African Youth Movements: The Politics of the New Generation

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — From #EndSARS to Kenya's 2024 Gen Z moment

Beyond #EndSARS: A Continent Awakening

An earlier unit examined #EndSARS as a governance case study. Here it is examined as what it also was: the most visible expression of a continent-wide awakening of youth political consciousness. The generation that organised #EndSARS, that brought down Bashir in Sudan, that defended democracy in Senegal, that protested against rising living costs in Kenya, and that has voted out incumbent governments across the continent, is different from the one that preceded it in three critical ways.

First, it is better educated and more digitally connected than any previous generation of Africans, with access to information about governance failures and governance successes elsewhere that previous generations lacked. Second, it is impatient — not in the pejorative sense of unwillingness to work hard, but in the sense of unwillingness to accept that change must wait another generation. Third, it is organising on new terms — not through the political parties and patronage networks of the independence era, but through social media, civic tech platforms, and issue-based organisations that bypass traditional political structures entirely.

Youth Movement	Country / Region & Significance
#EndSARS	Nigeria, 2020 · Mass protest against police brutality, organised entirely via social media; ended in the Lekki massacre; catalysed lasting civic organisation.
Sudanese Revolution	Sudan, 2018-19 · Youth-led popular uprising that overthrew Omar al-Bashir after 30 years; the military eventually hijacked the transition.
Y'en a Marre	Senegal, 2011-present · Rapper-founded civic movement opposing an unconstitutional third-term bid; evolved into a permanent Pan-African civic organisation.

Youth Movement	Country / Region & Significance
#FeesMustFall	South Africa, 2015-16 · Student movement demanding free higher education; shut down universities; won fee freezes but not free education.
Kenyan Youth Protests	Kenya, June 2024 · Youth-led protests against tax hikes; stormed parliament; forced the withdrawal of the Finance Bill entirely.
Generation Z Protests	Various countries, 2024 · The Kenyan example spread rapidly to Uganda, Nigeria, and beyond — a continental youth civic moment.

The Kenya 2024 Moment: When Gen Z Stopped the Government

In June 2024, Kenyan youth organised what became one of the most remarkable displays of civic power in African history. The trigger was a Finance Bill proposing significant tax increases on everyday items — cooking oil, bread, nappies, and sanitary pads among them — in a country already struggling with high living costs and youth unemployment. But the response went far beyond a typical tax protest.

Using TikTok, X, and WhatsApp, young Kenyans — identifying themselves as 'Generation Z' — organised massive, leaderless protests that brought hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets across the country. When protesters marched on parliament on 25 June 2024, some broke through police lines and occupied the building. Several protesters were killed by police. President Ruto, facing a crisis of legitimacy, withdrew the Finance Bill entirely — the most significant single policy reversal won by a mass protest movement in Kenya's democratic history.

The Kenya protests were significant not only for what they achieved but for how they were organised: there were no central leaders, no political party directing the movement, no formal organisational structures of the kind previous protest movements had depended on. The coordination happened through social media and the organic emergence of common purpose among a generation that had grown up communicating and organising digitally. The government — used to negotiating with protests led by

identifiable opposition figures — did not know how to negotiate with a movement that had no head to cut off. Within weeks, the Kenya model spread to Uganda, Nigeria, and elsewhere: a generation with the tools to organise across borders, inspired by shared examples of civic success, with no loyalty to independence-era political party structures, had become a new kind of political force in Africa.

Key Takeaways

From #EndSARS to Sudan's revolution to Kenya's leaderless 2024 Gen Z protests, African youth are organising political power on entirely new terms — digitally coordinated, leaderless, and unconstrained by the patronage networks of the independence-era political party system. Kenya's success in forcing a full Finance Bill withdrawal, and the speed with which that model spread across borders, shows this is a durable and continental new political force. The next lesson examines how this same generational energy is expressing itself economically.