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## Social media fuels Kenyan youth backlash over lawmakers' opulence

By **David Lewis** and **Cooper Inveen**

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[1/4] Didmus Barasa, a Kenyan Member of Parliament works in his office in Nairobi, Kenya, July 9, 2024. REUTERS/Cooper Inveen [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)



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### Summary

- Kenya's youth-led protests target MPs' opulence amid tax hike
- Protesters use X, TikTok to hold politicians accountable
- President Ruto dismisses cabinet, vows austerity
- Growing movement to recall Kenyan lawmakers before 2027
- Audits show \$13 mln child funds not fully accounted for

NAIROBI, July 12 (Reuters) - Luxury cars, private helicopters, mounds of cash. The lavish lifestyles of Kenya's lawmakers, splashed across TikTok and X, added fuel to anger simmering last month among a young, plugged-in population over proposed tax hikes.

Weeks-long protests about the tax measures have increasingly drawn attention to the large salaries, perks and ostentation of members of parliament (MPs) in a country where three quarters of the population is young and well-paid work is scarce.

Fury boiled over on June 25, when protesters stormed parliament and set it ablaze, pelting fleeing politicians' vehicles with stones. Since then, private residences and businesses of several MPs, mainly those associated with the ruling coalition, have been attacked.

Now, TikTok and X are being wielded as protest tools. Politicians' videos are edited and reposted with negative comments. The platforms are awash with allegations of mismanaged funds and discussions on next steps for the as-yet largely leaderless youth movement.

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Activists are sharing advice how to use recall powers to topple representatives and have even built an AI-powered chatbot that spits out media reports of corruption allegations when a politician's name is entered.

In April and May during the build-up to the protests, ruling party MP Zaheer Jhanda posted videos of himself on TikTok admiring his gleaming Range Rover, a Mercedes G Wagon and a Lexus, triggering angry online commentary.

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Protesters have since tried to storm his home, in the western town of Kisii.

Jhanda did not respond to requests for comment.

"Why would you show us your lavish lifestyle and still not do your job as a leader?" said artist and activist Rachel Stephanie Akinyi, referring to politicians' social media posts.


"What are you trying to show us? 'We have the power to use your money the way we want to, to take care of our own needs.' But what about us?", said Akinyi, who goes by the stage name 'Spontaneous The Poet'.

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In a sign of the pressure the protests are keeping on [President William Ruto](#), on Thursday he said that after listening to Kenyans and reflecting, [he had dismissed his entire cabinet](#)  apart from the foreign minister, with the aim of setting up a new "broad-based government."

Last week, Ruto, 57, said some officials displayed "obnoxious opulence." He announced [austerity measures](#) including cuts to his own offices budget and ordered a review of pay rises MPs and other officials had been due to receive in July.

Didmus Barasa, the ruling party MP for Kimilili in Western Kenya, told Reuters the protesters had valid concerns about what he called the "insensitivities" of the government's handling of economic development. He did not give further details.

Barasa denied MPs were overpaid.

His personal wealth, including a private helicopter, was a reward for legitimate business activities, he said. Barasa, who is a former soldier and not widely known as a businessman, said he owned a hospital in Turkey.

"Yes, I have a helicopter. I have a helicopter that I purchased," he said. "I am an inspiration of very many young people in this country."

Barasa, after being questioned by a senator about the helicopter, previously said in online comments that he could afford it because he chose to maintain only one wife and believed in God.

Caroline Gaita, Executive Director of Mzalendo, an organisation that monitors parliament, said young Kenyans previously disinterested in politics are re-engaging, aware of the impact legislation has on their daily lives and demanding lawmakers listen to them.

Calling the protests an "awakening of Gen Z," Tom Mboya, an expert on politics and corruption in Kenya, said there was a perception that politicians were rarely, if ever, held to account since Ruto took office in 2022.

"They have become bolder in their flashy and opulent lifestyles at a time when Kenyans are being taxed to their limit," Mboya said of officials and MPs, some of whom have been filmed handing out wads of cash to people in their constituencies.

In 2023, Kenya ranked 126 out of 180 countries in the world by Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, down three places from 2022.

Ruto's office did not respond to requests for comment on this story.

## LAWMAKERS FACE RECALL

On June 26, Ruto scrapped the tax hikes that triggered the unrest. At least 39 people have been killed in violence related to the protests.

But the anger did not fade.

Having faced little opposition since his 2022 election, Ruto and MPs must now contend with smaller but ongoing country-wide protests that transcend political and ethnic divides that have historically shaped social movements in Kenya, a regional power and Western ally.

There is a growing push for lawmakers to be removed now rather than wait until elections in 2027, with guidelines published online on how to do it, in what would be the first use of recall powers introduced in 2010.

The process involves collecting signatures of at least 30 percent of registered voters in the constituency and then presenting them to the election commission.

Voters in Kabete constituency near Nairobi have collected 5,000 of the 10,000 signatures they need to recall their MP, Ndungi Githuku, a human rights activist involved in the process said.

"I'm hoping that Kabete will be able to inspire the rest of the country to take action" Githuku said. "We are taking this country back."

Kenya's opposition, wary of being caught up in the wave of discontent, has named six of its own members to be recalled, subject to the same process.

Even if the MPs who are under pressure escape being ousted, they have lost legitimacy in the eyes of Kenyans, said Senator Richard Onyonka, who was an MP for 15 years.

"I think they are heavily damaged," he said.

## DISHING OUT MILLIONS

Kenyan MPs earn around 33 times the national average wage, and are no strangers to accusations of corruption and waste.

Basic pay for MPs is currently 725,502 Kenya shillings (\$5,650) per month in a country where annual per capita income is about \$2,000, making them among the best paid in the world compared to average incomes.

They can claim extra money for sitting on committees, cheap loans for houses and extra vehicles, and thousands of dollars per month for travel to constituencies.

Every year, each of Kenya's 290 MPs is given over \$1 million under a scheme called Constituency Development Funds (CDF) set up to promote local development. The programme has long been plagued by accusations from Kenya's Auditor-General (AG) and the national media that the money is inefficiently spent or embezzled.

Kenya's Supreme Court ruled in 2022 that the scheme was unlawful but it has not been scrapped, providing MPs with cash to hand out on building classrooms, subsidising education or improving security.

A Reuters analysis of 100 audits of constituency spending by the Auditor-General found 42 constituencies where a total of about 1.7 billion shillings (\$13 million) of spending under the CDF scheme on bursaries for school children could not be fully accounted for in the 2021/22 financial year.

The remaining 58 audits reviewed did not mention the bursaries.

The Speaker of the National Assembly did not reply to requests for comment.

MPs have long justified high pay saying that they are expected to distribute cash in their constituencies.

A 2021 report by UK and Dutch think-tanks the Westminster Foundation for Democracy Limited (WFD) and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy found aspiring members of Kenya's parliament had to spend over \$180,000, mostly out their own pockets, to campaign in 2017, a figure likely to have risen in 2022, according to anti-corruption expert Mboya, one of the authors.

At weekends, it is not unusual for lawmakers to return home in fleets of SUVs or by helicopter.

"People are angry and hate us as leadership because every weekend, helicopters crisscross the sky, all of them going to functions where these millions are being dished (out)," Boni Khalwale told fellow senators on July 3.

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