

# Effects of Social Media on National Security: A View from X Space in Kenya's Anti-Financial Bill 2024 Protest

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**Abstract:** *Although Kenya had experienced political protest, the events of June 25, 2024, have shaped how protest is viewed by Kenyans. Consequently, it becomes an interesting area of study because the success of the protest is attributed to social media platforms. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of social media on national security, with a special focus on X space in Kenya's anti-financial bill 2024 protest. This study, therefore, seeks to demonstrate that social media platforms, if not regulated, can destroy a country because they can be abused by individuals and terrorist organisations through their attacks. The study utilised hashtags to locate the articles to be analyzed. The study employed a qualitative approach using data obtained mainly from X (Twitter), and diverse Twitter users utilised the hashtags #OccupyParliament, #OccupyCBD, #EconomicShutDown, and #OccupyJKIA. Further studies can be conducted to examine the effects of social media on national security in other regions; little research has focused on Kenyan content. The study findings show that social media can help protesters by spreading propaganda and fake news, mobilising a huge population to join the protest, and allowing protesters to breach security.*

**Keywords:** National Security, Social Media, Protest, Occupy

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## INTRODUCTION

A series of protests rocked Kenya on June 25, 2024, a day Members of the National Assembly (MNA) were debating and voting on Finance Bill 2024, which would have realized the government raised \$2.7 billion in additional taxes to reduce the budget deficit and borrowing (Miriri & Kumwenda-Mtambo, 2024). The protests led to deaths, the burning and looting of properties associated with those who voted for the Finance Bill, and the shutdown of government businesses. The protest turned violent immediately as news spread that MNAs had voted for the bill. Consequently, protesters broke through the police line and breached the parliament in Nairobi County. What is interesting about the protest is that it took place in more than 25 counties, including Nairobi, Uasin Gishu, Kisumu, Mombasa, and Machakos, just to mention a few. By and large, it emerged that their concerns were beyond the financial bill and included a high cost of living, unemployment, huge public spending, and a lack of government transparency and accountability.

Similar to the Arab Spring of 2011, Millennials and Generation Z-led protests in Kenya raise questions about

the role of today's social media in revolutions. Some of the notable social media platforms used to mobilise protesters include X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, among others. Previously, Kenya had witnessed politically motivated protests leading to coalitions (Asingo, 2018). While previous protests were characterised as political or tribal, the recent protests were termed successful because of their unique structure; they were considered tribeless and leaderless, and this begs the question: Why are modern-day political revolutions leaderless? . Moro (2015), in an attempt to dissect this statement, takes an agent-based explanation and argues that the availability of social networks can mobilize huge masses without the need for strong political leadership.

The role of social media in providing a platform for organization, communication, and amplification of messages during the anti-finance Bill 2024 protests in Kenya has ignited debate even as President William Ruto's government seeks to increase internet connectivity in all parts of the country. In line with President William Ruto's repeated desire to develop the internet in Kenya,

his government has invested heavily in the telecommunications sector since taking over in 2022. While taking into consideration the huge investment required to layout a fibre internet connection, William Ruto, through a partnership-based approach, seeks to utilise readily developed power lines to transmit fibre optic cables to ensure universal access to the internet. For example, in March 2024, President William Ruto announced that "the government has secured KSh27 billion to connect 280,000 households to electricity under the Last Mile Connectivity Project."

William Ruto's strategy seeks to make Kenya one of the most highly developed telecommunications infrastructures not only in Sub-Saharan Africa but worldwide. Kenya currently ranks 35th globally, boasting a 33% internet penetration rate (Cowlings, 2023). This demonstrates Kenya's continued internet growth over the years, which also accelerates the use of social media among Kenyans. If the government successfully implements its strategy, social media usage will grow, raising the question of the security agencies' ability to handle huge amounts of content posted online during protests. According to Statistica Insight (2023), instant messengers such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter were most popular among Kenyans, with 74% using social media (Facebook, Twitter), while 71% used media sharing platforms such as YouTube or Instagram.

The accessibility of smartphones and the internet facilitated the hashtags and online mobilisation. Indeed, in the early days, Gen Z concentrated on creating content for online postings. Based on a population of 7.4 billion smartphone subscribers, we estimate smartphone penetration worldwide to be 69% (George, 2024). In Sub-Saharan Africa, there were 420 million smartphones in 2022, and Taylor (2023) predicts a rise to 689 million by 2028. As smartphone usage increases, it influences consumers's desire for faster internet, as was evident during the protest against the finance bill in Kenya. According to sector reports, Kenya had over 34 million smartphones (Communication Authority of Kenya (CA), 2024), and this may have accelerated access to social media among Kenyans. These devices remained a significant part of media consumption, something that was critical during the protest. A quarterly report by CA (2024) reveals that many Kenyans (96%) log into social media using smartphones, which facilitates access to information. Generally, active mobile (SIM) subscriptions increased to 68.0 million by the end of March 2024 from 66.7 million in December 2023 (CA, 2024). As mobile subscriptions continue to increase in Kenya, this presents a challenge to security agencies, which rely only on suspected individuals and groups when monitoring. Consequently, this gives rise to the amount of content posted by online users.

Despite research on social media's potential threat to national security (Al-Abd, 2022; Le, Wang, Nasim, & Babar, 2019), little is known about how social media platforms have influenced Kenya's national security

debate. This paper aims to illustrate how the mobilization of Gen Z protests through social media has surprised the world and has the potential to pose threats to national security. This concept of national security describes the protection of Kenyans' rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests from internal and external threats. We can compare the recent protest in Kenya to terrorism and extremism, and its violent nature further clarifies its eligibility. This study does not characterize the protesters as terrorists or extremists, but rather looks at their behavior during and after the protest. To demonstrate this, the confrontational behaviour between the protesters and the police resulted in deaths and injuries on both sides.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies have shown that social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, among others, are important communication tools that can be used to manage crises and disasters (Spring, 2011; Huang, Chan, & Hyder, 2010; Mavrodiava & Shaw, 2021; Hodzi & Zihnioğlu, 2024), but very few studies have investigated communication risks associated with social media in the context of threats to country stability. According to Cole and Fellows (2008), interorganisational and interpersonal communication play an important role in enhancing national security. This study, which focuses on risk communication through social media, utilizes a social amplification of the risk framework to predict and explain people's behavior on these platforms. Ekkart Zimmermann, a sociology professor at Dresden University of Technology, specializes in conflict research. In his book, *Political Violence, Crises, and Revolutions*, Zimmermann compares numerous empirically based studies of cross-national revolutions while integrating writings on "social psychological" and "social historical" research (Zimmermann 1983, 413). He argues that revolutionary activities do not emerge overnight; "they gradually build up through a number of less violent activities" (Zimmermann 1983, 413). This does not imply that such activities, in the form of political violence, are necessary precursors leading to revolutionary movements. Technological mobilisation has the potential to create new groups of elite actors. This increased level of activism challenges institutional behaviour and may encourage the government to implement greater control measures.

Kasperson, Renn, Brown, Emel, Globe, and Ratick proposed the social amplification risk framework in 1988. This theoretical model helps us understand the influence of social, psychological, and cultural factors on public perceptions of risks, as well as how these perceptions can influence risk-related behaviours. According to Kasperson et al. (1988), some aspects of hazard events and their portrayal in mediated and other sources interact with psychological, social, institutional, and cultural processes in a way that might attenuate (decrease) or amplify (increase) perceptions of risks and hence shape the

behaviour. As a result, there is evidence that risk attenuation and intensification have occurred in Kenya, and this raises the fundamental question of whether SARF can explain risk communication. The healthcare sector has used the concept of risk communication, and the study of national security has also applied it. The U.S. military has always explored ways to seize information superiority during conflicts and thus gain decisive advantages over its opponents (Busby & Busby, 2007).

The trend towards social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter presents new avenues for information leakage, which can in turn result in significant damage to reputation, revenue, and even competitive advantage (Webb, Ahmad, Maynard, & Shanks, 2014). These social media tools have been used frequently by activists as platforms for contentious interaction, but in some cases they negatively affect the country's stability, as in the case of the #OromoProtests in Ethiopia, caused by the expansion of the city into Oromia's territory (Hodzi & Zihnioğlu, 2024). Accordingly, Hodzi and Zihnioğlu (2024) explored how social media used as accountability tools are institutionalised and transformed to change agents to hold the government accountable. They argue, drawing on data from Ethiopia and Zimbabwe that successful protests necessitate a blend of online and offline mobilization, ensuring the movement remains unaffected even in the event of government internet shutdowns, such as Ethiopia in 2020.

Hermida and Hernández-Santaolalla (2018) analysed 784 tweets to examine Twitter and video activism as tools for counter-surveillance in Spain. They supplemented the content with an in-depth description of a qualitative nature and broadly analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data, including the increasing use of new devices (cameras and smartphones) to record and share video footage about the Gamonal's (Spain) revolution in January 2014. In other studies conducted in Canada, Poell and Borra (2012) analysed 11,556 tweets, 222 videos, and 3,338 photos posted on YouTube, Twitter, and Flickr during the 2010 G20 summit protests in Toronto. They discovered that social media did not facilitate crowdsourcing for alternative reporting, except to some extent for Twitter. Moreover, Poell and team found that 4% of the retweets highlighted the reasons for protest, mentioning, among others, native land rights and queer activism. Kharroub and Bas (2016) conducted an exploratory content analysis of Twitter images during the 2011 Egyptian revolution. According to a sample of 581 images, the majority contained more efficacy-eliciting content than emotionally arousing images. Crowds, protest activities, national and religious symbols, and emotionally arousing (violent) content posted by Egyptian users are all examples of efficacy. According to the efficacy explanations, the size of the social movement matters in the way it shapes individuals' perceptions.

As attention shifted to the increasing role of hashtags in protests, Vaccari et al. (2015) investigated the impact of hashtag movements on shaping political discourses

and policy debates. Their study combined content analysis and a field survey through expert interviews during the European Union parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom. They discovered that live comments as the protest progresses and Twitter hashtags are effective tools for mobilizing participants. Activists across the world have used hashtags to unite public conversations and push for policy change.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed is qualitative in nature, using data primarily from X (Twitter). Moreover, the study used a qualitative approach and assumed a positivist philosophy because it sought to identify the impact of social media on national security. The study seeks in-depth knowledge of social media as a social movement tool and how it can be a national security threat. The study does not rely on numerical data for statistical explanations. Furthermore, qualitative analysis assists in interpreting a wide range of data from social media platforms.

## STUDY SELECTION

The study extracted over 16000 posts from diverse twitter users using the hashtags #Occupyparliament, #OccupyCBD, #EconomicShutDown, #OccupyJKIA, #RutoMustGo. Data was filtered to ensure only selection with mentions of JKIA were analyzed and covered one month, from 25<sup>th</sup> June to 26<sup>th</sup> July 2024. The data was organized thematically.

## FINDINGS

With a special focus on the use of the X (formerly Twitter) space to mobilize protests against the Anti-Finance Bill 2024 in Kenya, this study examined the effects of social media on national security. While Kenya's constitution, under Article 37, guarantees assembly demonstrations, picketing, and petitions, the events of June 25, 2024, have changed how Kenyans view social media engagements. Prior to the deadly confrontation, many Kenyans, mainly youth who described themselves as leaderless, utilised social media to mobilise protesters. Previously, protests in Kenya have been largely elite-led, with vested interests leading to power-sharing deals that yielded few tangible benefits for demonstrators (Ross & Paravicini, 2024). Consequently, President William Ruto, who withdrew the finance bill, faced further pressure, resulting in the dissolution of the entire cabinet.

Despite having benefits for society, social media has demonstrated that, if not regulated, it can threaten a country's security. While internet penetration is still low in Kenya, the speed at which information about protests

mobilized thousands of youths is enough to reflect on its implications for national security. As technological determinism theory posits, technological advancements can lead to changes in approaches to addressing national security (Asogwa, 2020). Based on this emerging threat, the Kenyan government deployed the military to support the national police service, in accordance with Article 241, which stipulates that defense forces can assist and cooperate with other authorities in emergency or disaster situations and provide reports. The National Assembly (Kenya Law Reform Commission) must approve the deployment of troops to restore peace in any part of Kenya experiencing unrest or instability. During the protest, it became evident that the live audio conversations on social media platforms escalated confrontations and motivated protesters, particularly when they discovered that the MNA had voted for the financial bill. What social media did was bring people together through video and audio while tracking down their movements, and technology offered them the opportunity to send text messages, take photos, and connect to the Internet on their mobile phones. Some fans are now engaging in the practice of rapidly alerting non-attendees around the world to the songs being played, photos of the show, and any other aspects of the performance as it is happening, "live" (Bennett, 2012).

What is unique in the present debate on Kenya's protest is the nature of networked conversations, which complicated security agencies' approaches to intervention. While they (police officers) relied on physical confrontation, protesters with advanced technologies would identify routes leading to parliament, and this raises a scholarly debate on the complexity of technology during protest. This study, in line with previous research, reveals that social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok, among others, can significantly jeopardize national security, as terrorist groups and drug traffickers can exploit these platforms to target government infrastructure (Nsudu & Onwe, 2017; Shelley, 2020). Furthermore, recent studies confirm that protesters breaching security to break into parliament isn't a surprise because scholars such as Kuol and Amegboh (2021) warned of new threats and the nature of security threats in African countries. Besides common security threats in Kenya, such as acrimonious inter- and intra-community conflicts, there is also emerging technology that allows citizens to mobilise themselves against regimes. The emergence of the middle class in Kenya is responsible for the protests, as they continue to elevate citizens' expectations and call for more representative and accountable governance. However, this rise in income inequality could potentially trigger social unrest (Kuol & Amegboh, 2021).

What was evident during the protest was the adoption of generative AI, or generative artificial intelligence, which allowed protesters to create text, images, music, audio, and videos. Many social media platforms shared images of Kenyans seated at parliament and on airport runways

during #OccupyParliament and #OccuptJKIA. Some individuals also shared personal details, including the mobile phone number and family details of those who supported the finance bill. Most certainly, this was to arouse emotions among those planning to join the movements. By utilising advanced technology during the protest, it has shown that the evolving digital landscape is not only upgrading technology but also elevating the sophistication of cyber threat actors (Gupta, Akiri, Aryal, Parker, & Praharaj, 2023). For example, @bozgabi: #OccupyJKIA. The user posted a photo on X, a platform formerly known as Twitter, accompanied by explicit content that explains why attacking JKIA could prompt President William Ruto to consider resigning from his position: "JKIA." They cannot shoot because it will endanger foreigners. JKIA has NO CLOSING TIME. In addition to that, forget Uhuru Park; JKIA is international. That is where we shall humiliate this man."

### **Economic security and online attacks**

In their online campaign, protesters targeted critical utilities in Kenya, with JKIA becoming the primary target. Perhaps The protests may have been the worst since #OccupyParliament, but it's important to remember that the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) falls under the protection of the second schedule of Legal Notice No. 9 of 2011, due to the presence of the LPG Plant, the Bitumen Plant, and petroleum This was evident online, as #OccupyJKIA advocates targeted all contributing roads to Kenya's largest airport. For instance, a message on X, a former Twitter platform, declared, "Occupy Thika Road on Tuesday, July 23rd." Choke JuThe message read, "Chop Juja, Choke Ruiru Bypass stage (Kamakis), Choke Githurai, Coke Pangani Tunnel, Muthaiga (turning Kiambu road), Roysambu at TRM and towards Garden City, Chokle Kasarani (MT Mall and Garden City)." They didn't actualise their threats, it is clear their intention was to generate frustration among investors with the belief that the airport could shut down operations to portray the government negatively.

Protesters clearly adopted terrorist-like behavior by inciting fear among international guests, particularly in the hospitality sector, as evidenced by the cancellations and postponements of bookings at hotels located in Nairobi Central Business District (Simiyu, 2024). This could potentially explain why the government utilized a variety of strategies, including the military, to manage the protests' spread. Warnings about the possibility of harming the country's economy had been reported during previous political protests, but the difference with the anti-finance bill 2024 protests is the application of technology in the mobilisation process. In this regard, they strongly believe that by increasing online pressure with malicious intentions, they can influence the perceptions, behaviours, and decisions of the target groups to surrender to their demands.

@HEbabuowinos: So you want us to renew being a citizen like we're in a foreign country Kenya is yours you want to make changes everywhere like yours You're going to fast Mr Ruto give Kenyans time to breathe they're tired  
 #RutoMustGo. eCitizen Passaris #leak #EconomicShutDown #March2Parliament  
 @TalesofBosongo: With 80% of tours and safaris canceled, Kenya's tourism sector is in crisis. The protests must end. #EconomicShutDown Market Losses Make Money Not Noise  
 @MejahRawlins: As we #OccupyJKIA, remember to fan out, don't stay as a single file, spread and press continuously. The govt doesn't have 50 million cops.  
 They CAN'T SHOOT all of us. INJECT. #OccupyJKIA. #EconomicShutDown  
 @AlinurMohamed: This is one of the biggest motivation factors why we should not relent in our fight to liberate our country. #OccupyJKIA  
 @SokoAnalyst: TUESDAY. 23rd JULY 2024. RUTO will respect the Constitution and honor Article 1. #OccupyJKIA

### Foreign motivated ideologies

Kenya's protest demonstrates the influence of the media in disseminating information across borders. To illustrate this, Dodson (2015) highlighted the role of domestic factors—for example, generational change or economic affluence—without fully accounting for the possibility that international dynamics may play an

important role as well. International protest events clearly motivated Kenyans during the recent protest, as evidenced by some Twitter users advocating for the adoption of Ibrahim Traore's governance system, the coup leader of Burkina Faso:

@PublicSeal: BREAKING NEWS: Ibrahim Traore has withdrawn the mining licenses for all the foreign mining companies in Burkina Faso. No more goodies for the West. This guy is Who William Ruto thinks he is. #RutoMustGo #OccupyJKIA; @JohnOkwe52: Between Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso and William Ruto of Kenya, who do you think is working harder to boost the lives of his people. Like Ibrahim. Repost for Ruto.  
 @ian\_kimaru: Kenya must ban all IMF officials from entering Kenya. We the people have decided. The IMF should leave us alone. Kenya does not need them. The IMF is the reason for Kenya's problems. #EconomicShutDown #OccupyJKIA  
 @saidimu001: Ruto should be hngd. Proper. Bila huruma. Let's not relent. We must make him an example to the rest. It might not be today, or tomorrow, but someday! Atanyongwa huyu. Mwizi mkubwa sana.  
 Kasmuel Mcoore eCitizen Passaris #March2Paliament #EconomicShutDown  
 @MigunaMiguna: Formless, Leaderless, Tribeless and Fearless. No retreat. No surrender. Viva! #RutoMustGo #RutoMustResign,  
 #OccupyJKIA #OccupyCBD #OccupyParliamentSquare #OccupyEverywhere

### Countering mobilization #occupyJKIA

Over the coming weeks, the protests spread to key sectors of the economy. At this point, Kenyans opposed to the protest shared their frustrations, noting that the protests had negatively affected the economy and urging protesters to abort their planned attack on the country's largest airport. It is not clear what motivated the protesters

to target JKIA, but this study points to two scenarios: business rivalry or Kenyans who are genuinely against the alleged takeover of the airport by Indian firm Adani Airport Holdings Limited. For example, some Twitter users utilised the campaign to occupy JKIA to counter narratives about shutting down Kenya's economy.

@TalesofBosongo: Losing 30 billion KES daily to protests is unsustainable. Let's work together to restore economic stability. #EconomicShutDown Market Losses Make Money Not Noise

@ItsOmariba101: The economic impact of the Gen Z protests is evident, with numerous small business owners experiencing uninsured property damage and losses. Let's support our local businesses in this difficult time.

#EconomicShutDown. Market Losses. MakeMoney Not Noise

There were attempts to threaten the alleged leaders of the protest by invading into their properties. This is contrary to #Occupyparliament were almost every twitter

user supported the campaign depicting the pain among Kenyans

@raashid\_ramzi: Leave alone #eCitizen and madness of #OccupyJKIA! It's now time we occupy Gicheha farm in Rongai! If they embrace #EconomicShutDown it's time we occupy their personal properties. @bonifacemwangi @FGaitho237 @AlinurMohamed\_

@WMutunga @ProfKibwana mtukome! #EnoughIsEnough

@Amani254Gal: The continuous Gen Z protests have significantly harmed our economy, resulting in millions of shillings in losses. Businesses are closing, and jobs are at risk. Let's stop the protests and get back to rebuilding our economy. #EconomicShutDown Market Losses, MakeMoney NotNoise

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While there is a wealth of literature on the effect of social media on national security in other regions, little research has focused on Kenyan content. Therefore, this study aims to show that unregulated social media platforms have the potential to devastate a nation, as individuals and terrorist groups can exploit them through their attacks. Prior to June 25, 2024, when social media campaigns began and protesters breached security and forcefully entered Kenya's parliament, a facility classified as a protected area, many believed it was the end. However, the government's deployment of Kenyan Defence Forces clarified the situation. Many individuals perceived the protest as part of the Gen Z revolution, but social media primarily set it off. This study argues that although social media (Twitter) may not be directly responsible for the Gen Z revolution, it certainly played a significant role in facilitating the movement. When Twitter

users started targeting government installations as part of their online mobilisation, the government stepped up its security surveillance due to the imminent threats from protesters.

Unlike the previous regime, which had threatened the media during protests, President William Ruto remained open to the demands and in fact welcomed the Gen Z revolution. Protesters, mainly youth, primarily used mobile phones as they took selfies with security officers while using the hashtags #Ocupplaiment, #OccupyCBD, and #OccupyJKIA, and this increased attention via the Twitter hashtags and other social media platforms. By exposing details and operational strategies used by security agencies, we pose a potential threat to not only government installations but also the larger population of Kenyans doing their businesses.



## LIMITATIONS

This study is not complete without mentioning limitations. For example, the study relied mainly on qualitative approaches utilising hashtags on Twitter to locate stories and posts related to #OccupyParliament and #OccupyJKIA. This may not have provided adequate information or data to address the research problem.

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