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DIGITAL RUPTURES: AI-GENERATED ACTIVISM, STATE REPRESSION, AND THE POLITICS OF DISSENT IN KENYA

Job Mwaura
Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

Introduction

Kenya has become a focal site of digital contention, where AI-generated content mediates both protest and repression. After the Gen Z–led mobilisations of mid-2024, and the lethal policing of the June 2024 demonstrations, activists shifted back online, producing a dense stream of AI-generated satire, deepfakes, and memes—most iconically depictions of President William Ruto in a coffin—as a vernacular politics of ridicule and accountability. The state, in turn, expanded surveillance, social-media monitoring, and digital censorship, with abductions, disappearances, and extrajudicial violence reported alongside tighter controls over connectivity. This paper theorises this conjuncture as a rupture in Kenya’s civic space: generative AI amplifies both dissent and coercion. Building on Feldstein’s (2023) account of how generative AI augments surveillance, disinformation, and content regulation, and Nyamnjoh’s (2023) critique of digital–human fluidity, the chapter traces an escalating contest over public visibility, legitimacy, and political voice.

AI as a Double-Edged Sword in Digital Resistance and Repression

The Kenyan government’s suppression of digital dissent is occurring at a time when AI-generated content has become integral to protest repertoires. Whereas earlier cycles of contention relied heavily on street demonstrations and were often met with police brutality (Mwaura, 2020), activists now circulate AI-generated counter-narratives that reconfigure the struggle over visibility and legitimacy online (Tekiroglu et al., 2022). Tools such as Grok (integrated into X), OpenAI platforms, and related generative systems enable the production of hyper-realistic satire, deepfakes, and protest visuals that condense critique into viral, affective media. Yet AI is not only an instrument of ridicule. It also supports civic pedagogy, from generating slogans and music to translating and simplifying policy texts for wider public scrutiny (Mwaura, 2024).

State responses, long evident but markedly intensified after June 2024, have combined coercion with digitally mediated control. Reports describe abductions and

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disappearances of online influencers associated with satirical AI content (KNCHR, 2024), including allegations involving cartoonist Gideon Kibet and activist Billy Mwangi. KNCHR records at least 82 forced disappearances, with 29 people still missing (KNCHR, 2024). Repression is reinforced by facial recognition, mobile triangulation, and AI-enabled social media monitoring (KICTANet, 2024), alongside metadata tracking, spyware, call interception, and geolocation surveillance (Freedom House, 2024). Mandatory SIM re-registration that requires biometric data further deepens concerns about profiling (ARTICLE 19 & KICTANET, 2024). Suspected telecom cooperation in metadata access (Southerland, 2016; KHRC & MUHURI, 2024) aligns with broader patterns in the Global South, in which AI oversight is legitimised as national security (Feldstein, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Dual-Use Digital Technologies and the Contest for Control

This study draws on the concept of dual-use technology, where the same digital innovations enable both state repression and activist resistance, producing a recursive contest over control. Feldstein (2021) argues that governments increasingly deploy AI-driven surveillance, censorship, and social manipulation to contain dissent, while oppositional actors respond through encrypted communication, AI-generated content, and decentralised platforms. Kenya exemplifies this dynamic: the expansion of facial recognition, social media monitoring, and targeted internet disruptions mirrors wider authoritarian repertoires, even as activists adopt AI-generated satire, deepfakes, VPNs, and encrypted messaging to mobilise and evade detection. The chapter extends Feldstein's (2021) account by foregrounding the shifting, relational character of resistance. Drawing on Nyamnjoh's (2023) concept of digital-human fluidity, it treats AI activism as a practice that generates alternative political realities and forces the state into adaptive, often reactive, forms of repression. Rather than a stable hierarchy of surveillance, Kenya's civic space is shaped by iterative innovation, where AI simultaneously consolidates state power and expands the tactical possibilities of dissent.

Aims of the Paper

This study is part of my ongoing research on digital activism in Kenya, examining how AI and other advanced digital tools are reshaping civic space as instruments of activism and mechanisms of state control.

Building on this broader inquiry, this study focuses on the following key questions:

1. How has AI-generated content (deepfakes, satirical imagery, synthetic media) reshaped digital activism in Kenya, particularly after the Gen Z protests?
2. How have activists and the government deployed AI and other advanced digital tools, and what implications do they have for the civic space in Kenya?

3. How is the increasing use of AI and digital tools redefining state-citizen interactions and altering the boundaries of political expression in Kenya?

Methodology

This study uses digital ethnography and document analysis to examine the evolving dynamics of AI-driven activism and state repression in Kenya's digital space. Digital ethnography examines how activists and state actors interact online, including the circulation of AI-generated content, digital satire, and counter-narratives. By engaging with publicly available discussions, social media trends, and user-generated content, this approach provides insights into the lived experiences of digital resistance and repression. Additionally, document analysis examines reports from civil society organisations, policy documents, and investigative journalism that detail the government's use of digital surveillance, censorship mechanisms, and legislative frameworks for controlling online spaces. This combined methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of Kenya's shifting civic space, in which AI technologies function both as tools for political expression and as instruments of state control.

Findings and Implications

AI-Generated Political Satire and Digital Resistance

Since the June 2024 Gen Z protests, AI-generated content has reshaped digital activism in Kenya, offering a powerful instrument of political critique. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Facebook have seen an influx of deepfake videos, digitally manipulated imagery, and satirical memes targeting state officials. Widely circulated content includes AI-generated images of President William Ruto in a coffin, fabricated ministerial speeches, and caricatures portraying government figures as puppets. Some of these materials garnered tens of thousands of shares within hours, particularly during key moments of government repression, including internet regulations and crackdowns on activists. AI's capacity to produce realistic yet fictionalised representations complicates rapid debunking and immediate removal, enabling oppositional narratives to persist even under heightened scrutiny.

State responses have intensified alongside this diffusion of AI-assisted satire. Reports indicate the expansion of digital surveillance, metadata tracking, and social media monitoring, sometimes linked to collaboration with telecommunications providers. As of mid-2024, at least 82 activists were reported forcibly disappeared, with several cases publicly associated with the circulation of political satire. The state also pushed platforms to establish local offices, widely interpreted as an effort to deepen regulatory leverage over takedowns and compliance. Yet activists remain adaptive, relying on encrypted communication, decentralised channels, and counter-surveillance practices to sustain coordination.

Civic Tech and State Control in Kenya's Anti-Finance Bill Protests

Reports by KICTANET and ARTICLE 19 highlight the role of civic technology in protests against the Finance Bill. Protesters combined AI-generated materials with encrypted communication and distributed organising, while also using AI to simplify policy

documents and widen public comprehension. State responses included internet throttling, shadow banning, and temporary platform disruptions, as well as reported tracking via metadata analysis, IP tracing, and geolocation services. Overall, Kenya's civic space is increasingly shaped by dual-use infrastructures, where the same digital affordances that expand participation also enable scalable instruments of control, producing iterative cycles of innovation and repression.

Conclusion

Kenya's evolving digital landscape shows AI's dual role as both a medium of activist resistance and an expanding instrument of state control. The 2024 Gen Z protests marked a rupture in which AI-generated content became a primary vernacular of political expression, reshaping dissent and the repertoires available to authorities. Activists used AI-driven satire, synthetic media, and encrypted communication to contest official narratives and sustain mobilisation, while the state intensified surveillance, internet control, and metadata tracking to deter participation. Documented abductions, content takedowns, and suspected telecom-facilitated monitoring point to an emerging pattern of algorithmic governance consistent with wider authoritarian deployments of digital infrastructure. Yet the persistence of digital resistance, through decentralised coordination and counter-surveillance practices, indicates a continuing contest over visibility, attribution, and political voice. Kenya now stands at a hinge moment at which regulatory choices will determine whether AI expands civic agency or entrenches coercive control.

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