

The State of the World's Human Rights; Kenya 2025

Background

On 25 June 2024, thousands of Kenyans had demonstrated against a controversial finance bill. The protests continued through to July 2024 and were met by police use of unlawful and lethal force, resulting in at least 60 deaths. Youth-led movements, which had spearheaded the protests, continued to do so in 2025, raising concerns about government policies and inequality. Public frustration over economic hardship, corruption, poor governance, and the lack of accountability and reforms intensified.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression and media freedom came under sustained attack. Journalists, human rights defenders, bloggers and other activists were arbitrarily arrested, detained and assaulted while covering protests or exposing state abuses.

In June, as thousands of people gathered nationwide to mark the anniversary of the anti-finance bill protests, the Communications Authority of Kenya issued a directive ordering radio and television stations to cease live broadcasts of ongoing protests, claiming they would violate the Constitution.

The Kenya Information and Communication (Amendment) Bill, 2025, introduced to parliament in March, was under committee review, with public consultations ongoing. The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes (Amendment) Bill, 2025, was enacted in October, sparking debate among lawmakers and civil society on its implications for digital rights and freedom of expression. Both laws contained provisions that allowed for broad surveillance powers that could threaten constitutional rights to privacy and freedom of expression. Authorities also used existing counterterrorism and cybercrime laws to intimidate critics. Youth-led movements, including Privacy First and Ijue Data Yako II (Know Your Data), called for stronger protections of digital rights.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

The manner in which the police handled protests reflected the ongoing militarization of public order policing and the criminalization of dissent. Repeated violations by the authorities of the right to peaceful assembly, so prevalent in 2024, continued in 2025.

Youth-led anniversary protests on 25 June were met with arbitrary arrests, and the use of unlawful and lethal force by police. The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights said at least 19 people were killed, hundreds were injured, 15 were forcibly disappeared, and several women reported experiencing sexual violence, including two rapes and an attempted gang rape.

On 7 July, nationwide protests marked the 35th anniversary of the Saba Saba Day pro-democracy demonstrations. Police unlawfully used lethal and less lethal force against peaceful demonstrators in more than 20 counties. At least 38 people were killed and more than 500 injured, while over 500 protesters faced criminal charges, including offences under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Security forces also disrupted civil society gatherings and human rights events.

Extrajudicial executions

According to human rights monitors and advocacy groups there was a continued rise in extrajudicial killings nationwide. The rise signalled a trend in which efforts to strengthen accountability and the rule of law were undermined. Many victims were linked to protest movements, informal economic sectors or human rights activism. The UN Human Rights Council's May review of Kenya cited the authorities' failure to curb extrajudicial killings, noting systemic impunity and lack of accountability mechanisms.

Albert Ojwang died in June in suspicious circumstances while in police custody at the Central Police Station in the capital, Nairobi. He had been arrested in connection with an online post calling for government accountability for human rights violations and corruption. His family said that his body bore signs of physical trauma. While the police claimed he died from self-inflicted injuries, an independent autopsy confirmed that his death resulted from severe head injuries and multiple soft tissue injuries, pointing towards an assault.

Boniface Kariuki, a street vendor, was shot in June while in the vicinity of a protest that was being dispersed by the police in Nairobi's Central Business District. An autopsy report confirmed that he died from severe head injuries caused by a gunshot fired at close range. His death became symbolic of the targeting by police of youth protesters and protesters connected with the informal employment sector.

Despite years of advocacy and international scrutiny, the government was yet to implement systemic reforms or provide justice and reparations to families of victims of extrajudicial killings. However, in May, four police officers were charged with the 2017 killing of six-month-old Baby Samantha Pendo. She died from head injuries inflicted by police in a house raid during a violent crackdown on post-election protests in Kisumu county. In September, the High Court ruled that the case should be transferred from Nairobi for hearing at a court in the city of Kisumu. The developments marked a rare instance of progress in prosecuting state violence, although broader accountability remained elusive.

Enforced disappearances

Reports of enforced disappearances, particularly against civil society activists and protesters, continued (see above, Freedom of peaceful assembly).

In one notable case, Tanzanian activist Maria Sarungi Tsehai was abducted in Nairobi on 12 March while on her way to a media interview. She said she was taken by masked men in an unmarked vehicle and held for several hours during which her abductors choked and intimidated her. She was later dumped in an isolated spot. Maria Sarungi Tsehai had fled in 2020 from Tanzania to Kenya where she sought asylum. Her case raised concerns about possible transnational repression and the targeting of foreign activists in Kenya, and prompted calls for an independent investigation into the circumstances of her abduction and the possible involvement or negligence of Kenyan authorities.

Economic and social rights

Kenya's economic downturn worsened living conditions for low-income households. Inflation, rising taxes, food and transport costs, and limited social protection measures led to greater inequality.

In February, access to healthcare was severely affected due to systemic failures, including the unlawful withholding of doctors' salaries, chronic delays in payments, stalled promotions, unpaid gratuities and delayed employment confirmation letters. Consequently, doctors were compelled to strike in protest. Services were further compromised by the withdrawal in June of the Linda Mama (Protect the Mother) programme, which had provided free maternal health services for pregnant and breastfeeding women. It was withdrawn when the new Social Health Insurance Fund (SHIF) (see below) scheme was introduced. Meanwhile, erratic medical supplies in public hospitals compounded the situation.

Implementation of the SHIF scheme, a key component of Kenya's Universal Health Coverage Agenda, faced major challenges that left patients, particularly those with chronic illnesses, unable to access care. At Kenyatta National Hospital and the Kenyatta University Teaching, Referral and Research Hospital, terminally ill patients were denied treatment due to delays in SHIF accreditation and the requirement for patients to make upfront cash payments.

Social protection spending remained critically low, accounting for less than 1% of GDP. Workers in the informal sector and poor urban communities were largely excluded from existing safety nets. The crisis was compounded by forced evictions and inadequate housing, particularly in informal settlements targeted for redevelopment. In May, hundreds of families were forcibly displaced in Lang'ata, a sub-county of Nairobi county, to make way for construction under the Affordable Housing Programme, without the provision of alternative shelter or compensation. Civil society organizations condemned the evictions and called for equitable resource distribution and universal social protection. However, meaningful reform remained stalled by political inaction.

Refugees and migrants

In March the Shirika Plan was launched. A collaborative initiative between the government and UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, it was a progressive plan that aimed to enhance the socio-economic integration of refugees. Based on the 2021 Refugees Act, it committed to increase refugees' self-reliance through access to work, education and public services. However, its anticipated benefits were threatened by inadequate resources. Abrupt funding cuts from key donors, including USAID, led to the World Food Programme making extensive cuts to food assistance in refugee camps and settlements. Consequently, food insecurity increased significantly. Those not classified as being most vulnerable were disproportionately affected, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and unrest. In the Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps, protests that demanded the return of food aid led to clashes with security forces, resulting in injuries and one fatality.

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence reached crisis levels. In January, the government established the Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence Including Femicide, ostensibly to coordinate policy and institutional responses. However, its visibility, mandate and impact remained unclear, raising concerns about the adequacy of state-led efforts and the government's political will to address systemic barriers to justice, healthcare and survivor protection.

Between January and March, 129 women were murdered, most of them by people they knew and often in their own homes. According to the Africa Data Hub, since 2016 there had been more than 930 murders of women, 628 of which met the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's definition of femicide.

Survivors, activists and artists highlighted the crisis through MASKAN (Home), an art installation honouring victims of femicide. Nationwide protests demanded stronger government action, including measures for more accountability and protection against gender-based violence.

