

The Mashariki Today

The Power of Social Media in Transforming Political Governance in the East African Region



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Introduction

From hashtags to headlines, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for political engagement globally in recent years. This digital shift is particularly evident in East Africa, where platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp are playing an increasingly central role in political governance. In Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, social media has been challenging traditional media and state-controlled narratives, especially among the youth. A striking example is the 2024 Gen Z–led protests in Kenya against the Finance Bill, which were largely mobilized through social media and underscored the region’s rising wave of digital activism. While these platforms open up new spaces for civic participation, they also raise concerns around misinformation, state surveillance, and online repression. This commentary explores how social

media is transforming political governance in East Africa, highlighting both its potentials and pitfalls.

Contextualizing Social Media's Rise in East Africa

The growing role of social media in East African governance stems from deep-rooted structural challenges across the region. Many East African countries continue to grapple with weak public institutions, rising youth populations, high unemployment rates, inflation, poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to quality education and healthcare. These challenges are compounded by widespread corruption, rising public debt, and governance policies that often yield poor social and economic outcomes. In contrast, developed countries benefit from more robust governance systems, characterized by effective institutional checks and balances, industrial development, and a higher quality of life. The separation of powers among the executive, legislature, judiciary, civil society, and independent media ensures greater accountability and responsiveness in public policy. In East Africa, where such institutional safeguards are often weak or compromised, social media emerges as a critical platform for citizens, especially the youth, to express their dissent, demand accountability, and push for political reforms.



In many developing countries, overcentralized leadership and weak institutions have frequently contributed to policy failures and governance breakdowns. In such contexts, leaders often pursue non-priority or populist programs with limited oversight, resulting in poor social and economic outcomes. This absence of effective checks and balances has created a gap in accountability, prompting a new wave of political activism driven by social media. The global rise of digital

mobilization first gained attention during Iran's Green Revolution in 2009 and the Arab Spring uprisings beginning in 2010. These movements inspired a new generation of online political engagement, a trend that has taken root in East Africa. The 2024 Gen Z-led protests in Kenya against the Finance Bill are a case in point, demonstrating how social media platforms can rapidly galvanize public outrage and amplify calls for policy change. Such youth-driven, digitally coordinated movements are becoming increasingly influential in shaping governance across the region.

Key Issues Shaping Social Media Influence on Governance in East Africa

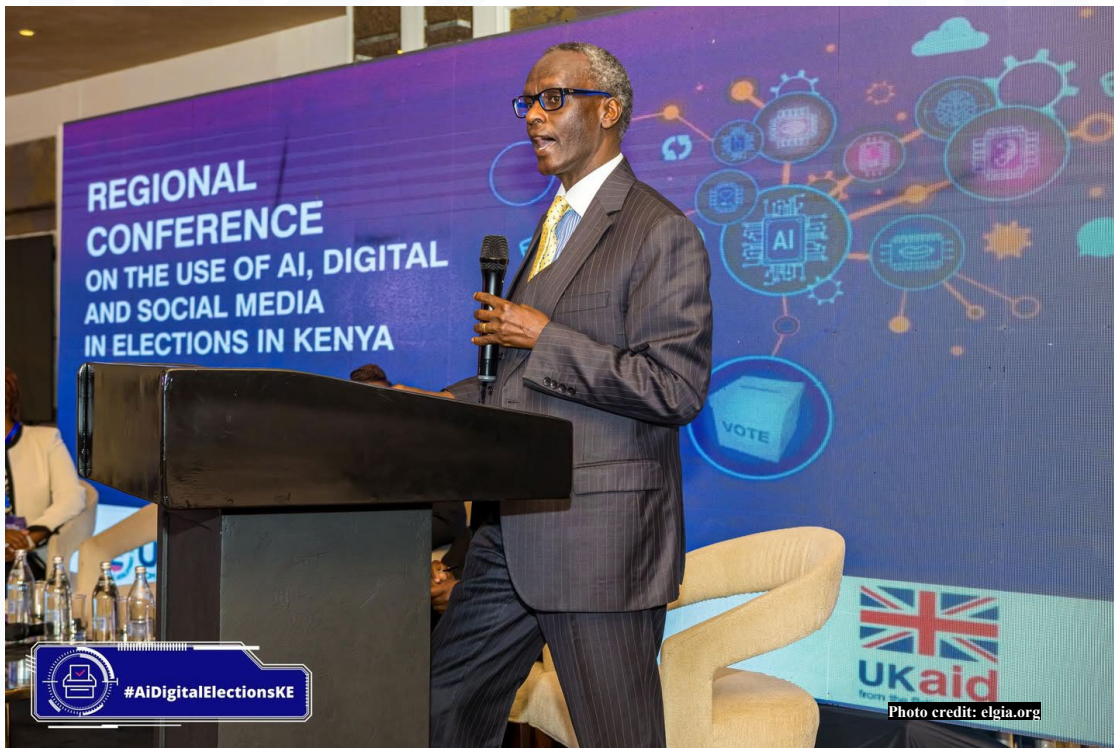
1. Political Terrain and Government Goodwill

The effectiveness of social media in influencing governance often depends on the political context and the willingness of leaders to respond to public sentiments. In East Africa, political goodwill towards digital expression varies significantly. For example, while Kenya has generally maintained open internet access, governments in Uganda and Tanzania have at times restricted online spaces, especially during elections or mass protests. Uganda introduced a controversial social media tax in 2018, widely criticized as a tool to suppress online activism. The differing levels of tolerance reflect how state institutions either enable or resist digital civic engagement.



2. Social Media and Government Response

Social media has become both a tool and a challenge for governments in the region. On one hand, it offers avenues for public engagement and e-governance; on the other, it challenges the state's control over narratives. In Kenya, the Gen Z-led #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests demonstrated how citizens can use social platforms to organize mass dissent. The protests, largely leaderless and decentralized, borrowed strategies from global movements like Occupy Wall Street, and showcased an unprecedented level of coordination — with legal, medical, and financial support structures organically emerging online. Although initially peaceful, the protests later turned violent, leading to the deaths of about 50 youths and widespread damage of property. However, the outcome was politically significant: the bill was withdrawn and several cabinet members were dismissed. A TIFFA poll later revealed that 81% of the public supported the protests, largely coordinated through social media.¹



3. Opportunities and Challenges of Digital Access

One of the key drivers of social media's influence in East Africa is increased access to digital technology. The region has experienced rapid growth in smartphone ownership and internet connectivity, supported in part by investments under global initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development

¹ <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/tifa-survey-most-kenyans-support-youth-led-protests-4695284>

Goals. In Kenya, mobile technology penetration is particularly high — the Communications Authority (CA) reports over 66 million registered mobile phones in a population of 54 million, with widespread use of smartphones on networks like Safaricom, Airtel, and Telkom.²

The affordability of Chinese-made smartphones and increased competition among global tech providers have made digital tools accessible even to low-income youth. Applications such as M-Pesa, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have become embedded in everyday life, transforming phones into mobile banks, offices, and organizing hubs.



However, this digital revolution is not without challenges. The spread of misinformation, limited digital literacy, state surveillance, and online harassment are growing concerns. Furthermore, the lack of robust legal frameworks to regulate digital spaces often leads to government overreach or reactive crackdowns on online dissent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, global interdependence has made it easier for social media platforms to access, create and share information at unprecedented speeds. Common citizens are today able to easily access social media connectivity. They are hence poised to be the new source of revolutionary power against

² <https://www.ca.go.ke/mobile-subscriptions-hit-66m-march-2023>

unpopular public policies and regimes. They increasingly crowd out mainstream media in shaping public opinion. Future advanced digitalisation will continue to crash traditional bureaucratic control systems, making government information, plans and programmes easily accessible to the public. This calls for increased transparency in government decision-making processes. The study thus recommends strengthening and institutional oversight, improved government policy sensitization, and enhanced collaborations between governments and think tanks involved in policy formulation while providing solutions to current social and economic challenges in developing countries.



Recommendations

The commentary puts forward several key policy recommendations aimed at enhancing governance in East Africa through strategic use of social media.

1. Governance Reforms and Improved Communication

Policymakers should initiate governance reforms focused on strengthening public service delivery and improving mechanisms for policy oversight. These reforms are fundamental to fostering a culture of transparency and accountability within government institutions. Alongside structural reforms, there is a pressing need to improve government communication and public outreach. This can be achieved by leveraging social media platforms to enhance citizen engagement, encourage feedback, and promote a stronger sense of public ownership over policy processes.

2. Strengthening the Role of Mainstream Media

Mainstream media continues to play a vital role in shaping public discourse and must be actively involved in governance. There should be robust participation from commercial media houses in policy oversight conversations, supported by broader coverage of national social and economic challenges. Such engagement would provide a counterbalance to the growing influence of social media activism, which often shapes public opinion without the benefit of balanced or evidence-based reporting.

3. Academic Engagement in Governance

Academia and research institutions must assume a more proactive role in governance by conducting rigorous, evidence-based data collection and policy analysis. Their contributions are essential for generating credible knowledge that can inform government strategies and interventions. By embedding research within policy cycles, academic actors can strengthen the foundations of decision-making.



4. Think Tanks and Data-Driven Policy Solutions

Research think-tanks, in particular, should endeavor on developing practical, data-driven solutions to national social and economic challenges. Their work will ensure that policy decisions are grounded in reliable, context-sensitive evidence, rather than speculation or populist pressures. This will not only enhance the quality of governance but also foster public confidence in the policymaking process.

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