

Kenya's Ruto withdraws IMF-Finance Bill in attempt to stem social explosion after massacre of anti-austerity protestors

Kipchumba Ochieng
26 June 2024

Kenya's President William Ruto announced the withdrawal of the Finance Bill 2024 Wednesday, terrified of the mass opposition sparked after Bloody Tuesday when police gunned down dozens of austerity protestors on the streets of Nairobi.

The Bill, dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), included severe tax hikes on a population already facing soaring food and fuel prices and high unemployment, amid the ruling classes' opulence and corruption.

Protests against the Finance Bill have morphed into an insurgency. Demonstrators targeted not only Ruto's blood-soaked regime, but the entire 60-year-old post-independence edifice backed by the US and NATO imperialist powers.

Millions protested across the country in 37 of the 47 counties, cutting across tribal divides. Led by youth, they chanted "reject" and "Ruto must go."

The day ended with a massacre.

According to the Police Reforms Working Group, at least 53 deaths were recorded and hundreds injured due to live ammunition. In the Githurai area on the outskirts of Nairobi, 30 were killed when police went on a shooting spree. The other 23 deaths occurred in Nairobi and across the country.

The repression was brutal. To find a comparable crime committed by security forces in a single day, one would have to look back to the 1969 Kisumu massacre, when President Jomo Kenyatta—Kenya's first post-independence leader—ordered police to open fire on a crowd during his visit, resulting in dozens of deaths.

Tuesday's slaughter is a warning of the character of the US-funded deployment of Kenyan police in Haiti, the first batch of which landed yesterday in the Caribbean nation tasked with terrorizing the population.

In seventeen hours, Ruto went from threatening anti-protestors with mass violence to making a conciliatory speech and announcing he was withdrawing the bill.

On Tuesday night, he described the protests as "treasonous events" led by "abettors of violence and anarchy," vowing

to deploy the whole state apparatus to "secure the country and restore normalcy." He announced the deployment of the Kenya Defence Forces to support the police in intensifying the repression.

The following day, he said, "Following the passage of the bill, the country witnessed widespread expression of dissatisfaction with the bill as passed, regrettably resulting in the loss of life, destruction of property and desecration of constitutional institutions." Sending his condolences to the families of those butchered by his security forces, he said he would "decline to assent to the bill."

Ruto would instead engage "with young people of our nation to listen to their issues and agree with them on their priority areas of concern." He proposed "a multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder engagement" in the next two weeks to discuss "matters relating to the content of the bill as well as auxiliary issues raised in recent days on the need for austerity measures and strengthening our fight against corruption."

Despite some sections of the population viewing this as a victory, Ruto intends to work out the best way to impose IMF austerity in collusion with the opposition Azimio la Umoja coalition and the trade union bureaucracy led by the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU).

Ruto announced that Parliament, Judiciary and county governments had been directed to work with the Treasury to undertake the budget cuts and austerity to ensure "We live within our means." As the bourgeois press reported, rejection of the bill would open a Sh200 billion (\$1.5 billion) revenue hole, resulting in cuts of the same magnitude in health, education, and social expenses.

Ruto is following the script of the IMF, which warned in January that, despite "unrest [that] could re-emerge in connection with protests against higher cost of living, need to raise more taxes and electoral processes," the Kenyan government would have to "remain committed to reforms under the programme."

Ruto now depends on the loyalty of the opposition and the trade union bureaucracy.

Francis Atwoli, COTU secretary general for two decades, organised a press conference yesterday urging “His Excellency the President to suspend the finance bill, and to appoint a commission of inquiry to examine the demands of Generation Z, Millennial young men, and other Kenyans. I want to tell Kenyans that if the country went down, it would not go down only with Ruto, it would go down with everybody. And as I’ve said before, It’s better to have a bad government than not to have one. Because anarchy is the worst thing that anybody should experience.”

His reaction is another indication that the trade unions function as an industrial police force for the government and big business. They will not oppose Ruto’s deadly violence and austerity. Rather, Atwoli insisted, “Kenya is a hub of economic activities in this region, and we must protect it at all costs. We must support the President and the government to ensure that this country remains peaceful.”

The opposition is led by millionaire Raila Odinga and has no fundamental differences with the Ruto government’s economic programme. Odinga’s concern is that the current government is incapable of implementing the required austerity measures in the face of rising opposition.

Odinga, who has been virtually silent for a week since the protests started, reacted to Ruto’s repression with calls for “a fresh start and dialogue” with the opposition. He has got his wish.

Kalonzo Musyoka—the leader of the Wiper party, which is a part of Odinga’s coalition, and who regularly acts as Azimio la Umoja spokesperson—stated that “It’s not too late for Ruto to decline the Finance Bill and send it back to Parliament for its withdrawal.”

Ruto, Kalonzo, and Odinga have worked for decades within the Kenyan political establishment, occasionally even within the same party and government. They all reside in the affluent neighborhood of Karen in Nairobi, part of what Oxfam reported as the 0.1 percent of the population (8,300 people) which own more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent (more than 44 million people).

Odinga has dedicated his career to derailing mass movements of workers, youth and sections of the middle class against the Kenyan establishment. In the 1990s, amid mounting opposition to the hated regime of Western-backed Moi regime, Odinga, despite being tortured by Moi in 1982, chose to support him. He merged his then National Development Party with Moi’s hated KANU party and served as his energy minister.

In 2007, after then-President Mwai Kibaki stole the election from him, Odinga called off mass opposition and entered into government as Second Prime Minister, even

though his supporters had been gunned down by security forces. Post-election violence resulted in over 1,200 deaths and displaced half a million people. Ruto, then an ally of Odinga, played a criminal role, whipping up ethnic violence for which he was indicted by the International Criminal Court.

In 2017, following another disputed election involving Uhuru Kenyatta, Odinga again made a deal amid widespread anger. Last year, he intermittently mobilised protests against Ruto’s Finance Bill 2023 to defuse opposition, ultimately calling them off when they threatened to intersect with strikes by civil servants, doctors, and teachers.

Kalonzo, like Ruto, started his career under Moi’s police state and was foreign affairs minister (1993-1998), Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly (1988-1992) and National Organising Secretary of KANU, the only legal party under Moi, as workers, students and left-wing opponents of the regime were killed and tortured.

Ruto is hoping to deactivate the mass upheaval. Protests, however, are expected on Thursday, as hundreds of thousands of users supported hashtags of #Resign #RejectingFinanceBill2024 #Resignation #RutoMustGo #Roadtostatehouse on Twitter/X.

The Kenyan ruling class is terrified. As the *Business Daily* noted yesterday, “Demonstrations in Kenya have typically been mobilised by political leaders who have been amenable to negotiated settlements and power-sharing agreements [in reference to Odinga], but the young Kenyans taking part in the current protests have no official leader and have been growing increasingly bold in their demands.”

Yesterday, Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua organised a press conference and said “Please I beseech you as you father please my sons and daughter make an announcement and call off the protest.”

Internationally, as former Interior Minister Sheikh Rasheed of Pakistan, where similar IMF measures are being implemented, stated yesterday, “They don’t know that the film running in Kenya could also be repeated in Pakistan. Prepare for it, the nation will make you accountable... it will not wait for any leader.”



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)