

Kenyan President Ruto imposes savage austerity as High Court upholds military deployment

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Kenyan President William Ruto has unveiled savage austerity measures amounting to billions of shillings, as the High Court upheld the deployment of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) to patrol Nairobi and other urban centers to suppress mass social opposition. More nationwide protests are expected this week.

On Friday, Ruto signed into law Appropriations Bill 2024 and instructed the Treasury to “immediately prepare supplementary estimates to reduce expenditure by the amount of revenue that was expected to be generated by the rejected Finance bill.” The Finance Bill 2024, which Ruto withdrew last week, was meant to raise \$2.7 billion through hikes in regressive taxes, including the sales tax (VAT).

Ruto plans to offset the now abandoned tax hikes with massive cuts to social expenditure, affecting education, healthcare, social welfare, housing, infrastructure, and county funding. The counties oversee devolved functions such as primary healthcare, pre-primary education, county roads, public works, and other vital services essential for local development. Forty six thousand intern teachers promised permanent positions after a three-week strike last month will be affected.

These actions show that Ruto’s decision to withdraw the Finance Bill 2024 was a tactical pullback aimed to stem mass opposition sparked after the events of Bloody Tuesday (June 25) when police gunned down dozens of austerity protestors on the streets of Nairobi and across the country. Millions had joined protests across the country that day, cutting across tribal divisions long stoked by the ruling class.

At least 30 were killed according to Human Rights Watch, and hundreds left injured, as Ruto unleashed live bullets and tear gas on mostly peaceful protestors. The exact number of dead remains unknown as the government covers up the extent of the bloodbath, with families still searching for their missing children in city mortuaries.

The Kenyan political establishment is determined to impose the diktats of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Kenya’s workers and toilers by any means necessary. The goal of the IMF is to place the full burden of Kenya’s unprecedented debt crisis onto the masses. This includes further tax and levy hikes, social expenditure cuts, and privatizations—and all with the aim of repaying outstanding foreign debts and boosting corporate profits.

Ruto, supported by the bourgeois media, is attempting to portray the austerity measures as popular. *The Standard* stated on Sunday, “The President still faces a significant challenge in winning the support of citizens. They expect him to implement further austerity measures, which may include halting planned renovations of State House, State lodges, and the deputy president’s residence and office, all of which are projected to cost billions.”

Indeed, the lavish expenses of the political class, including luxury travels, \$60,000 SUVs, generous per diems, and Ruto’s many chartered

flights to meet and curry favor with imperialist leaders, are deeply resented. However, any cuts to these will represent only a tiny fraction of what the IMF demands and serve merely to provide political cover for the savage austerity measures to be imposed on workers and the rural masses.

With these measures, Ruto is trying to buy time, as he builds up the military-police state machine to suppress mass opposition. On Friday, the High Court upheld the KDF’s deployment on the streets against protestors. Ruto deployed the military soon after a call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and days after the European Union announced it was providing €20million (\$21.4 million) in military supplies and other support to the KDF.

Following the High Court order, Defence Cabinet Secretary Aden Duale expanded the KDF deployment, announced that troops will be deployed in all 47 counties until “normality is restored” and army personnel empowered to arrest protestors.

Kenya is rapidly returning to its post-independence police state roots under the regimes of Jomo Kenyatta (1964-1978) and Daniel arap Moi (1978-2002). Even those regimes never deployed troops against unarmed civilian protests. Recent weeks have seen abductions of activists, use of live ammunition, rooftop snipers, internet slowdowns, social media shutdowns, and state-sanctioned armed goons intimidating protestors.

Ruto’s so-called “dialogue” initiative, announced last Wednesday and which involves the formation of a 100-member National Multi-Sectoral Forum to discuss unemployment, debt, and corruption, is a mockery. This “dialogue” was exposed as a cover for state repression and austerity the following day, when police gunned down 3 protestors in Rongai, including a child, and heavily armed KDF soldiers patrolled the streets of Nairobi in armoured vehicles, Humvees and military land cruisers. Anti-Finance Bill activists Alvina Wangui and Kevin Kori were abducted on Friday; their whereabouts remain unknown. On Sunday, former Nandi Hills MP Alfred Keter was abducted after Church in broad daylight.

Behind the scenes, the opposition Azimio la Umoja coalition led by millionaire Raila Odinga is colluding with Ruto on how best to suppress opposition, while publicly professing token support for the protests.

On Saturday, Odinga covered for Ruto with whom he has long worked in previous Kenyan governments, claiming he had bad advisors. Odinga described Ruto’s Tuesday night speech—in which he justified the massacre of unarmed protestors, denouncing them as “treasonous” and “dangerous criminals” who constituted “an existential threat to our republic”—as a “bad one, full of chest-thumping and written by bad advisors.”

“I told him,” Odinga continued, “the protests will not stop if you do not come out and talk strongly about it. We are at a delicate place as a country and anybody who is not aware is foolish.”

Standing next to Odinga on Saturday, the minority leader in the National Assembly Opiyo Wandayi echoed his comments, urging Ruto to

implement the National Dialogue Committee (NADCO) report before any new supposed popular consultation. At the end of last year, Odinga joined with Ruto to bring an end to a wave of anti-austerity protests triggered by last year's budget (Finance Bill 2023), which introduced a battery of tax hikes, subsidy cuts, and other austerity measures.

For five months last year, Odinga intermittently mobilised protests with the aim of keeping the swelling mass anger under the control of the bourgeois opposition forces he leads. The Ruto government, for its part, responded with mounting repression. Protesters were shot and teargassed, resulting in some 75 deaths. Ultimately Odinga called off last year's anti-austerity protests when they threatened to intersect with strikes by civil servants, doctors, and teachers, stating that issues would be resolved through NADCO, which has since predictably become a dead letter.

Unsurprisingly, Azimio has said nothing about the new IMF-dictated austerity measures. In the past, the opposition has agitated against the Ruto government's "misplaced allocations," a reference to lavish expenses by top officials.

The opposition coalition have also withdrawn its brief, short-lived calls for Ruto to resign, which proved widely popular among workers and youth. Last Tuesday, after Ruto's bloodbath on the streets of Nairobi, leading opposition figure Nairobi Senator Edwin Sifuna, demanded Ruto's resignation: "The entire country has risen up to say Ruto must go. At this moment in time even withdrawal of that Bill will not be enough. William Ruto resign as President of the Republic of Kenya."

Sifuna has not repeated this demand, hoping that Ruto's dropping of the tax hikes can be used to defuse the protests and restabilize bourgeois rule.

The Azimio la Umoja coalition has no fundamental differences with the Ruto government's economic programme and defends the same reactionary class interests. Odinga, like Ruto, is a millionaire, living streets away from each other in the affluent neighborhood of Karen in Nairobi. They are part of the 0.1 percent of the Kenyan population (8,300 people) which, according to Oxfam, owns more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent (more than 48 million people).

The silence of the trade unions indicates that they are willing to allow Ruto to impose austerity and troops to crush protestors. The Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU), representing 1.5 million workers, has said nothing. Its secretary general Francis Atwoli infamously defended the Finance Bill, before the massacre on Tuesday forced him to reverse and appeal to Ruto to withdraw the bill.

He did so in the name of defending Kenyan capitalism. "Kenya is a hub of economic activities in this region, and we must protect it at all costs," declared Atwoli. "We must support the President and the government to ensure that this country remains peaceful."

More protests are expected this week. Middle class activists are now circulating an anonymous list of demands titled "Our non-negotiable demands to dictator Ruto and his greedy government." It combines popular working class demands with middle class anti-corruption issues and calls for minor government reforms.

Among other demands, it calls for abolishing the publicly funded offices of the 1st Lady and 2nd Lady and the redirecting of funds to employ teachers and staff; the scrapping of the housing levy; the sacking of corrupt officials; the recall of "rogue" (corrupt) MPs; the reduction of MP's wages to those of a doctor; the employment of more teachers and doctors; the reinstatement of the school-feeding programme; and Ruto's immediate resignation for "selling the country to the IMF and the West."

Notably, it calls for the recall of the Kenyan "anti-terrorist" police deployed to Haiti, where they have been sent as a mercenary, US-funded force to terrorise the Haitian population, so as to prevent migration to the US and prevent the crisis in Haiti from destabilising the broader Caribbean region, which Washington considers its backyard.

It also calls for "a proper audit on the national debt." Workers and youth must be warned: there is nothing to be audited. Workers and youth should

not sacrifice their jobs, wages and social conditions so imperialism and finance capital can keep plundering the country.

Events have proved that Ruto is imposing the dictates of imperialism and the IMF, and that the opposition is conspiring to work with him to suppress the mass opposition. The Kenyan capitalist class and its political representatives are completely incapable of addressing any of the pressing social needs of the workers and poor. No amount of pleading or pressure will cause them to give up their role as clients for the US and EU imperialist powers, to whom they look to defend their privileges, or to cede to the masses any of the profits and vast tracts of land and wealth they have looted.

The events in Kenya point to the urgency of workers and youth basing their struggle on Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which explains that in the former colonial and oppressed countries only the fight for power by the working class can advance the struggle against imperialism and ensure genuine national liberation and democratic and social rights for the workers and toilers. It means uniting the working class across tribal lines and across national borders in a fight for socialism.

The eruption of class struggle in Kenya is being fueled by a global capitalist crisis and part of a growing counter-offensive of the international working class. This crisis has been accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the US-led NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, and Washington's trade war and military-strategic offensive against China, which are rapidly escalating towards a global conflict between nuclear-armed states. These conditions are fueling a powerful revolutionary movement of the working class, not only in Kenya but across Africa and the entire world.

In neighboring Tanzania, Kiswahili-speaking like Kenya, traders at Dar es Salaam's Kariako district, a popular market area in the country and one of the busiest in the whole region, went on strike against increased taxes last week. On the other side of the continent, in Nigeria, oil workers are threatening an indefinite strike over wages and the privatisation plans of the country's largest oil refinery; construction workers are threatening to strike due to the layoff of 30,000 workers; and health workers are embarking on a seven-day strike.

Social media reactions from Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and South Sudan are expressing admiration for the mass upheaval in Kenya and drawing parallels to their governments' similar IMF-austerity measures, attacks on democratic rights, and use of state repression.

The key task is to provide this movement which has evolved into a full-blown insurgency with political and programmatic direction by building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in every country.



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