party structures, labour union and civil society mechanisms, were largely peaceful and harnessed attention to critical governance issues and deepening of Africa's democracy (Maganga, 2020; Diallo & Diallo, 2019; Babatunde, 2015).

Post-independence youth movements largely shunned violence to challenge political repression and economic austerities in the respective countries. Independent African states, under dictatorial regimes, resorted to the use of political violence and dangerous repressive policies that further deteriorated the democratic environment. Crushing post-independence youth movements remained difficult for the state despite unleashing violence and harmful politics of marginalization of political dissidents through state development. The youth movements were difficult to crush by the state partly because some of them were ideologically motivated mainly providing alternative development pathways for the state while preserving its newly gained independence. Contemporary youth movements are increasingly sophisticated, shunning violence while calling for rapid overhaul of state systems including the repressive structures. The rapid revolution was witnessed especially in North Africa countries of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the Arab Spring where the young people mobilised in the streets against state inefficiencies of the states and lack of opportunities for growth and development (Branch & Mampilly, 2015; Honwana, 2015; Koster, 2013; Simpson, 2009).

Youth political movements in Kenya also seem to follow and lead the phases of youth activism on the continent in equal measure. The movements are negatively characterized by armed criminal elements and positively by peaceful youth movements supportive to democracy and governance. Armed youth elements are effectively crushed by security agencies before resurgence during electoral campaigns. The recurrence and persistence of armed youth political movements is arguably because of the frustrated intergenerational dialogue and succession planning (Rasmussen, 2010; Kagwanja, 2005, 2006). Armed youth movements were mostly active during the 1992

squabbles in the Rift Valley and the 2007 post-election violence that devastated the country (Khadiagala, 2010; Anderson & Lochery, 2008). The armed movements unlike peaceful ones do not have enduring achievements in terms of contributing to the governance and democracy of Kenya. They pose substantial liabilities in respect of the political development, governance and democratization processes. On the contrary, peaceful youth movements attract credible international actors boasting their contribution to governance and democracy. Peaceful movements gain traction, legitimacy and obtain international acceptance relatively easily hence ramping up the pressure to the ruling regime for positive change.

Many reasons have been given for the rise in youth political movements and protests in Kenya, including poor governance, corruption and nepotism, lack of opportunities for jobs and business, as well as state repressive tendencies, especially after the 2010 constitution, which prioritizes Human Rights centred governance (Gachuki, 2024; Mati, 2020). The youth are also battling systemic marginalization in the political, economic and social aspects of the country. Marginalization of the majority, energetic and most skilled has served to limit the effectiveness of the youth agency and delay the much needed innovations and transformations in the knowledge and ideas of governance. The barriers in the state's social, economic and political spheres hold the youth in a constant state of wait as '*Leaders of Tomorrow*' and '*youth empowerment*' programs are mired with systemic inefficiencies that are meant to sustain the hegemony and propagate oppression of the youth agency. The resurgence and political movements of the youth are attempts to reclaim and liberate the youth space for inclusive and meaningful stability and development. The movements are fuelled by state marginalization, inefficiencies and inordinate practices including state sponsored killings, mistrials, personality power grabs and injustices in the society. Highly educated young people are put in a dangerous state of 'waithood' that impacts not only on the quality of their own lives but also on the quality of governance and democracy (Kimari et al., 2020; Mwaura, 2015; Mwangola, 2007).

Theoretical Framework: Political Process Theory

Main schools of thought on social movements have focused on resource mobilisation (Tilly, 1978), economic motivations (Olson, 1965), identity and culture (Jasper, 1999; Melucci, 1996) as well as emotional dissatisfaction (Morris & Mueller, 1992) among others. New perspectives have also emerged, including the new social movement theory, which provides insights into diversely organised movements such as those on gender, ethnicity, youth, sexuality, spirituality, environmentalism, and animal and human rights, among others (Buechler, 2022). New social movement theory provides significant understanding of social movements in Kenya but its limited in understanding the complexity of the youth movements that have appeared to have a sense of political direction and organisation towards influencing governance and democracy. In this regard, this article attempts to understand youth movements in Kenya through the intellectual lens of the

political process theory that captures to a great extent the political processes, the democratic trends and the historical periods of the country (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018).

McAdam first articulated the political process model while analysing the empirical rise and fall of black movements in the periods 1930-1970 (McAdam, 1999). He drew a correlation on the emergence of social movements to the availability and access to political opportunities. According to McAdam, social movements emerge, endure and decline according to the expansion and contraction of political opportunities. Tarrow improved on this thesis developing the political process theory of collective action to explain the elusive but real power of social movements throughout history. Tarrow's intervention helps to better understand the symbiotic relations between social movements and political processes in different jurisdictions and in different political environments including democratic and authoritarian environments (Tarrow, 1998).

Political process theory captures the unique environment of the young people in Kenya (opportunities) and the actions and approaches they take towards change (processes). It helps to understand the mobilising structures of the youth agency and the framing culture of the main issues the movement seeks to address. The youth movements in Kenya capitalize on available political opportunities to mobilise and seek change to create new ones through their collective action. This process of collective action is mired with protest and regime violence to discourage and derail the momentum. A number of youth also assimilate within the existing political opportunity abandoning the movements' quest for change and expansion of the opportunity.

Assimilation in the existing political opportunity is a seamless way to avoid state brutality and repression but does not help in expanding or transforming the political opportunities. It does not also address underlying structural and intergenerational issues for collective action. The need to expand opportunities has served to mobilise youth sections across the country for collective behaviour including those allegedly without grievances. When a political opportunity arises, Kenya's youth agency can be mobilised for a common purpose and solidarity even without prior grievances and without huge resources for mobilisation. The desire to expand and open up existing opportunities and resources seems to inspire youth organisation and mobilising in Kenya throughout the generations.

Kenya's youth movement structures of mobilisation have also been outside the mainstream and outside the institutionalized ones such as party structures and trade union establishments. This has helped the youth movements to mask their processes and avoid repressive state behaviour. Operating loose structures outside the mainstream has also helped to frame the movement's communication, nature leadership and shape strategy while ensuring sensitivity to the prevailing youth culture. This has helped in the movements' wider mobilisation, recognition and awareness amongst its cadres. Framing of issues especially on social media with the advent of technology is used to harness support, manipulate opposition and build synergies for the movement.

The political process theory is not without limitations (Bracey, 2016; Goodwin & Jasper, 1999). In addition to its overemphasis on political factors, it conceptualizes the goals and motivations of the movement as largely external and which creates an impression that they cannot be achieved. Notably, it centres the state as the sole source of social challenges and therefore the only institution that is responsible for positive change. While the state has an increasingly central role in the exacerbation of social, economic and political challenges, other institutions also play a significant role including religious bodies and non-governmental organisations that operate within the space of the state. External factors beyond the state cannot also be ruled out completely in terms on how they impact on the expansion and contraction of social, economic and political opportunities inside the state. While it's important for the state to take the leading role in realizing social, economic and political opportunities and mitigating challenges, meaningful, impactful and transformative change can be realized if all the actors and stakeholders can work together to expand, diverse and deepen social, economic and political opportunities.

Historical Evolution, Influence and Future Implications of Youth Political Movements in Kenya

1. *Pre-Independence Period*

Kenya's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity were achieved partly because of the courageous, clandestine mobilisation and political organising of pre-independence groups of young people, including the Young Kavirondo Association and Young Kikuyu Association. They pioneered the resistance that eventually defeated British colonial brutality. Youth political movements including the Young Kavirondo Association founded in the year 1921 and the Young Kikuyu Association founded in 1922-spearheaded resistance to colonial exploitation (Hobley, 1903; Wagner, 1987). They rose to claim African social, economic and political rights during the pre-independence period. British colonial rule had disenfranchised African communities throughout most of the colony. The colonial administration economically subjugated and socially marginalized the local people. Land issues became the main source of grievances and framed political mobilising of the pre-independence movements. Colonial land alienation policies, which hived off huge chunks of fertile land for colonial settlement confined Africans, who were mainly farmers, to overcrowded reserves. Land alienation resulted in a decline in agricultural productivity and widespread food insecurity.

The Young Kavirondo Association mainly mobilised Western Kenya. They advocated for equitable land redistribution and fair compensation for African labourers exploited in the settler farms. They publicly mounted resistance to policies like the *Kipande* system, which severely curtailed mobility of the local people. The K*ipande* system firmly entrenched the most exploitative aspects of labour policies of exploitation of locals (Ogot & Kieran, 1974). The Young Kikuyu Association mobilised mainly the Central Kenya. They rose against rampant land alienation that

resulted in the emergence and concentration of the minority 'White Highlands' where whole local Kikuyu communities were forcefully uprooted and displaced (Beyan, 1989; Kilson, 1955).

The displacement of locals not only robbed the communities of their ancestral lands but also denied them a cultural and spiritual association with the lands, a loss for which anger and resentment were to be immediate consequences. The associations organised protests against the Highlands Ordinance 1939, whose intention was to legalise exclusive European land ownership in these areas, further alienating African farmers from the same. They also petitioned colonial administrators for the recognition of African land claims and pointed out injustices that had been perpetrated in various policies (Berman & Lonsdale, 1992; Coldham, 1979).

Both organisations applied grassroots strategies to galvanise support and build collective resistance. Young Kavirondo Association held meetings across villages in Western Kenya, using them as an opportunity to teach people about their rights and the negative impacts of colonial policies. It was made inclusive, even with storytelling and traditional songs, which helped them gain a place in the greater society and build in their solidarities. This approach resonated particularly with those who otherwise felt intimidated by the thought of challenging colonial authority (Elkins, 2010; Lonsdale, 1977). The Young Kikuyu Association approached reform through a series of calculated petitions, usually in both English and Kikuyu. English and Kikuyu framing of grievances ensured they were well understood and recognised by both the colonialists and spread quickly among the people.

In recruitment strategies, these movements were also quite innovative and inclusive. In addition to the young Africans desirous of reform, the Young Kavirondo Association sought and obtained the support of influential Luo chiefs whose endorsement gave the movement legitimacy and encouraged wider community involvement. For example, Chief Odera Akang'o of Gem, helped rally support for the Young Kavirondo Association. He called for improved labour working conditions in the areas concerned (Ogot & Kieran, 1974; Spencer, 1982). The Young Kikuyu Association formed alliances with influential elders and traditional leaders, who were perceived to be unequivocally better placed to transcend the generation gap and attract conservative elements hostile to youth-led movements. These ultimately assisted the movements in meandering through the highly politicised environment at the time.

Although the colonial administration often tried to repress such groups through arrests, harassment, killings and even co-option (assimilation strategies), the work of the movements had an immense impact on the goals of the collective Kenya nationalist and independence movement (Kagwanja, 2005). For instance, the activities of the Young Kikuyu Association catalyst the founding of the *Kikuyu Central Association*, one of the most significant voice in the early movement for Kenyan political representation. Significantly, the first president's (Jomo Kenyatta) early lobbying activities in the Kikuyu Central Association were founded upon the ideas of activism, mobilisation and organisation of the Young Kikuyu Association. Similar ideas of

activism especially on labour rights arguably influenced later organisations such as the *Kenya African Union* in the struggle for just labour policies including minimum wage regulations and abolition of *kipande* system (Berman & Lonsdale, 1992).

The broader results of these movements went beyond the immediate victories. They succeeded in instilling a spirit of resistance and collective identity among Kenyan communities, which enabled them to challenge colonial authority more effectively in the years leading to independence. By 1963, when Kenya gained independence, the work of the Young Kavirondo Association and the Young Kikuyu Association was recognised as foundational to the country's nationalist movements. It also demonstrated the importance of young people led community-driven actions against systemic oppressions. Their articulation of Kenyan communities' grievances, organisation of resistance, and inspiration of successive generations of leaders showed the important role that youth could play in social and political transformation. As (Berman & Lonsdale, 1992) contend, such movements challenged not only the immediate injustices of their time but also made the ideological and structural preparations for Kenya's eventual decolonisation.

2. Post-Independence Period

The period immediately after independence was a very critical phase of political development in Kenya. Youth-led movements, such as the Young Turks Movement and other activist groups, rose against state authoritarianism to demand democratic reforms, commonly referred to as the Second Liberation. The movements were very important in changing Kenya's political landscape under extremely oppressive conditions. The youth challenged over-concentration of power in the post-independence formations coupled with high levels of corruption, violation of human rights, and increased economic inequality (Kagwanja, 2003; Park, 2020). The Young Turks, was at the forefront of this post-independence struggle for the Second Liberation of the country. Young Turks comprised of young politicians and activists with the desire to construct a new identity from the older political class who had entrenched authoritarianism and presided over the suppression of political freedoms (Muna et al., 2014; Mwangola, 2007). Young leaders pioneered the struggle in the late 1980s and early 1990s in efforts to reintroduce multi-party democracy that could guarantee effective intergenerational political succession at all levels. Elaborate pressure and actions of student unions and other activist groups mobilised at the grassroots level. The goal of the Young Turks was to demolish a one-party system that guarded the older generations within the levers of the state and suppressed political freedoms since independence. They agitated for constitutional reforms, electoral transparency, and the formation of democratic institutions, often at very great personal risk (Brown, 2001; Murunga & Nasong'o, 2007; Nyong'o, 1989).

The Young Turks political movement is credited for deepening the country's political culture by staging protests against state overstepping of mandate, marginalization among other issues. The protests were violently repressed but enabled the country to transition from chaotic single party

system to vibrant multiparty democratic state (Mutua, 1994). Notable youth leaders during this period included Paul Muite, Peter Anyang' Ny'ong'o, James Orengo, Kijana Wamalwa, Martha Karua, Gitobu Imanyara, Raila Odinga, Kiraitu Murungi among others. They mobilised under *Mwangaza* foundation to root and mobilise for political reforms in the country. Mwangaza was used to channel political debate, counter regime's 'Kenya Times' and mobilise the youth brigade for plural politics and economic reforms.

Youth action, especially at the grassroots and university students also gained momentum during this period to strongly oppose political repression. In 1971, the University of Nairobi Students' Organisation (SONU) was formed to champion student interests and struggles for academic and political freedoms. SONU would take the front line in protests against state repression. SONU led protests against arbitrary detentions, political assassinations and the suppression of free speech epitomising the larger struggle. Release Political Prisoners movement led by the likes of Wangari Maathai and Koigi wa Wamwere became very active in pushing for the release of detainees without trial. The movement highlighted the inhumane treatment of political prisoners and drew national and international attention to the state's human rights abuses. They strategically organised protests involving mothers of political prisoners (Melchiorre, 2020; Wamwere, 2015; Maathai, 2008; Klopp & Orina, 2002).

Youth activists condemned economic inequality and systemic corruption. Protests that were organised, influenced, and joined by student unions, associations, and movements of civil society and organisations at the grassroots level often exposed growing disparity and the failure of the state in addressing basic needs. The Green Belt Movement, which started in 1977 under the initiative of Wangari Maathai, purposed to reverse environmental degradation through tree planting, extended its agenda to encompass critiques of government corruption and the propagation of social justice (Maathai, 2003). These movements' strategies were varied and adaptive, reflecting a general adaption to the hostile operating environment. Despite the high risk of police brutality, youth movements braved to mobilise in their numbers and protest on the streets and public squares. For example, SONU's mass protests in the 1980s and 1990s were brutally suppressed but they managed to galvanise public support for democratic reforms. *Mwakenya* underground networks were established to reach target people and maintain contact with local communities, trade unions, and church organisations to enlarge their support base. Underground publications such as *Pambana* and *Mpatanishi* played an important role in informing and politically educating the people (Kinyatti, 2020; Mutunga, 1999).

Mobilisation and recruitment was mainly on campuses, particularly universities, the epicentre of Kenya's intellectual and political life. SONU expanded to become one strong avenue for youth engagement in which the youth would flex political and mobilisation muscles, keep the state in check and demand accountability. Local groupings and religious institutions provided a haven for recruitment and organisation. The youths also tapped international networks to raise international

attention to the cause of the struggle. Civil Society groups such as the Kenya Human Rights Commission lobbied international pressure for democratic reforms. State repression remained a big challenge to the groups. It manifested itself in the arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings used to silence the youth movements on many occasions. Many of the members of the youth movements were imprisoned or exiled in different countries. Additionally, resource constraints further limited the capacity of these movements to sustain big campaigns (Cheeseman, 2015).
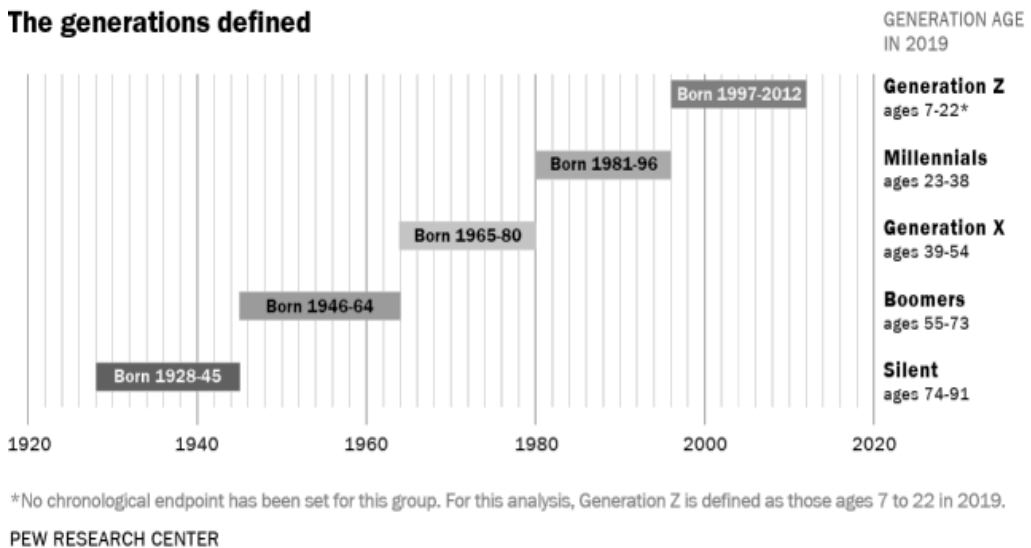
The results of these youth movements had far-reaching implications, including the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1992, which enhanced political engagement and state accountability. The constitution of 2010 culminated in the most important cornerstone of Kenya's democratic landscape. The 2010 constitution institutionalized most of the issues the post-independence youth movements agitated for and especially enshrined the principles of human rights, gender equality and devolution that reflected the aspirations of many decades of activism (Sihanya, 2011). The institutionalization of the main issues of the Second Liberation in the 2010 constitution ushered an important transition moment for the youth moments. Subsequent movements especially the Gen Z have mainly sought to diversify, hasten and deepen the gains of the Second Liberation.

3. *Contemporary Period:*

Generation Z, infamously Gen Z, is the most significant young people's political movement of the contemporary period (See Figure 1 below for definitions of generational age groups). They are doubted as the leaders of Kenya's third wave of liberalization, which is focused on efficient state systems, accountability, a strong economy and just distribution of state opportunities for the benefit of all Kenyans. They have impressed digital mobilising and organisation dramatically transforming youth activism in Kenya. They strategically use digital platforms for mass mobilisation, advocacy and agitations for positive change, accountability and efficiency in state systems. This is infamously coded as *salamu* to responsible state institutions. The Gen Z movement amalgamates, diverse youth groupings, harnessing their collective efforts to agitate for positive change in state systems. They have revolutionized execution of the primary role of the citizens to oversight the state through social media platforms such as twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok among others (Mwaura, 2021).

Figure 1

Indicating the generational beginnings of Millennials and Generation Z

The generations defined

GENERATION AGE IN 2019

Born 1997-2012 — **Generation Z** ages 7-22*

Born 1981-96 — **Millennials** ages 23-38

Born 1965-80 — **Generation X** ages 39-54

Born 1946-64 — **Boomers** ages 55-73

Born 1928-45 — **Silent** ages 74-91

1920   1940   1960   1980   2000   2020

*No chronological endpoint has been set for this group. For this analysis, Generation Z is defined as those ages 7 to 22 in 2019.

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 Source: (Dimock, 2019)

The Gen Z movement has sought to deepen the social contract and improve the stability of the country. Their campaigns shade light on issues that weaken the social contract and call for accountability and responsibility from the state institutions. The movement has addressed various social, economic and political concerns using novel ways of advocacy that have seemed to disturb different levers of the state. Gen Z amalgamation brings together youth in tribe-less formations united solely in the quest to address social, economic and political concerns of the country. By relegating tribal identities and setting the bar above ordinary tribes, Gen Z seeks to transform Kenya's political discourse ordinarily buttressed by tribal cocoons. Dominant tribal discourses hindered objective diagnosis of the country's challenges, the prescription of solutions and the ultimate implementation for many years. Gen Z movement assumes a leaderless formation partly as a result of the diverse social, economic and political ills the different factions mobilise around. Some of the impactful Gen Z campaigns include; *#MyDressMyChoice*, that advocates for gender equality. In a country that still struggles to realize gender constitutional requirements, this campaign helped to address widespread cases of gender-based violence and discrimination (Wambua-Soi, 2014). #OccupyParliament campaign in 2013 aimed to tame unnecessary state expenditures including attempts of increasing parliamentary salaries in the backdrop of deteriorating economic conditions for the ordinary Kenyans (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024).

Almost all Gen Z movements, factions and formations seem to be motivated by the desire to hold the state institutions accountable for the public good (McKinsey, 2024). After being dismissed as keyboard warriors in most occasions, the collective power of the Gen Z movements was witnessed on the streets when all the formations of youth movements peacefully mobilised and occupied the streets across all the 47 counties (Twinomurinzi, 2024). The collective desire and motivation was to hold to account the representatives of the people, who are primarily mandated to take care of the welfare of the ordinary Kenyans they represent. #OccupyParliament 2024 and #RejectFinanceBill 2024 campaigns culminated in the mammoth protests of June 25 that breached parliament (BBC News Africa, 2024; Citizen TV Kenya, 2024; Gachuki, 2024). On June 25, all formations of Gen Z movement including remote and grassroots youth networks were mobilised. They engaged and amplified their protests through the livestreams of frontline content creators that were re-packaged and re-shared widely. The #occupy campaigns, mobilised youth from all tribes and social classes. They have since largely moved online due to state repression, abductions and killings that begun to characterize the streets and public spaces. The campaigns are also localized due to the sensitization of the grass root youth networks across the country to demand efficiency and accountability from the nearest state institutions including hospitals, devolved governments, education institutions, infrastructure projects among others.

Other Gen Z campaigns have included; #NjaaRevolution in 2022 that highlighted state economic mismanagement and burdening debts that were exacerbating the hunger and suffering of ordinary Kenyans especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. #EndPoliceBrutalityKE and #StopExtraJudicialKillingsKE protests aimed at addressing police violence, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings that rocked the country including systematic dumping of the victims' bodies in forests and rivers like Yala in Nyanza. Kenyan youth movements have managed to effectively blend online activism and offline protest in a hybrid model of advocacy. Hashtag campaigns on Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook magnify individual stories, captures national attention and mobilises for action to bring justice. Online content including videos, animations, graphics and voice notes trend almost immediately magnifying the impact of the movement. AI algorithms also help the youth movements to target the right audience with the right message for mobilising, fundraising and other calls to action.

The movement raised funds online for the injured protestors' medication bills, to cater for the burial expenses of the victims and to provide some family support. Unlike the previous youth movements that relied heavily on external support from international donors and financiers, Gen Z movement shows greater solidarity in terms of raising resources for their cause. The movement organically financed its accountability campaigns including #injectcampaign that sought to expose and address incompetence, wastage and inefficiencies in implementation of state's projects that violated the social contract.

The movement conducted huge online educational campaigns to their steady following on social media. The webinars, live streams, twitter spaces and forums revolutionized engagement with the base ensuring that the vast majority of the youth understood the main issues of the movement (Makhulo, 2024). The widely acknowledged civic education also brought in expertise including from the country's renowned constitutional lawyers and prominent people whose actions were not injurious to the goals of the movement. The sessions raised awareness, countered opposing narratives and importantly mobilised and energised the support base. Diaspora youth networks also found an elaborate space to contribute to the Gen Z movement campaigns, sometimes supporting the movement with raising resources and chatting the movement's strategies. The huge online meetings accommodated thousands of young people, a natural following with increased sense of togetherness and solidarity (Nabiswa, 2024).

Collective campaigns by these groups have borne some results including youth-related police reforms, economic rethinking and broadening of the ruling regime for wider representation of the diversities of Kenya. #OccupyParliament and #EndPoliceBrutalityKE have attracted international solidarity including solidarity protests in neighbouring countries. Youth activism has also led to greater political engagement, with more young people assuming leadership roles especially through the ballot. #NjaaRevolution saw an increase in resources for youth opportunities. The various youthful movements in Kenya reflect virtual activism vis-a-vis change. The marriage of online advocacy with mobilisation of grassroots has driven youth activism into intriguing amalgams toward new modes of youth political movement. However, the movements must overcome obstacles such as censorship, killings, kidnapping and digital divide for their advocacy to continue shaping the future of Kenya (Nyabola, 2018).

A Periodic Comparison of Youth Political Movements in Kenya

The dynamic role of the youths throughout Kenya's political history has been evolutionary throughout the three periods. The characteristics, strategies, issues and even challenges of youth political movements show significant transformation since pre-independence, post-independence and during the contemporary period as shown in table 1 below. In the pre-colonial era emphasis was placed on land alienation and racial injustices which became foundations for the Kenya's nationalist movements. During the post-independence, movements aimed at political repression and promotion of democratic reforms through protest and lobbying. In this digital age, youth movements have taken up digital advocacy in the struggle against economic, social and political inequalities, using innovative strategies to navigate the dynamic and challenging environment.

Table 1

Comparative Analysis of Youth Movements

Aspect	Pre-Independence	Post-Independence	Contemporary Period
Key Issues	Land rights, racial discrimination	Multi-party democracy, corruption, human rights	Economic inequality, cost of living, police brutality, human rights, gender equality etc.
Major Movements	Young Kavirondo Association; Young Kikuyu Association; Kikuyu Central Association	Young Turks Movement, University of Nairobi Students' Organisation (SONU), Release Political Prisoners, Green Belt Movement	Gen Z collective movement #OccupyParliament, #RejectFinanceBill #EndPoliceBrutalityKE, #NjaaRevolution, #MyDressMyChoice
Strategies	Grassroots mobilisation, petitions, community meetings	Protests, lobbying, underground networks, student union activism	Digital advocacy, social media campaigns, hybrid activism combining online and offline protests, civil education, inject campaigns
Outcomes	Independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity	Multi-party democracy, Constitutional reforms	Increased youth engagement in governance, policy changes, addressing inequality and injustice
Challenges	Colonial repression, arbitrary arrests, limited communication channels	Political repression, imprisonment, internal divisions, resource constraints	Censorship, misinformation, violence against activists, murder and abductions, digital divide.

Source: Authors (2025)

Impacts of Youth Political Movements on Governance and Democracy in Kenya

Contemporary youth political movements (Gen Z) in Kenya have particularly focused attention to the economic grievances and hardships that have been exacerbated by shortcomings in governance, state policymaking and implementation mechanisms. The youth movements mobilised to break the vicious cycles of economic hardships including run away unemployment, cost of living and wasteful tax regimes. Accountability and transparency in governance has underlined young people's mobilisation and organisation for reforms and transformations in the running of state affairs. The young people through both institutionalized and non-institutionalized mechanisms of mobilisation and action have expressed a desire for a lean and efficiently functioning state system

where corruption and mismanagement of public goods and services attracts severe consequences for the culprits. Young people's agency has also impacted how security goods and services are generally provided to the public. They have raised against police brutality, arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings, generally disapproving oppressive tendencies as means of securing the state. The youth have sought to reassert the dominance of human dignity as a guiding principle in the provision of sustainable security for the people and the state.

Kenya's youth political movements throughout the periods have always had a strong interest in governance and democracy, which they pursued through mass action and advocacy. The youth have propelled very significant political and social revolutions. The Young Kavirondo Association advocated for labour rights playing an instrumental role in influencing colonial authorities to pay decent wages and offer good working conditions. Their efforts did not only alleviate labour conditions but also laid a foundation for successive nationalist struggles leading to Kenya's independence. Early periods of Kenya's youth political movements rallied the youth in deepening democratic reforms, positive policy changes, challenging authoritarianism and widening political participation.

During the course of authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, student movements became pivotal for democratic reforms. SONU organised protests against one-party state. The protests brought into light the political oppression, marginalization, lack of freedoms and failures in governance. Re-introduction of multi-party politics in 1992 bolstered Kenya's democracy underlining the resilience of youth movements in challenging well-engrained systems of authoritarianism, corruption and inequalities (Byakika, 2021; Omweri, 2024).

Gen Z digital movements have become strong avenues for youth organisation with better outcomes. Technology has become a game-changer for youth activism, bridging geographical divides and enabling collective action on an unprecedented scale. Digital contributions by youth movements have increased transparency and accountability of governance practices. Other youth-led movements like "*Inuka Kenya Ni Sisi*!" have spearheaded campaigns on anti-corruption and civic education for the electoral processes. These efforts have shed light on governance failures and given confidence to the citizens to demand better leadership. "Inuka Kenya Ni Sisi!" played an important role in tracking public expenditures during COVID-19 pandemic, exposing cases of misappropriation and demanding accountability. This level of vigilance has greatly deterred corruption and promoted responsible governance.

The youth movements have increased political inclusivity. There is a considerable increased proportion of youth in the bicameral parliament evidencing the increasingly confidence and people's trust in youth leadership. Youth activism has inspired political participation and ambition among the young people in Kenya to better influence policy and governance.

Future of Youth Political Movements in Kenya

With the technological advancements, youth movements in Kenya are likely to increase in sophistication especially in evading repression, censorship and silencing and deliver effective and inclusive advocacy for the betterment of the country. Youth access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities have also contributed to their understanding of the country's most pressing challenges, mobilising lasting influence and developing significant proposals for positive change. The Gen Z movement for instance, developed and utilized some readily available mobile applications to understand critical moments of the country's history, understand and articulate its constitution and communicate the improvement measures in simple and basic content that cuts across generations. State bureaucracies have always served to interfere, limit or slow down youth innovations that can address the basic challenges of Kenya.

In addition to increasing digital literacy and narrowing the digital divide, digital liberalization will enhance youth imagination, increase engagement and social, economic and political activism. Future movements are increasingly becoming responsible for positive change in almost all sections of the society including the private businesses, international corporations and foreign governments. Relevant opportunities to maximize their effectiveness and objectivity in addressing the ills should be made available. Youth movements do not just imagine fair and just futures, they take active steps to realize them within their own localities.

Inter-generational mentorship opportunities can help demystify governance and political processes and actually encourage active youth participation in shaping the outcomes of elections, governance structures and other critical state processes. Mentorship is also important to support moral and value acquisition and transformation for impactful and enduring change. Values and morals of peace and patriotism will improve the capacities of the youth movements in intervening in the important issues affecting the country at any particular time especially during periods of crisis.

Conclusions

Since the colonial era, Kenya has always witnessed significant participation of youth in the social, economic and political spheres of the country. This has also evolved greatly from independence demonstrations to digital and technologically influenced modern-day demonstrations that have contributed to governance and democratic transformations. The youth political movements have consolidated and deepened Kenya's democratic framework and accountability. The resilience and adaptability of the young people bolsters their importance in shaping the future social, economic and political landscape of the nation through their mobilising agency. Intervention measures such as narrowing the digital divide, mentorship and learning and capacity-building processes will revolutionize the will power of the youth and deepen their impact on the country's development and stability.

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