

# From Moment to Movement

## Challenges Facing Gen Z Activism in Africa

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### INTRODUCTION

Africa is often described as the world's youngest continent and is endowed with significant mineral resources. Yet it is also marked by political leaders who overstay their mandates, entrenched corruption and political greed, and chronically dysfunctional institutions.

This disconnect has clear consequences and is becoming increasingly visible in the streets. The grievances driving many Gen Z led protests are concrete and cumulative: poor governance, chronic corruption, nepotism, and a pervasive lack of economic and social opportunities.

Gen Z movements have developed their own organizational logic, relying on decentralized leadership, hashtag driven coordination, and a visual culture that circulates instantly across TikTok, Twitter/X, and encrypted channels. Examples abound: #EndSARS in Nigeria, #FeesMustFall in South Africa, Y'en a Marre in Senegal, LUCHA in the DRC, the Sudanese revolution of 2018–19, the 2024 Kenyan Finance Bill protests, and the 2025 Madagascar protests against corruption and the transitional government. Together, they form a wave of mobilization that has gradually shifted from demanding specific reforms to questioning the political and economic system itself.

How governments respond—through genuine reform or through managed containment and repression— has become a defining test of democratic legitimacy across the continent. Yet, in most cases, the distance between mass protest and durable institutional transformation remains substantial.

The six challenges that follow explore why this gap persists and what can be done to turn flash-in-the-pan moments into durable transformation.

### 1. Economic Precarity and Sustainability

Economic precarity is where the story begins and where it most often stalls. High unemployment, entrenched inequality, and weak pathways from education into decent work generate waves of mobilization that are powerful but difficult to sustain. Kenya's 2024 protests are emblematic: while the proposed Finance Bill served as the immediate trigger, the deeper drivers were accumulated frustrations over the rising cost of living, joblessness, and perceived injustice in how resources are raised and spent.

Across the continent, chronic corruption and massive illicit financial flows systematically drain public coffers, reinforcing a political economy built on opacity and impunity (UNCTAD, 2020; Kaldas & Alhosani, 2024). In such a context, promises of reform ring hollow when citizens see limited improvement in their material conditions.

A central question, therefore, is how to expand the circle of opportunity and make growth genuinely more inclusive. This is where the role of the private sector becomes critical - not as a passive beneficiary of a system of status quo but as an active enabler of structural change. The private sector can invest in young people as a reservoir of talent and skills, rather than as a "risk" to be avoided.

By developing and financing new growth poles, spearheading innovation and intentionally nurturing and attracting youth talent— be it through apprenticeships, incubators, targeted hiring, and partnerships with educational institutions, businesses can help convert protest energy into pathways for socioeconomic transformation. If strategically aligned with public policy and accountability, such investments can be a game changer in shifting African economies from cycles of precarity and frustration to trajectories of inclusion and opportunity.



## 2. Leaderless Structures and Organizational Fragility

Leaderless and horizontally organized structures lie at the core of both the strength and the vulnerability of contemporary Gen Z movements. Their refusal to concentrate authority in a few recognizable figures fundamentally reshapes how power operates within protests and how states attempt to contain them.

### **Strength: Resistance to co optation and repression**

The dispersion of leadership makes traditional strategies of co optation far less effective. In Kenya, for example, the government's usual playbook - offering power sharing arrangements or selective concessions to opposition elites to calm the streets largely failed in 2024 because the protesters were not taking their cues from those elites. There was, in effect, no single interlocutor to invite to the negotiating table, no obvious "leader" to buy off, threaten, or arrest in order to neutralize the movement. This structural opacity complicates both surveillance and repression. When strategy, messaging, and mobilization are crowdsourced through hashtags, encrypted groups, and rapidly shifting online hubs, the state cannot easily decapitate the movement. This is a major source of its resilience in the short term.

### **Weakness: Limited capacity to endure and institutionalize change**

Yet the very features that make these movements hard to stop also make them hard to sustain. The absence of formal structures, be it clear membership, leadership rotation, decision making processes and internal accountability, creates several long term weaknesses such as no organizational backbone, burnout under sustained pressure and limited engagement with formal politics.

In this sense, leaderlessness is a double edged sword: it protects movements from being easily hijacked or neutralized, but it also constrains their ability to convert fleeting moments of disruption into durable institutional transformation.

## 3. Weak Institutional Pathways for Political Entry

Entry into formal politics is frequently shaped by networks, influence, and access to money. This gatekeeping effect crowds out individuals who are motivated by public service and reinforces a culture of cronyism and patronage. Across the continent, there is no shortage of examples of those who challenge entrenched power becoming targets of harassment, judicial persecution or outright violence.

The Kenyan experience of John Githongo is illustrative. As Permanent Secretary, he exposed high level corruption that reached into the Cabinet and was ultimately forced into exile. Reflecting on this, he noted that anyone seeking to enter politics "seriously" must raise substantial funds from precisely the interests they are supposed to regulate or oppose, thereby entrenching a system of transactional politics (Wrong, 2009).

For many Gen Z activists, the lesson is stark: the central problem is not simply who steps into the political arena but how the existing system disciplines and reshapes those who do. In their view, individual integrity is rarely enough to withstand structural incentives that reward complicity and punish dissent.

## 4. State Repression and Co-optation

Governments across the continent have developed a layered and increasingly refined response to youth mobilization. Repression takes multiple forms: arrests, surveillance, internet shutdowns, and targeted violence against those who remained publicly visible, a pattern the V-Dem Institute's *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization* tracks systematically across the region. Yet repression alone tends to generate the narratives that sustain movements. The more effective tool, often deployed alongside it, is co-optation: absorbing leaders into advisory roles or transitional governments, and eroding the collective belief that resistance is worth sustaining.

## 5. The Intergenerational Divide

Institutions built on hierarchical authority clash with Gen Z's horizontal, consensus-driven approach. The cost falls mainly on the movements, which remain cut off from the experience, networks, and resources that established organizations have accumulated over decades. Those organizations, in turn, lose the youth energy and public credibility that meaningful engagement would bring. The African Union's African Youth Charter (2006) formally committed member states to closing this divide, though the distance between that commitment and practice remains wide.

## 6. Fragmented Pan-African Solidarity

While movements share tactics and inspiration across borders, they remain operationally isolated. Governments suppress movements nationally without facing coordinated continental pushback. Cross-border solidarity has not produced the infrastructure that would give it force namely shared legal support, coordinated advocacy, or networks capable of responding quickly. The *CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report 2024* and the *CIVICUS Monitor* confirm that all these conditions are deteriorating across the continent. External powers with little interest in democratic governance are expanding their influence across the continent, and surveillance technology moves freely across borders. The African Union frameworks designed to counter these pressures and protect civic space remain weakly enforced (African Union, 2007).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Greater investment in political and media literacy is needed so that movements can act as support systems for change.
- Governments must commit to transparent public finances, credible anti-corruption enforcement, and real investment in employment pathways with the private sector as an active partner.
- Movements need independent funding mechanisms, legal support, and coordination platforms that preserve horizontal structures.
- Movements should maintain transparent decision-making and clear red lines against co-optation and international actors ought to treat civic space suppression as a matter of engagement, not a domestic issue.
- Political participation must be reformed to lower the cost of electoral entry and open party structures to those outside the existing political class.
- Institutions should introduce co-governance arrangements to give youth genuine decision-making power, grounded in mutual respect rather than symbolic inclusion.
- Continental structures require deliberate investment: African Union frameworks prioritizing civic space, cross-border legal defense networks, and coordinated advocacy capacity.

## CONCLUSION

These six challenges reinforce each other. Addressing one challenge alone yields limited results. Conditions for change exist: the growing level of urbanization, rising levels of education, grassroots voices and the strategic use of digital tools— but favorable conditions do not automatically produce change, and governments that feel threatened are not waiting for the balance to shift. The window for democratic progress is open, but so is the window for entrenchment, and several governments are already making their choice. Africa's youth have shown they are willing to demand change at real personal cost. The question is whether the institutions around them are willing to meet them halfway.

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