

The Global “Youth Quake”? Student Protest and Generational Politics in Africa, 2020–2025

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Contemporary African student protests signal a reconfiguration of generational politics shaped by mass education, constrained socioeconomic opportunity, and digital mobilization. Rather than isolated campus unrest, they express a broader youth political economy of frustration. These movements are locally rooted yet globally resonant, positioning students as central actors in wider youth-led protests.

In the last five years, across Africa and in several parts of Asia and Latin America, students and young people have mobilized around issues of economic precarity, governance failures, and the erosion of their future prospects. As repeatedly reported in relation to the protests, these movements are locally grounded yet globally resonant. In this article we focus on the African cases, situating them within a broader Global South context, and argue that contemporary student protests reflect a reconfiguration of generational politics—particularly the political economic strain taken on by Gen Z at the intersection of mass education, constrained opportunity, and digitally mediated mobilization.

Gen Z and the Political Economy of Frustration

Gen Z, born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, has come to constitute a significant share of the global population, especially in Africa. Gen Z is the most educated generation in human history, owing to universal access to schooling and massified higher education even in much of the Global South. Despite this, unemployment and underemployment are part of the Gen Z experience. This “mobility constraint,” reported by *The Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, is central to understanding contemporary youth and student discontent in the Global South. Moreover, as “digital natives,” Gen Z uses transnational digital networks to articulate their grievances and rapidly mobilize collective dissent.

Student activism is now more tightly interwoven with broader youth movements. As higher education in Africa is massifying, so are student grievances. As much as universities remain important sites of protest, in the post-COVID years they have become less campus-bound, more urban and networked. This is evident in key African student and youth movements of recent years.

Fiscal Crisis and Youth Mobilization: The Case of Kenya

The 2024 protest movement against Kenya’s finance bill is a popular case of recent youth mobilization in Africa. The proposed legislation sought to increase taxes on basic goods and services; at the same time there was also a proposal for a new “variable scholarship and loan funding model,” which affected students.

According to *University World News*, the proposals triggered widespread opposition among youth facing rising living costs and limited employment prospects. As *BBC News* and Kenya’s *Daily Nation* reported, the protests escalated and culminated in the storming of Kenya’s Parliament in June 2024. The government subsequently withdrew the finance bill and the Constitutional Court ruled the new higher education funding model unconstitutional, thus marking a significant victory for the movement. A notable aspect of the #RejectFinanceBill2024 was its scale of mobilization across social groups, suggesting that youth activism can act as a catalyst for wider societal discontent while having a distinctive digitally networked generational identity.

Anti-Corruption and Political Authority: Uganda and Beyond

In Uganda, youth and student mobilization has centered more explicitly on questions of corruption and political accountability. Uganda’s *Daily Monitor* reported that the #March2Parliament campaign in 2024 brought young people into direct confrontation with state authority, highlighting longstanding concerns about President Yoweri Museveni’s governance that narrows the political space of democratic expression and operation.

Repressive political dynamics are evident on the continent. In the Gambia, local media reported that youth groups challenged the transparency of asset sales linked to former President Yahya Jammeh, mobilizing around accountability and public interest.

Their protests did not change policy but sparked wider public debate about governance in the post-authoritarian era.

Elections, Constitutional Change, and Repression

In some African contexts, electoral politics and constitutional reform shape student and youth protests. In Mozambique, for example, students and opposition groups contested election results. Meanwhile, local and regional media reported that student leaders in Zimbabwe faced arrest and intimidation when they protested the 2023 general election results (alongside other grievances). In Togo, the proposed constitutional changes to extend presidential tenure sparked opposition from student organizations and youth groups. These cases underscore the uneven political terrain across which student activism unfolds. Some movements may achieve policy concessions, while others encounter significant repression that limits their capacity for sustained mobilization and eventual impact.

Higher Education as a Site of Contestation: Morocco and Nigeria

Often, student protests are directly linked to conditions within higher education systems and institutions. From late 2023 into 2024, medical students in Morocco engaged in sustained strikes, opposing curriculum reforms and declining training conditions. As *Morocco World News* and *Reuters* observed, the protests highlighted systemic issues in the health and education sectors. Negotiations with the government secured concessions, including adjustments to student stipends; however, many concerns remained unresolved.

In Nigeria, although the 2020 #EndSARS protests remain a reference point, recent mobilizations have addressed both national and sector-specific issues. Protests linked to rising living costs and governance concerns have intersected with student-led campaigns around accreditation delays and institutional conditions. *Premium Times* shows how these issues affect students' ability to complete their studies and transition into professional careers. These cases illustrate the dual character of student protest: rooted in higher education specificities and tied to broader political and economic dynamics.

The Institutionalization of #FeesMustFall: South Africa

In contrast to the nationally explosive protests seen in Kenya, Morocco, and Nigeria, student mobilization in South Africa in

2024–25 took a more institutionalized and university policy-focused form. These more recent efforts reflect the enduring legacy of #FeesMustFall (2015–16) in institutional politics. Protests across the universities of Cape Town, Fort Hare, and the Witwatersrand centered on the dysfunctionality of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, student funding and student debt, and student accommodation-related issues. As *News24*, *Daily Maverick*, and *Mail & Guardian* have reported, these issues left many students without accommodation or financial support at the start of the academic year, prompting a new pattern of campus shutdowns. Thus, despite mounting revelations of government corruption and service-delivery failures, student mobilization in South Africa is not so much about broader political change as about securing the material conditions necessary for broad-based student participation in higher education.

Global Resonances of Contemporary Student Protests

The cases of African student and youth protests resonate with similar patterns elsewhere in the Global South. In Bangladesh, student-led protests in 2024 against public sector employment quotas escalated into nationwide unrest, as reported by *Al Jazeera*. In Indonesia, youth mobilization around electoral and governance issues similarly drew on digital networks and student participation, according to *The Jakarta Post*. Such parallels show that while protests are locally specific, they are shaped by shared structural conditions: demographic youth bulges, expanding education systems, constrained labor markets, and contested governance.

In this regard, student and youth protests are reshaping political discourse and challenging established narratives of political apathy. As *The Economist* has noted in its coverage of global youth unrest, young people are asserting themselves as political actors, even in contexts where formal avenues for participation are limited.

While we are not quite witnessing a “Youth Quake” in the sense of a singular political rupture catalyzed by young people across the Globe, there is evidently a convergence of structural pressures that produce recurrent waves of youth mobilization across different national contexts and beyond. In Africa, students remain central to this process; they are not isolated campus activists but embedded participants in broader youth-led movements.

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