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Digital Insurgency and Narrative Sovereignty: Social Media, Gen Z Activism, and the Remaking of Political Discourse in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 Kenyan Finance Bill protests marked a structurally novel episode in African political history: a leaderless, tribeless, and digitally organized youth movement that successfully compelled a sitting government to reverse a major legislative initiative. Existing scholarship has focused predominantly on the mobilization mechanics of this movement, examining how platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp enabled coordination and participation. This paper moves beyond mobilization analysis to examine a less theorized dimension: the active construction, contestation, and partial suppression of autonomous political discourse through competing digital regimes. Drawing on Bennett and Segerberg's logic of connective action, Entman's framing theory, and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, this paper introduces an original conceptual framework termed Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty (PMNS), defined as the capacity of non-state political actors to establish, sustain, and defend their own terms of public discourse through digital platforms against organized state counter-narrative efforts. Through a critical synthesis of published empirical studies, Amnesty International documentation, and institutional policy analyses, the paper examines three analytical planes: activist narrative construction, platform-differentiated discourse logics, and the state counter-narrative apparatus. The analysis reveals that while Kenyan Gen Z activists achieved a remarkable short-term narrative victory, the state's systematic deployment of troll networks, coordinated disinformation, and tech-facilitated surveillance produced a chilling effect that constrained the durability of that victory. The paper argues that PMNS is inherently contested, temporally bounded, and structurally asymmetric in contexts where state actors possess superior technological and financial resources. These findings carry implications for theorizing digital civic participation, democratic governance, and freedom of expression across the African continent.

Keywords:
Gen Z protests; digital activism; narrative sovereignty; connective action; critical discourse analysis; social media; platform politics; political communication

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INTRODUCTION

On 25 June 2024, hundreds of thousands of young Kenyans converged on cities and towns across 34 of the country's 47 counties in what would become the largest street demonstrations in Kenya's modern political history. What distinguished this moment from prior cycles of Kenyan protest was not merely its scale but its organizational architecture: there was no central leadership, no sponsoring political party, no ethnic alignment, and no legacy civil society machinery. The movement had assembled, coordinated, and sustained itself almost entirely through TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp, mobilizing around the hashtags #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament to oppose proposed tax legislation that protesters argued would impose punitive economic burdens on ordinary citizens (Okibe, 2024; Shilaho & Monyae, 2024).

Within days, President William Ruto declined to assent to the Finance Bill, marking a symbolic and material victory of rare proportions for a leaderless popular movement anywhere on the African continent. Yet what followed this victory is analytically as important as the victory itself. The state did not retreat from the digital arena. Instead, it escalated its presence there, deploying coordinated troll networks, paid influencer campaigns, state-sponsored disinformation, and alleged telecommunications surveillance to delegitimize protest leaders, fracture activist coalitions, and construct a counter-narrative framing activists as financially motivated and foreign-influenced (Amnesty International, 2025; Kapiyo, 2025). By 2025, a generation that had demonstrated unprecedented narrative power found itself contending with what Amnesty International documented as a systematic campaign of tech-facilitated violence designed to chill civic expression.

The scholarly response to these events has been swift but analytically partial. A growing cluster of peer-reviewed publications has examined how digital platforms enabled mobilization and coordination (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023; Ingutia, 2025), how framing strategies shaped public perception of the Finance Bill (Khaemba, 2024), and how meme culture functioned as a tool of political accountability (Akondo et al., 2026). What remains undertheorized is the dimension that fundamentally determined the movement's political trajectory: the contest over narrative sovereignty itself, understood as the capacity of non-state actors to define, sustain, and defend their own terms of political discourse against organized counter-narrative effort.

This paper addresses that gap through the introduction of an original conceptual framework, Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty (PMNS), which theorizes the conditions under which digitally organized civic actors achieve, sustain, or lose the capacity to govern political meaning in the public sphere. The argument proceeds in five substantive sections. Following this introduction, the political economy context of the 2024 protests is established, with particular attention to Kenya's digital infrastructure, youth demographic pressures, and the evolving relationship between civic media and state power. The theoretical literature is then reviewed and PMNS is developed as an integrating concept. An empirical analysis applies this framework across three planes: activist narrative construction, platform-differentiated discourse logics, and the state counter-narrative apparatus. A discussion section draws broader theoretical and comparative observations before the paper concludes with implications for democratic theory, platform governance, and the future of Gen Z political agency in Kenya and across the continent.

The paper's contribution is threefold. It introduces PMNS as a conceptual framework applicable beyond the Kenyan context to any polity in which civic and state actors compete for narrative authority through shared digital infrastructure. It advances the literature on African digital activism by shifting analytical focus from mobilization to narrative durability, an aspect that determines the long-term political significance of protest movements. And it contributes an evidence-based account of the Kenyan state's counter-narrative

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apparatus that situates documented repression within a coherent analytical framework rather than treating it as an isolated series of abuses.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PROTEST: KENYA'S GEN Z UPRISING

To understand the narrative dynamics of the 2024 protests, it is necessary to situate them within the structural conditions that produced them. Kenya entered 2024 as a country in which the contradictions between its constitutional promise and its political practice had become visible to a generation that had come of age entirely under the 2010 Constitution. Youth unemployment had reached 67 percent by 2022, public services were in chronic decline, and the political elite was widely perceived to be insulated from the economic conditions it imposed on ordinary citizens (Mutunga & Khalifa, 2026; Shoki, 2025). The Finance Bill 2024, introduced by the National Treasury to service government debt and comply with International Monetary Fund program conditions, proposed tax increases on a range of everyday goods including bread, cooking oil, financial services, and menstrual health products, while simultaneously exempting items associated with elite consumption such as helicopter spare parts(Brown, 2024; Lee, 2025).

The response to the bill was organized with a speed and sophistication that surprised state actors. Young Kenyans used TikTok and X to translate the bill's technical language into accessible formats, created AI-assisted question-and-answer tools to demystify legislative jargon, and crowdfunded transportation costs for protesters outside Nairobi (Mwaura, 2024). A single X Spaces session organized by protesters on 22 June 2024 recorded 1.2 million views and 60,000 live listeners, demonstrating the reach of platform-native civic communication (Lee, 2025). The protests that followed represented what scholars describe as connective action rather than traditional collective action: mobilization enabled by personalized, shareable content rather than organizational resources, collective identity framing, or leadership structures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023).

Several structural features of the movement merit analytical attention. The protests were explicitly tribeless, departing from the ethnically segmented mobilization that has historically defined Kenyan political contention (Kariuki & Gichanga, 2025; Shilaho & Monyae, 2024). They were intergenerational in practice while Gen Z in identity, drawing participation from millennials and older citizens who identified with the movement's constitutional framing even if they did not identify as Generation Z. They were also intersectional in their issue scope: the movement that began over taxation quickly absorbed demands related to femicide, police brutality, corruption, and democratic accountability, suggesting that the Finance Bill functioned as a proximate trigger for deeper structural grievances rather than as the movement's sole animating concern (Kumah-Abiwu, 2026).

The enabling conditions for this digital insurgency were themselves structural. Kenya's digital infrastructure had expanded significantly in the decade preceding the protests, with 22.7 million internet users and 13 million active social media users recorded by 2024, against a backdrop of 66 million cellular mobile connections reflecting widespread multi-SIM usage (Kapiyo, 2025). Smartphone penetration, particularly through affordable Android devices and mobile data bundles, had brought TikTok and WhatsApp within reach of urban and peri-urban youth populations who had previously been excluded from the kinds of digital political participation documented in Global North contexts. This democratization of digital access was geographically uneven, with urban areas recording significantly higher adoption rates, but it was sufficient to create the critical mass of digitally fluent youth activists that the 2024 movement required (James, 2025; Wamuyu, 2020).

The media environment within which the protests unfolded was equally consequential. Kenya's mainstream broadcast and print media, while formally independent, operate within a commercial and political economy that creates

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structural pressures toward circumspect coverage of government criticism. Several major media groups have ownership structures with direct or indirect connections to political interests, and self-censorship among journalists covering politically sensitive topics has been documented extensively in the literature on Kenyan press freedom (Munoriyarwa et al., 2025). The 2024 protests exposed this structural constraint with particular clarity: while mainstream media eventually covered the demonstrations, the initial framing and sustained analytical depth of coverage was generated on digital platforms rather than in legacy media spaces. This dynamic meant that the movement's narrative was formed, contested, and transmitted largely outside the reach of institutional media gatekeepers, a condition that both enabled the movement's narrative independence and concentrated its communications infrastructure on platforms it did not own or control.

These features distinguish the 2024 Kenyan protests from earlier episodes of African digital activism while connecting them to a broader global wave. Comparative analysis positions the movement alongside Nigeria's #EndSARS protests, Bangladesh's 2024 student uprising, and the Arab Spring as instances in which digital-native youth movements achieved short-term political outcomes through platform-mediated pressure (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). Yet the Kenyan case carries a distinctive analytical signature: the state's counter-mobilization was itself digital, orchestrated, and sustained, producing a narrative contest rather than merely a physical one. It is this feature, the dual digitalization of both insurgency and repression, that the Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty framework is designed to theorize.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Connective Action and the Personalisation of Contentious Politics

Bennett and Segerberg's (2023) logic of connective action provides the foundational organizational lens for understanding how the 2024 protests assembled and sustained themselves. Classical theories of collective action emphasize organizational resources, collective identity framing, and leadership structures as prerequisites for sustained mobilization (Tilly, as cited in Bennett & Segerberg, 2023). Connective action theory identifies a distinct logic operative in digitally networked activism, where mobilization proceeds through the mass sharing of personalized content that requires neither a collective identity nor formal organizational infrastructure. In this logic, social media platforms function not merely as communication channels but as organizing agents: they structure participation, amplify resonant frames, and coordinate action through algorithmic and networked dynamics that no individual actor controls.

The Kenya protests exemplify this logic with particular clarity. There was no single account, no coordinating organization, and no leadership hierarchy that directed the movement. Instead, thousands of individual content creators, each producing and sharing material aligned with the broad anti-Finance Bill sentiment, created an emergent coordination effect that scaled rapidly across platforms (Ingutia, 2025). The personalized action frames that circulated, including individual testimonials about economic hardship, satirical memes about elite consumption, and direct-address videos to members of parliament, travelled precisely because they did not require shared organizational affiliation to be adopted and redistributed.

However, connective action theory was developed primarily through analysis of movements in Western liberal democracies and carries several assumptions that require critical adaptation for the African context. The theory presupposes a relatively permissive regulatory environment in which platforms operate without significant state interference, a condition that does not hold in Kenya or in many other African polities where telecommunications infrastructure is subject to state leverage and platforms can be pressured to facilitate surveillance (Brevis, 2022; Kapiyo, 2025). It also tends to treat the digital arena as a relatively level competitive field in which the

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personalization advantages of connective action neutralize the organizational advantages of incumbent political actors. The Kenyan evidence suggests this levelling effect is real but temporary: it holds during the initial phase of a movement when the speed and creativity of connective action outpaces the state's capacity to respond, but erodes as state actors deploy institutional resources to contest and ultimately restructure the digital field (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). The theory accounts well for how movements form and scale but is less equipped to theorize the conditions under which narrative gains made through connective action are sustained, eroded, or extinguished by organized counter-power. It is this limitation that motivates the development of PMNS as an extending concept.

Bennett and Segerberg's (2023) earlier journal article additionally distinguishes between crowd-enabled connective action networks, which are largely self-organizing, and organizationally enabled networks, which retain elements of hierarchical coordination. The 2024 protests were predominantly crowd-enabled, and this distinction matters: crowd-enabled networks are more resilient to the decapitation of individual leaders but also more vulnerable to algorithmic manipulation and the absence of organizational memory that could sustain narrative coherence across extended time periods. Zuckerman's (2022) work on institutional mistrust provides a useful complement here, suggesting that the same distrust of legacy institutions that drives youth toward connective action also creates a structural disinclination to build the alternative institutions that could sustain narrative sovereignty beyond the immediate protest moment.

Framing Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis

Entman's (2002) framing theory offers the analytical vocabulary for examining how specific rhetorical choices within the protest corpus defined the political situation, attributed causality, and mobilized moral evaluation. To frame, in Entman's formulation, is to select and make salient certain aspects of perceived reality in order to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation. The Kenyan protest corpus is rich with identifiable frames: the Finance Bill as economic violence against the poor; the political elite as corrupt beneficiaries of the fiscal system they designed; young Kenyans as constitutional subjects asserting popular sovereignty; and the state's response as a continuation of post-independence elite capture rather than legitimate governance (Carter, 2024; Khaemba, 2024).

Fairclough's (1995, 2003) critical discourse analysis extends this framework by positioning discourse as both a reflection of social relations and a site of their contestation and reproduction. CDA is particularly suited to the Kenya case because it attends not only to what is said but to how saying it inscribes, challenges, or reproduces power relations. In the context of the protests, CDA allows the analyst to examine how activist discourse constructed a counter-hegemonic political subject, how state discourse sought to delegitimize that subject, and how platform architectures shaped the conditions under which each discourse achieved or failed to achieve salience. Van Dijk's (2015) socio-cognitive approach to CDA further enables attention to how ideological structures, including narratives of foreign interference and professional activism, were deployed to manufacture consent for state repression.

The paper additionally draws on Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA), which analyses how historical narratives and collective memory are mobilized in contemporary political discourse (Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2015). The 2024 protests were rich in historical invocation: protesters drew explicit analogies to the Mau liberation struggle, to the Saba prodemocracy protests of 1990, and to the constitutional struggles that produced the 2010 Constitution, positioning themselves within a long tradition of popular democratic resistance against authoritarian governance (Mbunga, 2025; Mutunga & Khalifa, 2026). The state's counter-narrative, conversely, invoked histories of

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political instability and externally funded civil society destabilization to frame the protests as a security threat rather than a democratic exercise. The DHA lens reveals this historical contestation as a constitutive dimension of the narrative sovereignty contest: the side that successfully anchored its contemporary claims to a resonant historical tradition would be better positioned to sustain narrative authority across the longer arc of the movement.

Together, connective action theory, framing theory, CDA, and the discourse-historical approach provide the analytical infrastructure for PMNS. What they leave unaddressed is the structural asymmetry between activist and state actors in the digital arena, specifically the question of whether and under what conditions non-state actors can maintain sovereign control over the terms of political meaning-making when state actors possess superior resources, institutional access to platform companies, and the capacity for sustained coordinated counter-narrative operation.

Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty: An Original Framework

This paper introduces Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty (PMNS) as a conceptual framework for theorizing the capacity of non-state political actors to establish, sustain, and defend their own terms of public discourse through digital platforms. The concept draws on narrative sovereignty's roots in Indigenous studies, where it denotes communities' rights to control their own stories and resist the imposition of external narratives (Zuckerman, 2014), and extends it to the domain of contentious digital politics. PMNS is defined as the degree to which a political actor can govern the dominant frame through which a political situation is publicly understood, in a context where multiple actors are competing for narrative authority through the same platform infrastructure.

PMNS has three constitutive dimensions, each with sub-criteria that enable analytical assessment. The first dimension is narrative construction: the capacity to produce, circulate, and anchor frames that define the political situation on the actor's own terms. Sub-criteria include the originality and cultural resonance of the frames produced, the speed with which they achieve circulation, and the degree to which they compel institutional actors to respond on the movement's terms rather than their own. The second dimension is narrative reach: the degree to which constructed frames achieve salience beyond the actor's existing audience, crossing into mainstream public discourse and compelling response from journalists, international observers, and institutional actors. Sub-criteria include cross-platform diffusion, mainstream media uptake, and international amplification. The third dimension is narrative durability: the capacity to maintain those frames over time against organized attempts to displace, discredit, or suppress them. Sub-criteria include resilience to counter-narrative operations, the capacity for frame renewal in response to changing circumstances, and the ability to re-anchor narrative authority after episodes of state-driven disruption.

The 2024 Kenyan protests scored high on the first two dimensions and were selectively successful on the third, with durability ultimately constrained by the state's counter-narrative infrastructure. This differential performance across PMNS dimensions is itself analytically revealing: it suggests that achieving narrative sovereignty is fundamentally easier than sustaining it, and that the conditions for achievement, speed, creativity, and the viral dynamics of connective action, are structurally distinct from the conditions for durability, which require platform-independent communication infrastructure, organizational memory, and the capacity to absorb and recover from counter-narrative attacks.

Crucially, PMNS is not an absolute condition but a contested and dynamic one. It is structurally asymmetric: state actors typically possess advantages in financial resources, relationships with platform companies, control over telecommunications infrastructure, and institutional authority that non-state actors cannot easily match. It is also temporally bounded: the conditions that enable a surge of narrative

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sovereignty, such as a viral grievance, a dramatic physical event, or an international media moment, are inherently unstable and cannot be sustained indefinitely without the organizational infrastructure that connective action logic resists. And it is platform-dependent: the same narrative that dominates TikTok's algorithmic ecology may be suppressed on X through coordinated trending manipulation or on WhatsApp through encrypted group infiltration. A further dimension of platform-dependency concerns platform ownership and regulatory context: platforms headquartered in jurisdictions with weak human rights frameworks, or those subject to state pressure through license conditions and data-sharing agreements, provide structurally weaker narrative sovereignty conditions than platforms operating under stronger digital rights regimes (Brevis, 2022). The PMNS framework thus directs analytical attention not only to the content of political narratives but to the structural and technical conditions of their circulation, contestation, and possible suppression.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: THE PMNS FRAMEWORK APPLIED

Activist Narrative Construction

The activist narrative corpus produced during the 2024 protests is characterized by several consistent framing operations that collectively constituted a coherent alternative political discourse. The first and most foundational was the constitutional frame: the Finance Bill was constructed not merely as bad policy but as a violation of the people's constitutional sovereignty, placing the movement within the tradition of the 2010 Constitution's emphasis on participatory governance and the public's ultimate authority over public finance (Kariuki & Gichanga, 2025; Mutunga & Khalifa, 2026). This frame was strategically significant because it transformed the movement from a protest against specific taxes into an assertion of democratic principles that were formally endorsed by the very state that was now violating them.

The second dominant frame was the economic injustice frame, which constructed the Finance Bill as an instrument of class-based extraction: taxes that would fall on bread, cooking oil, and mobile money transfers used by working-class Kenyans, while items associated with elite consumption remained untaxed (Brown, 2024; Shoki, 2025). This frame was amplified through TikTok's video format, which enabled individual creators to produce direct-address testimonials about specific economic hardships, creating an affective proximity that abstract policy arguments could not generate. Akondo et al. (2026), in their analysis of 500 political memes from TikTok and X, found that satirical video memes constituted 62 percent of the meme corpus, effectively framing political leaders as accountable for governance failures through cultural resonance rather than formal argumentation.

A particularly notable discursive innovation was the appropriation of the biblical nickname "Zakayo" for President Ruto, a reference to the tax collector Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke. This frame operated simultaneously as economic critique, moral indictment, and cultural humor, reaching across educational and generational boundaries in a country where Christianity is deeply embedded in public culture (Lee, 2025; Onyango, 2025). The Zakayo frame illustrates a characteristic feature of Gen Z activist discourse: the capacity to mobilize pre-existing cultural codes, in this case biblical narrative, as containers for contemporary political critique, making them simultaneously accessible and resonant. This discursive strategy reflects what Khaemba (2024) identifies as the movement's intertextual creativity: the ability to draw on diverse cultural repositories, including religious texts, popular music, historical slogans, and internet meme culture, to construct frames that travel effectively across platform and audience boundaries.

The third frame was the generational sovereignty frame, which constructed Gen Z not as apolitical youth but as a constitutionally informed generation asserting its right to hold power accountable. This frame was reinforced by the movement's conspicuous attention to legal and procedural correctness: protesters cited specific

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constitutional provisions, engaged with parliamentary procedure, and demonstrated a level of civic literacy that undermined the state's initial dismissal of the protests as uninformed online noise (Bhattacharya, 2026; Mwaura, 2024). The movement produced what the Mutunga and Khalifa (2026) described as a civic pedagogy, teaching the nation that democracy is not a ritual of voting but a continuous act of holding power to account. AI-assisted tools further amplified this pedagogical dimension: custom chatbot applications built by Kenyan developers enabled ordinary citizens to query the Finance Bill's provisions in plain language and in multiple Kenyan vernaculars, democratizing technical information and strengthening the constitutional frame's evidential base (Mwaura, 2024).

Across all three frames, the narrative construction process was platform-native rather than platform-mediated: activists did not use platforms to distribute messages produced elsewhere but generated their narratives within platform affordances, adapting format, tone, and register to the specific logics of TikTok's visual-algorithmic ecology, X's hashtag-trending architecture, and WhatsApp's trusted-network dynamics (Akondo et al., 2026; Khaemba, 2024). This platform-nativeness was a source of both strength, enabling rapid adaptation and wide reach, and structural vulnerability, as it made the movement's narrative infrastructure dependent on platform architectures it did not control.

Platform-Differentiated Discourse Logics

A distinctive feature of the 2024 Kenyan protests that has not been systematically analyzed in the existing literature is the degree to which different platforms functioned as distinct discourse environments rather than interchangeable channels. Each platform's technical architecture produced different narrative logics, different publics, and different vulnerabilities to state counter-narrative intervention. The movement's sophisticated, if largely intuitive, navigation of these differences constituted a form of platform literacy that distinguished it from less effective protest communication strategies.

TikTok functioned as the movement's primary narrative production environment. Its short-form video format privileged affective, personalized, and visually compelling content over analytical or argumentative discourse, making it particularly effective for the economic injustice and generational sovereignty frames. The platform's algorithmic distribution logic, which amplifies content based on engagement signals rather than follower networks, enabled protest content to reach users with no prior political engagement, dramatically expanding the movement's effective audience. Khaemba (2024) identifies TikTok as the principal arena for the movement's linguistic creativity, with creators deploying code-switching, satire, and intertextual reference to produce content that was simultaneously entertaining and politically mobilizing. The platform's architecture also produced a distinctive temporal logic: viral content could shift the political agenda within hours, creating a speed asymmetry between activist mobilization and state response that was particularly consequential during the initial protest phase.

X served as the movement's primary agenda-setting and inter-institutional communication environment. Its hashtag architecture enabled the rapid aggregation of dispersed individual expressions into trending narratives that compelled response from mainstream media, political actors, and international observers. The #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament hashtags functioned as organizational nodes, aggregating content from thousands of accounts into coherent visible movements. X's Spaces feature provided a broadcast infrastructure for extended civic deliberation: a single protest-organized Space session on 22 June 2024 attracted 1.2 million views and 60,000 live listeners, demonstrating the platform's capacity for real-time mass civic assembly at a scale that traditional broadcast media could not easily replicate (Lee, 2024). However, X's trending algorithm was also the platform most susceptible to coordinated manipulation, a vulnerability that the state would

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later exploit systematically through paid troll networks.

WhatsApp functioned as the movement's secure coordination and community-building environment. Its end-to-end encryption and group-based architecture enabled activists to share sensitive coordination information, crowdfund resources, and maintain community ties beyond the reach of public surveillance. The platform's trusted-network dynamics meant that content circulated through WhatsApp carried higher credibility within communities than public platform content, making it effective for local mobilization and the translation of the Finance Bill into vernacular languages (Mwaura, 2024). WhatsApp's closed architecture also created structural limitations: it was less effective at generating new publics or achieving the inter-institutional visibility that X provided. Its encryption, while providing security from conventional surveillance, did not protect against infiltration of group spaces by state-linked actors, a vulnerability documented in Kapiyo's (2025) analysis of digital repression in Kenya.

A critical but underappreciated dimension of the movement's digital strategy was cross-platformization: the deliberate or emergent practice of producing content on one platform and circulating it across multiple others in adapted forms. TikTok videos were screenshotted and shared on WhatsApp groups, X threads were compiled into TikTok slideshows, and WhatsApp-circulated legal analysis was reformatted into X threads for public visibility. This cross-platformisation created a form of narrative redundancy that made the movement more resilient to platform-specific suppression: content removed from one platform was likely to persist on others in altered forms. It also created a cross-pollination of platform publics, introducing politically marginal users on one platform to protest content originating on another (Njuki et al., 2024). The BBC's Blood Parliament documentary, which investigated the shooting of protesters on 25 June 2024 and alleged Kenyan military involvement, demonstrated the further extension of this cross-platformization logic to international media: documentary content produced for broadcast was immediately repurposed into social media clips, amplifying the movement's international narrative reach and simultaneously triggering the state's targeted counter-narrative attack on its protagonist, Hanifa Adan (Amnesty International, 2025).

Table 1: Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty in Kenya's 2024 Gen Z Protests: A Comparative Analysis of Three Digital Platforms

Dimension	TikTok	X (Twitter)	WhatsApp
Primary discourse function	Narrative production and affective framing	Agenda-setting and inter-institutional signaling	Secure coordination and community building
Dominant content form	Short-form video; satirical memes; personal testimonials	Hashtags; threads; live Spaces broadcasts	Text messages; document sharing; group discussions
Reach logic	Algorithmic amplification beyond existing networks	Trending-based visibility to journalists and institutions	Trusted-network circulation within existing communities
Key activist strength	Speed; emotional resonance; cross-demographic reach	Forced institutional response; international attention	Coordination security; local mobilization; vernacular translation
State counter-narrative vulnerability	Content moderation inconsistency; algorithmic opacity	Trending manipulation by coordinated paid networks	Group infiltration; telecom surveillance
PMNS narrative durability	Moderate: content removed or suppressed over time	Low: systematically targeted by troll networks	Moderate-High: encryption limited direct suppression

Note. PMNS = Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty. Durability scores represent analytical assessments based on Amnesty International (2025) and Akondo et al. (2026)

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State Counter-Narrative Apparatus: Organised Disruption of Narrative Sovereignty

The state's counter-narrative response to the 2024 protests represents perhaps the most analytically significant and undertheorized dimension of the entire episode. Rather than confining its response to physical repression, the Kenyan state deployed a comprehensive and orchestrated counter-narrative apparatus operating through the same platforms that had enabled the protests, constituting what Amnesty International (2025) documented as a systematic campaign of technology-facilitated violence against protest participants and civic voices.

The counter-narrative apparatus operated across at least four distinct dimensions. The first was narrative delegitimization: the systematic construction of activist voices as professionally paid, foreign-funded, and politically motivated rather than genuinely civic. The #ToxicActivists campaign deployed by state-linked trolls in April 2025 targeted prominent protest voices, including journalist Hanifa Adan following her interview with the BBC documentary Blood Parliament, with coordinated Islamophobic imagery, false financial allegations, and organized harassment designed to discredit her and allied activists (Amnesty International, 2025). This operation illustrates the state's capacity to mobilize intersecting systems of oppression, in this case Islamophobia, misogyny, and suspicion of NGO-funded activism, in service of counter-narrative objectives that ostensibly had nothing to do with religion or gender.

The second dimension was trending manipulation: the use of coordinated paid networks to amplify pro-government messages and suppress protest hashtags in X's trending architecture. Amnesty International (2025) documented evidence of state-sponsored troll networks paid specifically to promote pro-government messaging with the aim of reaching Kenya's top daily trends on X, effectively occupying the algorithmic infrastructure that had previously served as the movement's primary public agenda-setting arena. This intervention demonstrates a critical asymmetry in PMNS: the same platform architecture that enabled activist narrative construction could be turned against activists by actors with superior financial resources and coordination capacity. The capacity to trend was not, therefore, a neutral technical achievement but a contested political resource whose access could be bought.

The third dimension was surveillance and de-anonymization: the alleged use of telecommunications infrastructure, including Safaricom's mobile network data, to track and identify protest organizers, enabling their physical targeting through abduction, detention, and in some cases enforced disappearance (Amnesty International, 2025; Kapiyo, 2025). By linking digital identity to physical location, the state converted the digital arena from a space of relative activist security into a vector of physical vulnerability, producing what Amnesty International (2025) documented as a chilling effect: the deliberate suppression of digital civic expression through the threat of physical consequence. Amnesty International estimated that security forces' excessive and unnecessary force resulted in 63 deaths, 83 abductions, and 2,000 arbitrary arrests in 2024 alone, with the digital-to-physical pipeline from online identification to physical targeting documented in court testimony that revealed call triangulation and location tracing performed without court orders (Amnesty International, 2025).

The fourth dimension was platform complicity by omission: the failure of X and other platform companies to remove coordinated inauthentic behavior despite documented violations of their own policies, effectively becoming passive infrastructure for state-organized harassment (Amnesty International, 2025). This dimension raises significant questions about the accountability of platform companies in contexts where they serve simultaneously as the infrastructure for civic mobilization and for state repression. The gendered and intersectional dimensions of this counter-narrative targeting deserve particular emphasis: Amnesty

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International's (2025) report documented that young women and LGBTQI+ activists faced especially brutal forms of tech-facilitated abuse, including AI-generated sexual imagery and homophobic hate campaigns, revealing that the state's counter-narrative apparatus leveraged pre-existing social hierarchies of gender and sexuality to impose compounded narrative vulnerabilities on the movement's most marginalized voices. The movement's tribeless framing, while a genuine organizational achievement, did not neutralize these intersectional risks; it rendered them less visible analytically while they remained materially consequential for the activists who bore them.

Taken together, these four dimensions reveal the state counter-narrative apparatus as a sophisticated, multi-layered operation designed not merely to respond to activist discourse but to restructure the conditions under which civic discourse could be produced and sustained. The apparatus was not merely reactive but anticipatory: its sustained operation through 2024 and 2025 created a structural chilling effect on future digital civic expression that extended well beyond the immediate protest context, conditioning the environment within which the movement's transition toward electoral politics would need to be navigated.

DISCUSSION

The empirical analysis above permits several theoretical observations about the PMNS framework and its applicability beyond the Kenyan context. The first observation concerns the temporal structure of narrative sovereignty contests. The 2024 protests demonstrate that activist narrative sovereignty can be achieved rapidly and at scale through connective action dynamics, but that this achievement is intrinsically unstable. The conditions that enabled the movement's narrative surge, a highly visible legislative grievance, a viral cultural moment, and a generation with high digital fluency and low institutional investment in the existing political order, are not reproducible on demand. Once the immediate trigger receded and the state's counter-narrative apparatus had time to organize, the structural asymmetries in resources, institutional access, and platform leverage that favor state actors began to reassert themselves (Kumah-Abiwu, 2026; Tonui, 2026). This temporal dynamic suggests that PMNS theory should distinguish between what might be termed insurgent narrative sovereignty, achieved through the speed and creativity of connective action, and institutional narrative sovereignty, which requires organizational infrastructure, platform-independent communication capacity, and the ability to project narrative authority across extended time periods without the animating energy of a crisis moment.

The second observation concerns the relationship between platform affordances and narrative durability. The paper's platform-differentiated analysis reveals that the movement's reliance on X's trending architecture as its primary agenda-setting mechanism constituted a structural vulnerability, since that mechanism was susceptible to coordinated manipulation by well-resourced actors. A more platform-distributed narrative strategy, one that invested equally in WhatsApp's trusted-network dynamics and TikTok's algorithmic reach while developing platform-independent communication infrastructure such as newsletters, community radio, and activist-controlled websites, might have produced greater narrative resilience against state counter-narrative intervention (Munoriyarwa et al., 2025; Tufekci, 2017). This observation carries a practical implication for future movements: narrative sovereignty is structurally more durable when it is distributed across multiple communication environments than when it is concentrated on a single platform whose affordances can be captured or corrupted by state-resourced actors.

The third observation concerns the intersection of PMNS with existing social cleavages. The state's counter-narrative apparatus did not operate in a neutral discursive field but strategically mobilized Islamophobic, misogynistic, and anti-LGBTQI+ discourses to target specific activist voices (Amnesty International, 2025). This selectivity

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reveals that narrative sovereignty is not uniformly distributed within social movements: activists occupying marginalized identity positions face compounded narrative vulnerabilities that a movement's nominal tribelessness or inclusive framing cannot resolve. A fully theorized PMNS framework must therefore incorporate an intersectional dimension, attending not only to the overall narrative power of a movement but to the differential distribution of narrative precarity within it. Movements that fail to structurally protect their most vulnerable voices against targeted counter-narrative attacks risk having those attacks function as a wedge that fractures coalitions along pre-existing identity fault lines.

The fourth observation concerns the accountability gap in platform governance that the Kenya case exposes with particular clarity. The documented failure of X to enforce its own policies against coordinated inauthentic behavior in the Kenyan context is not an isolated incident but reflects a broader structural problem in global platform governance: the absence of effective accountability mechanisms for platform companies when their inaction serves the interests of state actors with whom they have commercial or regulatory relationships (Brevis, 2022; Bwire, 2024). This accountability gap has asymmetric consequences for PMNS: it structurally favors state actors, who can leverage their regulatory authority over platform licensing and market access to create implicit incentives for platform compliance with state counter-narrative objectives, while non-state actors have no comparable leverage. Closing this accountability gap requires regulatory interventions at both national and international levels that are currently absent from the African policy landscape and only partially developed in European and North American jurisdictions.

The fifth observation concerns the comparative African dimension of the analysis. The Kenyan protests did not occur in isolation but as part of what scholars have identified as a generational wave of digitally enabled civic activism across the continent, including movements in Nigeria, Uganda, Senegal, Madagascar, Chad, and Gabon during the same period (Bhattacharya, 2026; Kumah-Abiwu, 2026). The PMNS framework developed here is designed to be transferable across these contexts, with the expectation that the specific configurations of narrative construction, platform use, and state counter-narrative capacity will vary according to each country's digital infrastructure, press freedom environment, and political economy. In contexts with lower internet penetration or stronger state control over telecommunications infrastructure, the conditions for activist narrative sovereignty will be correspondingly more constrained. In contexts with stronger regional media institutions or more robust civil society networks, the conditions for narrative durability may be more favorable. The Kenya case thus functions as a theoretically generative site rather than a unique or exceptional one: its analytical value lies in the clarity with which it exposes the structural dynamics of PMNS contests, not in any claim that its specific outcomes are likely to be replicated elsewhere.

The sixth and final observation concerns the emerging electoral horizon. As the 2027 Kenyan election approaches, the movement faces what analysts describe as a fundamental structural dilemma: how to translate digital narrative power into durable institutional influence without being absorbed into the patronage politics it sought to challenge (Mayabi, 2026; Onyango, 2025). This dilemma reflects a structural feature of PMNS that the framework is designed to make analytically visible: narrative sovereignty is a necessary but not sufficient condition for political transformation. It can compel state actors to retreat on specific legislative measures, as the Finance Bill withdrawal demonstrated. It cannot, by itself, restructure the institutional conditions that generate those measures. That restructuring requires the translation of narrative power into electoral and institutional forms that connective action logic actively resists through its preference for leaderless, structure-light organization. Navigating this translation without surrendering the movement's narrative independence or its constitutive hostility to patronage politics

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represents the defining challenge of Kenya's next democratic chapter.

CONCLUSION

Kenya's 2024 Gen Z protests constitute one of the most analytically significant episodes of digitally organized political contention in contemporary African history. This paper has examined this episode through a framework that moves beyond the mobilization question that has dominated the existing literature, asking instead how narrative sovereignty is constructed, contested, and either sustained or suppressed in digital political arenas where state and non-state actors compete using the same platform infrastructure. The Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty framework introduced here theorizes this competition as a structurally asymmetric, temporally bounded, and platform-dependent contest in which activist advantages in speed, creativity, and civic legitimacy confront state advantages in resources, institutional access, and the capacity for coordinated counter-narrative operation.

The empirical analysis demonstrates that Kenyan Gen Z activists achieved a remarkable and historically significant narrative victory in June 2024, compelling a governmental retreat through the force of civic discourse rather than electoral mandate or organized institutional power. This achievement rested on three analytically distinct contributions: the construction of resonant, culturally embedded frames including the constitutional frame, the economic injustice frame, and the generational sovereignty frame; the sophisticated navigation of platform-differentiated discourse logics that leveraged TikTok for affective reach, X for institutional agenda-setting, and WhatsApp for secure coordination; and the creative deployment of AI-assisted tools that democratized access to legislative information and strengthened the movement's evidential base. These are not incidental features of the 2024 protests but constitutive elements of what made them the most effective exercise of non-institutional civic power in Kenya's post-independence history.

However, this narrative victory was followed by a systematic state campaign, documented extensively by Amnesty International (2025) and corroborated by multiple civil society and academic sources, that deployed tech-facilitated surveillance, coordinated troll networks, targeted disinformation, and platform complicity by omission to fracture activist coalitions, chill civic expression, and structurally constrain the movement's capacity for narrative renewal. The analysis of platform-differentiated discourse logics reveals that the movement's concentration of agenda-setting function on X's trending architecture represented a structural vulnerability that was systematically exploited by state-linked counter-narrative operations. The intersectional dimensions of this suppression, particularly the compounded targeting of women, Muslim, and LGBTQI+ activists through identity-based harassment, reveal that the movement's tribeless framing, while a genuine organizational achievement, did not provide uniform protection against a state counter-narrative apparatus that was adept at mobilizing pre-existing social hierarchies in service of political repression.

These findings carry several implications for scholarship and policy. For democratic theory, they suggest that digital platforms do not create a level playing field for political communication: the same affordances that enable non-state actors to bypass traditional gatekeepers also enable state actors to deploy new forms of narrative repression that operate below the threshold of conventional media censorship and are therefore harder to identify, regulate, and contest. For platform governance, they underscore the accountability gap created by platform companies' failure to enforce their own policies against coordinated inauthentic behavior when that behavior serves state interests, and they strengthen the case for mandatory transparency reporting, independent moderation audits, and cross-border regulatory cooperation that can hold platform companies accountable in contexts where national regulatory frameworks are compromised by state capture. For African political sociology, they raise urgent questions about the long-term conditions under

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which digital civic movements can translate short-term narrative victories into durable institutional change without surrendering either their independence or their transformative ambitions to the institutional logics that connective action was designed to circumvent.

The Platform-Mediated Narrative Sovereignty framework does not offer prescriptions for how these questions should be resolved. It offers instead an analytical lens through which the structural conditions of digital political contestation can be examined systematically and comparatively. Applied beyond Kenya to the broader wave of African Gen Z activism documented by scholars and policy analysts in 2025 and 2026, the framework directs attention to the same core questions: which actors control the platforms on which narrative sovereignty contests are fought, what structural asymmetries condition those contests, and what organizational and communicative strategies are available to non-state actors seeking to sustain narrative authority against superior state counter-narrative resources. The trajectory of Kenya's Gen Z movement toward the 2027 election will serve as a critical test of these questions. Whether a generation that demonstrated extraordinary narrative capacity in a moment of connective action can construct the institutional infrastructure necessary to sustain that capacity through the slower, less legible processes of electoral politics and governance reform remains the defining political question of Kenya's near-term democratic future, and an urgent research agenda for scholars of African political communication, digital governance, and democratic theory alike.

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