

DOMESTIC SOCIAL DISCONTENT AND GLOBAL IMAGE: THE FRAGILE BALANCE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP – A CASE STUDY OF KENYA UNDER PRESIDENT DR. WILLIAM RUTO

Domáca sociálna nespokojnosť a globálny imidž: Krehká rovnováha politického vedenia – prípadová štúdia Kene za vlády prezidenta Dr. Williama Ruta

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ABSTRAKT

Medzinárodná reputácia štátu a jeho lídrov sa v globálnej diplomacii často považuje za kľúčovú, pretože poskytuje uistenie spojencom a otvára možnosti strategických partnerstiev. Aby si politickí lídri udržali pozitívny imidž a reputáciu na globálnej scéne, často si pestujú silné medzinárodné osobnosti, ktoré vyžarujú stabilitu a víziu. Táto práca skúma spoločensko-politické napätie, ktoré vzniká, keď vnútorné sociálne negatívne faktory – ako sú ekonomické problémy, zlyhania v oblasti správy vecí verejných a občianske nepokoje – protirečia globálnemu imidžu lídra. Na príklade Kene za prezidenta Dr. Williama Ruta analýza skúma, ako rastúca nespokojnosť verejnosti s hospodárskymi politikami, správou vecí verejných a ľudskými právami v rokoch 2022 až 2024 ovplyvnila národnú súdržnosť aj medzinárodné vnímanie krajiny. Na základe sekundárnych údajov práca situuje skúsenosti Kene v rámci širších debát o vzťahu medzi domácou legitimitou a medzinárodnou reputáciou. Výsledky tejto štúdie ukazujú, že v ranom období svojho prezidentovania sa Dr. William Ruto prezentoval ako prominentný panafrický líder – presadzoval dedolarizáciu, klimatickú spravodlivosť a oddĺženie. Jeho vedenie počas inauguračného summitu o klíme v Afrike a jeho zaradenie do zoznamu 100 najvplyvnejších ľudí roku 2024 časopisu *Time* zvýšilo jeho medzinárodný profil a vyvolalo značnú globálnu dôveru v jeho regionálne vedenie. Toto uznanie však bolo v ostrom kontraste s narastajúcimi domácimi výzvami vrátane rozsiahlej ekonomickej nespokojnosti a protestov. Keďže Keňa čelila intenzívnejšej kontrole zvnútra aj zvonku svojich hraníc, tento prípad zdôrazňuje neistotu globálneho vplyvu, ak nie je založený na domácej legitimitě. Štúdia zdôrazňuje zložitú interakciu medzi štátnou mocou, dôverou verejnosti a medzinárodným postavením a tvrdí, že narušenie vnútornej dôveryhodnosti môže v konečnom dôsledku poškodiť globálny imidž krajiny, čo vedie k zníženiu zahraničných investícií a oslabeniu podpory zo strany rozvojových partnerov.

Kľúčové slová: Medzinárodná reputácia. Politické vedenie. Domáca sociálna nespokojnosť. Keňa.

ABSTRACT

The international reputation of a state and its leaders is often considered vital in global diplomacy, offering reassurance to allies and opening avenues for strategic partnerships. To maintain a positive image and reputation in the global scene, political leaders frequently cultivate strong international personas that project stability and vision. This paper examines the sociopolitical tensions that emerge when domestic grievances - such as economic hardship, governance failures, and civil unrest - contradict a leader's global image. Using Kenya under President Dr. William Ruto as a case study, the analysis explores how rising public discontent over economic policies, governance, and human rights between 2022 and 2024 impacted both national cohesion and international perceptions of the country. Drawing on secondary data, the paper situates Kenya's experience within

broader debates on the relationship between domestic legitimacy and international reputation. The results of this study show that, in the early period of his presidency, Dr. William Ruto positioned himself as a prominent pan-African leader - championing de-dollarization, climate justice, and debt relief. His leadership during the inaugural Africa Climate Summit and his inclusion in *Time* Magazine's list of the 100 Most Influential People of 2024 elevated his international profile, generating considerable global trust in his regional leadership. However, this acclaim stood in stark contrast to mounting domestic challenges, including widespread economic discontent and protests. As Kenya faced intensifying scrutiny both from within and outside its borders, the case highlights the precariousness of global influence when not grounded in domestic legitimacy. The study underscores the complex interplay between state power, public trust, and international standing, and argues that erosion of internal credibility can ultimately damage a country's global image - leading to diminished foreign investment and weakened support from development partners.

Key words: International Reputation. Political Leadership. Domestic Social Discontent. Kenya.

Introduction

Despite growing recognition of the pivotal role that international reputation plays in enhancing a state's strategic influence and diplomatic leverage (Baser 2024; Crescenzi 2018; Goldfien et al. 2023), there remains a gap between how political leaders are perceived on the international stage and the complex realities they confront within their domestic environments. This paper defines international reputation as the comprehensive evaluation of the trustworthiness of a country's capabilities and intentions by other countries in the international community (Jiang 2022). Political leaders, especially in emerging economies, often invest heavily in crafting polished global personas that highlight visionary leadership, diplomatic engagement, and commitment to pressing global issues such as climate change, peacebuilding, and economic integration (Renshon et al. 2018). These international images are carefully curated to project resolve and reliability, thereby enhancing the state's reputation and bargaining power in global affairs (Goldfien et al. 2023). However, this external projection frequently contrasts sharply with persistent domestic challenges, including economic hardship, governance deficits, institutional weaknesses, and social unrest, which undermine the leaders' legitimacy and constrain their capacity to deliver on both

domestic and international promises (Brewster 2009).

This divergence between international reputation and domestic legitimacy raises pressing questions about the authenticity and credibility of global leadership that is not firmly rooted in broad-based domestic support. The literature suggests that reputations are dynamic and contingent, shaped not only by foreign policy actions but also by domestic political stability and leadership choices (Baser 2024; Crescenzi 2018; Goldfien et al. 2023). When domestic discontent and governance failures persist, they can erode the very foundation of a leader's international image, leading to reputational vulnerabilities which then affect a country's relationship with foreign development partners (Brewster 2009). Understanding this disconnect is therefore critical for comprehensively assessing how states build and maintain credible global reputations, and for evaluating the interplay between domestic politics and international perceptions in shaping effective and sustainable leadership on the world stage.

Kenya, a country located in the *East African region of the African continent*, offers a compelling case study of this tension. Upon assuming office in 2022, President Dr. William Ruto quickly positioned himself as a prominent advocate for African agency on

the global stage. He championed key international issues such as de-dollarizing global trade, advancing climate action, and reforming global governance structures, notably the *United Nations Security Council*. His leadership in convening the landmark *African Climate Summit in Nairobi* in September 2023 not only secured climate pledges exceeding \$23 billion but also spotlighted his commitment to addressing the structural economic constraints that limit Africa's climate ambitions (*African Development Bank* 2024). His Pan-Africanist advocacy - calling for debt relief and climate justice - resonated widely and reinforced his stature as a transformative continental leader. This culminated in his inclusion in Time Magazine's 2024 list of the 100 Most Influential People, further amplifying his international profile (J. Worland 2024).

Yet, Ruto's international acclaim coincided with intensifying domestic challenges. Soaring inflation, rising unemployment, and public disillusionment - exacerbated by the controversial 2024 Finance Bill proposing tax hikes on essential goods - ignited widespread protests, particularly among urban youth. Although the bill was eventually shelved, it revealed deep-seated frustrations about governance, economic exclusion, and policy insensitivity. These grievances were further inflamed by recurrent corruption scandals involving senior officials and eroding public confidence in the administration.

The widening gap between President Ruto's favorable international image and his declining credibility at home illustrates a key dilemma in modern political leadership: the challenge of balancing global recognition with domestic legitimacy. This tension raises important questions about how long a leader can sustain international influence without strong support from their own citizens. This article investigates the relationship between internal public dissatisfaction and the global perception of leadership, using Kenya under President Ruto as a case study. Based on secondary sources, the study explores how leaders manage the competing demands of projecting influence abroad while remaining ac-

countable at home. It places *Kenya's* experience from 2022 to 2024 within larger debates on the impact of internal governance issues on foreign relations, particularly with development partners, investors, international financial institutions, and broader people-to-people connections.

1 Domestic Social Discontent and its role on Global Reputation

The relationship between domestic social discontent and a country's international standing has become an increasingly relevant area of inquiry within international relations. Various scholars acknowledge that international reputation and the need to nature it exists in global interaction. Mark J. C. Crescenzi's main argument in *"Reputation and Learning in International Politics"* (2024) is that reputation plays a critical and systematic role in international politics by influencing how states perceive each other's actions, which in turn affects the likelihood of peace, development and prosperity of the state. Crescenzi emphasizes that state reputations are complex, multidimensional, and highly contextual, shaped both by a state's observable past behavior and by the unique perceptions of other states. A central tenet of Crescenzi's view is that reputation primarily signals a state's "competence" within specific political contexts (Crescenzi 2018).

Reputation of a state and of its leaders is often seen as a critical component in international relations for reassuring allies and forging new partnerships. Ekrem T. Baser's article, *"Reputations and Change in International Relations"* (2024), argues that a strong reputation can deter potential challengers and encourage partners to cooperate, while a damaged reputation constrains a state's influence and bargaining power. However, because a state's resolve is unobservable and can change, reputations are dynamic and subject to revision based on new information, making the management of global image an ongoing strategic necessity (Baser, 2024).

The domestic political decisions made by political actors within a state can either

bolster or harm a state's image abroad and thus its reputation. Rachel Brewster's article *"Unpacking the State's Reputation"* (2009) notes that global reputation of a state is deeply intertwined with its domestic political context, and that shifts in leadership or domestic priorities can significantly alter both the state's actual behavior and how that behaviour is perceived internationally (Brewster 2009). Brewster argues that the conventional approach, which treats the "state" as a single, rational actor whose reputation persists over time, is overly simplistic and potentially misleading. Instead, Brewster highlights that governments - composed of changing leaders and coalitions - equally play a part in influencing the outcome of the reputation of the state. These political actors often do not always fully internalize their actions and the reputational costs or benefits to the state as a whole. This is particularly true in systems where government turnover is frequent or leadership is unstable (Brewster 2009).

Recent literature in international relations has increasingly challenged the assumption that a state's global reputation is shaped exclusively by its foreign policy conduct and how the state relates with global actors. Goldfien et al. (2023) in the article *"The Domestic Sources of International Reputation"*, underscores the reputational significance of domestic choices. Building on theoretical and empirical arguments they contend that domestic political decisions - especially those involving high-stakes costs or salient national issues - can shape international perceptions of leadership with a state. The authors challenge the traditional view that leaders' international reputations are formed solely through their foreign policy behavior, especially in crises. Instead, they argue that leaders' domestic decisions - such as managing protests, staging coups, or pushing through contentious reforms - can be equally or even more influential in shaping international perceptions of their resolve and credibility. This insight expands the scope of reputation-building beyond the international arena to include domestic political actions (Goldfien et al. 2023).

A similar view is shared by Renshon et al. (2018) in *"Leader Influence and Reputation Formation in World Politics"*. The authors argue that a country's reputation is not solely state-based; rather, they are dynamic and contingent on who holds power domestically and how that power is exercised. Since leader-specific reputations depend on the leader's influence and actions, domestic political environments - where leaders operate and make decisions - are crucial in shaping their global image. Leaders facing domestic discontent or political instability may alter their behavior in ways that affect their international reputation. Through survey experiments involving hypothetical and realistic conflict scenarios (e.g., a U.S.-Iran crisis), the authors demonstrate that international observers update their beliefs about a country's resolve and trustworthiness based on both the country's past behaviour and the current leader's track record (Renshon et al. 2018).

Fangfei Jiang (2024) in *"Understanding International Credibility and Its Changes: Taking China as an Example"* agrees that a country's global trust and credibility depend on a multifaceted evaluation of its capabilities including both domestic and international factors. The author identifies five essential pillars for maintaining international credibility: hard power, governance and contractual capabilities, domestic government credibility and social cohesion, trustworthy foreign policies, and effective international communication. Using China as a case study the author notes that despite the country's rapid rise in credibility post-Cold War, its international trust was severely damaged after the 2008 financial crisis due to perceived governance failures and policy inconsistencies. The study underscores how reduced global trust, stemming from both domestic and foreign policy factors, can significantly impair a country's international standing, diplomatic influence, and ability to engage cooperatively on global issues (Jiang 2022).

Understanding the dynamics on the role of domestic factors in influencing international reputation is especially significant in the modern world where democratic institutions themselves are under strain. A study

by Brookings Institution's "*Democracy & Disorder*" project situates domestic unrest within broader geopolitical shifts, noting that internal disorder in democratic states has compromised the global credibility and moral authority to push for stronger democratic ideals (Jones & Tausig 2019). The study observes that rising domestic unrest in democratic states has become more frequent and intense, with direct consequences for international credibility.

As internal protests, populist challenges, and weakening institutions unfold, even traditionally stable democracies find their legitimacy questioned not just at home but abroad. These internal crises undercut the ability of states and their leaders to project moral authority or uphold democratic ideals in global forums and in other states. For example, the U.S. suffered a sharp global reputational blow after the Capitol riot in January 2021, with Pew Research showing a steep fall in international confidence in U.S. democracy—from 57% in 2020 to as low as 17% in some allied nations in 2021 (Schaffer, 2021). Likewise, widespread unrest in countries like France and the UK over governance and economic reforms has cast doubt on their domestic stability and undermined their influence as global leaders. These examples illustrate how domestic turbulence can weaken the external standing of political leaders.

Low global reputation and diminished international trust can significantly impact a nation's economic, political, and social standing therefore having dire consequences on the citizens. A study by Canayaz et al. titled "*Country Reputation and Corporate Activity*" demonstrates that negative shifts in a nation's global reputation directly harm its economic interests through corporate performance. The authors establish a causal link between damaged country reputation and persistent reductions in foreign-market sales for firms originating from that nation abroad. These effects are amplified when firms' branding closely aligns with their home country identity and when media coverage intensifies, confirming that reputational spillover extends beyond immediate political

consequences to erode internationally corporate value, profitability, and growth of companies originating from that country (Canayaz & Darendeli 2024).

This position is shared by Adina Săniuță (2025) in "*The Impact of a Country's Reputation in The Economic Development of a Nation*". The author argues that a country's global reputation and the level of trust it commands internationally are critical intangible assets that directly influence its economic competitiveness, foreign investment inflows, and export performance. It highlights that low global trust increases transaction costs, deters investors, and undermines the country's ability to effectively participate in global value chains. The study emphasizes that reputation is multidimensional, encompassing competence, likability, and trust, and that countries suffering from diminished international trust face challenges not only economically but also in governance and diplomatic relations. Such deficits erode social cohesion domestically and weaken the global image, limiting a country's capacity to mobilize resources globally (Săniuță 2025).

Together, the literature reviewed in this paper demonstrate the intricate interdependence between domestic social discontent and international reputation. They provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for analysing how leaders are judged globally not only by their foreign policy but by the relationship between those yielding state power and public trust. This intersection is particularly relevant in the Kenyan context under President William Ruto, where a widening gap between international acclaim and internal unrest underscores the fragility of global leadership without domestic legitimacy.

2 Ruto's Pan-African Vision and Global Posture (2022-2024)

Dr. William Ruto is the fifth and current President of *Kenya*, having assumed office on September 13, 2022. Ruto's political journey began in the 1990s where he served as a Member of Parliament for Eldoret North from 1997 to 2013 and held various ministerial positions, including *Minister of Home Affairs, Agriculture, and Higher Education*.

From 2013 to 2022, he was Kenya's first elected Deputy President under President Uhuru Kenyatta. Ruto's 2022 presidential campaign under the *United Democratic Alliance* (UDA) emphasized a "bottom-up" economic model aimed at empowering ordinary citizens (Musambi 2013).

In the global scene, the early phase of his presidency, Dr. William Ruto presented himself as a strong advocate for Pan-Africanism, leveraging key policy platforms to elevate both Kenya's and Africa's visibility in international forums. His diplomatic agenda emphasized climate justice, the restructuring of global financial systems, intra-African trade de-dollarization, and the promotion of regional mobility. These initiatives reflected a deliberate effort to reshape how Africa engages with the world and to promote self-reliance and collective agency among African nations.

Ruto's role as chair of the Committee of African Union Heads of State and Government on Climate Change allowed him to lead discussions on climate financing and green growth. He emphasized that although Africa contributes minimally to global emissions, it suffers the harshest consequences of climate change, and therefore deserves increased, fairer climate funding from the international community. He led calls for a major shift in how climate financing is approached globally, encouraging a rise in Africa's share of investment in energy transition projects (Miriri 2023).

The *Africa Climate Summit 2023* hosted in Nairobi the capital city of Kenya, which brought together numerous heads of state, climate specialists, and international development stakeholders, concluded with commitments totaling \$23 billion (Alushula 2023). President Ruto's approach to climate leadership went beyond advocating for clean energy; he also spotlighted the deep-rooted structural economic barriers that restrict Africa's ability to realize its climate ambitions (Kabukuru 2022). Notably, Ruto emerged as a leading voice in the call for debt relief across the continent, asserting that unsustainable debt levels significantly constrain the fiscal space needed for green and inclusive growth. This framing resonated with other

African leaders, many of whom increasingly recognized the link between debt vulnerability and stalled climate progress. Ruto's public addresses consistently carried Pan-African themes, urging African unity in the pursuit of climate justice and stronger financial commitments from wealthier nations in the Global North (Alushula 2023).

In tandem with climate advocacy, Ruto pushed for reforms in the international financial system. He highlighted the structural inequalities embedded in global lending frameworks that burden African states with unsustainable debt and high refinancing costs, limiting their ability to invest in public goods and climate resilience (Owino 2024). By calling for a new architecture that aligns public finance with climate needs, Ruto joined a growing chorus of leaders demanding a more equitable global economic order (*African Development Bank* 2024). A further extension of his critique involved advocating for reduced dependency on the U.S. dollar in African trade. This push for de-dollarization was framed as a means to reclaim economic sovereignty and build stronger internal financial mechanisms within the continent (Azeez 2023). Though implementation remains limited, the rhetoric signalled a broader ambition to challenge Western dominance in global economic governance.

Between 2022 and 2024, President Ruto's efforts contributed to repositioning Africa as an active and influential participant in global affairs, rather than a passive actor. His assertive diplomacy enhanced Kenya's visibility and credibility, casting the country as a regional leader advocating for structural reforms in global finance, climate action, and African integration. These initiatives held the promise of improving the continent's negotiating strength, securing more equitable access to development resources, and encouraging greater unity among *African states*. For President Ruto these bold stances earned him recognition as a vocal advocate for the continent's aspirations (B. J. Worland 2024).

However, even as Ruto's international standing grew, a wave of public discontent was building at home. Economic hardships -

including a rising cost of living and controversial tax measures - sparked growing frustration among citizens. The disconnect between Ruto's dynamic global posture and the worsening domestic disaffection raised important questions about the sustainability and authenticity of his global leadership agenda. This tension between external acclaim and internal legitimacy would go on to define much of his early presidency.

3 State Power and Public Dissent in Kenya

July 2024 marked a watershed moment in Kenya's recent history, as widespread street protests erupted in response to the government's proposed Finance Bill, which sought to increase taxes on essential goods (Bhalla 2024). Despite the government's partial amendments to the bill, protesters' demands hardened into calls to "*Reject, Not Amend*," signalling a profound erosion of trust in formal political institutions and processes (*The EastAfrican Newspaper* 2024).

The state's response to this unrest was marked by excessive use of force and a crackdown on dissent that further inflamed tensions. Police deployed live ammunition, tear gas, and water cannons against demonstrators, resulting in deaths and hundreds of injuries. Beyond the immediate violence, the government engaged in a pattern of abductions, with documented cases targeting critics and online activists since June 2024 (Ombuor 2025). As dissent intensified across *Kenya* in after June 2024 the government escalated its suppression of opposition through a combination of online and offline tactics. In the digital arena, a fierce contest over narratives unfolded, with state-aligned accounts amplifying pro-government messaging and targeting critics, while activists and ordinary citizens leveraged social media to mobilize and document abuses. The government's efforts to regulate and monitor online content, including AI-generated images and viral political satire, further heightened the climate of intimidation and sparked heated debates on free speech and digital rights (Wasike 2025).

This response to protests began to create a stark contrast between President Ruto's international persona as a champion of climate justice and African solidarity, and the harsh realities of repression faced by his citizens at home. The clash of direction between state-driven narratives of progress in the global stage and grassroots accounts of repression illustrates how digital platforms have reconfigured power dynamics, enabling localized dissent to shape global perceptions.

Human rights organizations documented cases of abductions between June and December 2024 (*Human Rights Watch* 2024). These abductions often targeted those most vocal against the Ruto administration both online and on the streets. This was widely interpreted as a deliberate strategy to instill fear and deter further mobilization (Kirui, 2025). The *Kenya Human Rights Commission* and other civil society groups condemned these actions, calling for accountability and the unconditional release of all abductees (KHRC 2024).

The government's response to the protests and abductions provoked not only local outrage but also galvanized international condemnation. Civil society organizations and two prominent lobby groups called for the cases of enforced disappearance to be presented to the International Criminal Court, underscoring the gravity of the allegations and their potential to plunge Kenya into deeper political crisis (Mumbi 2025). Kenya's key development partners, including the United States and the European Union, expressed profound concern over the deteriorating human rights situation, warning that continued repression could further isolate Kenya diplomatically and undermine President Ruto's efforts to position himself as a continental leader (Nowrojee 2024; Otieno 2024).

In the 2024 *Civics Monitor Report* - an international research platform that tracks the state of civic freedoms globally - Kenya's civic space was downgraded to the status of "Repressed" due to the intensifying clampdown on civil liberties following widespread protests earlier in the year (*Civics Monitor* 2024). The *People Power Under*

Attack 2024 report notes that the state's forceful response to criticism and opposition resulted in the deaths of at least 60 unarmed demonstrators and the arrest of over 1,200 individuals. More than 130 people remain unaccounted for, with report indicating continued abductions of protesters and online dissenters months after the initial unrest. These actions by security forces fostered a climate of fear and severely undermined civic freedoms in Kenya and the global reputation of its leadership abroad.

The evolution of protests from fiscal grievances to broader systemic discontent reflected how public dissent in Kenya was not merely about material deprivation but also about perceived exclusion from centres of power and decision-making, which further fuelled a sense of political and social alienation (Klaus 2024). The protests, largely youth-led and coordinated, exemplify what political sociology scholars describe as the *geographies of discontent*—a phenomenon where localized economic and social grievances converge into a nationwide movement challenging the state's legitimacy (De Ruyter et al. 2021). By occupying public spaces and dominating online platforms, these movements have redefined the contours of civic engagement, exposing the growing disconnect between the state and a digitally empowered, politically conscious generation.

4 Industrial Unrest and Labour Union Strikes

Parallel to the street protests, Kenya experienced the longest and most widespread industrial actions in its recent history (Rugutt & Njoki 2025). Strikes by lecturers disrupted academic calendars in public universities, leaving thousands of students in limbo. These disruptions were exacerbated by the government's revised higher education funding model, which made access to financial aid increasingly difficult, further fueling frustration among the youth (Abuso, 2024). Healthcare professionals, including doctors and nurses, also staged prolonged strikes over unfulfilled Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs), crippling hospitals and clinics and exposing the fragility of Kenya's

public health system (Musambi 2024). The aviation sector was not spared; protests by workers opposing the controversial Adani Group airport lease deal caused significant disruptions to flights, impacting trade and tourism (Holland 2024). These labor actions reflect a broader breakdown in the social contract between the state and its citizens, where the government's failure to honor commitments and deliver essential services deepens distrust and resentment (Rugutt & Njoki 2025).

The surge of strikes and protests across various sectors in Kenya—including education, health, and aviation—reflects a deeper deterioration in the relationship between the state and its citizens, a trend commonly associated with governance breakdowns. Research consistently points to a strong connection between frequent industrial actions and broader systemic governance failures, especially where the state neglects its duties in delivering public services, honoring negotiated agreements, and guaranteeing fair access to essential goods and services (Ishiyama 2019). In Kenya's case, the successive governments' repeated failure to implement Collective Bargaining Agreements with healthcare workers, the introduction of a contentious higher education financing model, and its opaque management of public resources - such as the proposed airport lease - exemplify a pattern of inconsistent policymaking and limited responsiveness, which undermines public confidence in institutions (Rugutt & Njoki 2025).

According to research by, Evans Getembe (2025) the recurring labor challenges in Kenya—such as delayed salaries, inadequate working conditions, and unmet *Collective Bargaining Agreements* (CBAs) - trigger regular strikes and industrial actions. His research indicates that when labor grievances remain unresolved, they often contribute to broader social and political unrest, becoming rallying points for public dissent and diminishing confidence in government institutions. The study underscores that inadequate enforcement of labor regulations and sluggish conflict resolution mechanisms dee-

pen these issues, emphasizing the importance of strengthening institutional capacity to effectively manage labor relations and avert governance-related disruptions (Getembe 2025).

5 Public Backlash Against Kenyan State Initiatives

The frequency and intensity of these strikes in Kenya during the early phase of President Ruto's administration underscore how unresolved governance challenges can drive social unrest, turning labour mobilization into both a protest mechanism and a sign of deep institutional fragility. Public dissatisfaction with President William Ruto's administration extended well beyond economic hardship, manifesting as widespread skepticism and distrust of new government initiatives. This backlash is rooted in a broader crisis of confidence, as many Kenyans perceived state policies as poorly conceived, with inadequate public participation, and disconnected from the realities of ordinary citizens (Opalo 2024).

A prominent example is the rollout of the Social Health Authority, Kenya's new healthcare system. Launched in October 2024, the program was met with significant public skepticism. Concerns about the system's viability, the persistence of out-of-pocket payments, and limited coverage have led to slow uptake and mounting frustration (Abuso 2025). Similarly, the government's labor export deals—such as those with Germany and Middle Eastern countries—have failed to inspire public confidence. While these initiatives were designed to address Kenya's chronic youth unemployment, many question the transparency of the recruitment processes and the actual impact on the broader jobs crisis (Frayer-Laleix 2024).

Perhaps the most contentious of state initiatives has been the introduction of the housing levy. Marketed as a solution to Kenya's housing deficit by the Ruto administration, the levy has instead become a point of public anger. Critics argue that it imposes an additional financial burden on already struggling citizens without clear evidence of direct benefit or robust accountability mechanisms

(Kiriungi 2024). The housing levy, like the failed Finance Bill 2024, is widely seen as emblematic of a government out of touch with everyday struggles, further fueling the perception that public resources are vulnerable to elite capture and corruption.

The eruption of mass protests in June and July 2024, initially triggered by the Finance Bill, quickly expanded to encompass these wider grievances. The #RejectFinanceBill and #RejectNotAmend movements, led by Kenya's youth and amplified through digital platforms, signaled a profound shift in the country's political landscape. The protests were not only about taxation but also about the perceived lack of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in government decision-making. Analysts note that this wave of activism reflects a generational demand for genuine reform and a break from the entrenched corruption and governance failures of the past.

6 Kenya's Role as a Sanctuary Under Threat

Kenya has long been recognized as a regional sanctuary, hosting over 770,000 refugees and asylum seekers, including large populations from *Somalia*, *South Sudan*, and other conflict-affected countries. Historically, Kenya's progressive refugee policies—such as the 2021 Refugee Act and the recent Shirika Plan for refugee inclusion—have earned international praise for expanding rights and promoting integration (Ikanda 2024). However, incidents in the early years of President William Ruto's administration, casted doubt on the country's commitment to upholding international protection standards.

A series of high-profile abductions involving foreign nationals who had sought political asylum in Kenya raised alarm among human rights organizations and the international community. The case of Dr. Kizza Besigye, a prominent Ugandan opposition leader, is particularly illustrative. Besigye, along with 36 members of his political party, was reportedly abducted from Kenya and forcibly returned to Uganda, where he faced trial in a military court (Al Jazeera 2024). This process, widely condemned by civil society and

legal experts, undermined Kenya's reputation as a haven for political refugees and raised concerns about the violation of the principle of non-refoulement—a cornerstone of international refugee law (Ahmed 2025).

Similarly, the abduction and brief detention of Tanzanian activist Maria Sarungi Tsehai in Nairobi, followed by her rapid release after public and civil society pressure, highlights the precariousness of asylum-seekers' safety in *Kenya* (Ahmed 2025). Even more concerning was the October 2024 incident in which seven Turkish nationals, all registered refugees, were abducted and handed over to Turkish authorities. Despite Kenya's legal obligations under the 2021 Refugee Act and international conventions, these individuals were forcibly returned to Turkey, where they faced likely persecution (Muia 2024). *Amnesty International* and other global human rights organizations sharply criticized these actions, noting that they occurred just as Kenya was making strides in refugee integration and legal reform (Kizito 2025).

These cases reflect a trend where bilateral relations and security considerations appear to override Kenya's international commitments. The contradiction is stark: while Kenya continues to launch progressive refugee inclusion initiatives and advocate for international burden-sharing, the government's willingness to cooperate in the abduction and refoulement of asylum seekers signals a retreat from its traditional role as a sanctuary. This shift carries significant implications. Not only does it undermine the safety and rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya, but it also threatens to erode the country's hard-earned reputation as a neutral ground for those fleeing political persecution (Irūngū 2024). These actions risk setting a dangerous precedent in the region, where respect for international protection norms is already fragile. The tension between Kenya's aspirations for global leadership and its recent failures to protect the vulnerable underscored the fragility of its sanctuary status.

7 The Fragile Balance: Kenya's Internal Crises versus External Aspirations

Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes societal discontent not merely as economic grievance but as a *broad negative sentiment about society as a whole*, encompassing eroding moral norms, distrust in institutions, and perceived societal decline (De Ruyter et al. 2021; Gootjes 2023). Kenya's 2024 protests over the Finance Bill exemplify this phenomenon, where youth-led dissent reflects deeper disillusionment with governance failures and inequality - a sentiment amplified by digital activism.

As the literature on state legitimacy and international reputation underscores, a leader's ability to project influence abroad is fundamentally linked to their capacity to manage domestic grievances and uphold democratic norms at home (Goldfien et al. 2023; Renshon et al. 2018). President William Ruto's first few years of governance reveals a two-layered legitimacy crisis. On one hand, President Ruto's global leadership initially enhanced Kenya's international standing leading to investor confidence and a positive reputation. On the other, systemic protests and perceived governance failures at home are likely to erode investor confidence and diplomatic trust. This dynamic is consistent with research showing that global shaming can influence domestic public opinion, compelling leaders to navigate the precarious balance between maintaining local legitimacy and sustaining a positive global image.

For President Ruto, the coming years before the end of his presidential first term represent a critical window to recalibrate his administration, address the root causes of public discontent, and demonstrate that Kenya's global ambitions are grounded in accountable, inclusive governance. The paper concludes that rebuilding global trust requires strategic management of Kenya's international reputation. According to Săniuță Adina, this can be done through improved governance regime domestically and a consistent foreign policy internationally, which are essential for restoring a country's legitimacy on the global stage (Săniuță 2025).

In sum, the protests, strikes, and state repression that defined Kenya's 2024 political landscape illustrate the complex and often fraught relationship between domestic social discontent and a nation's global image. They highlight the urgent need for political leadership that can reconcile grassroots demands with international aspirations, lest the fragile balance between state power, public trust, and global influence collapse. Concrete reforms are urgently needed to restore public trust and consolidate Kenya's progress on the world stage. Greater transparency in government operations, meaningful anti-corruption measures, respect for constitutional rights, and policies aimed at alleviating economic hardship are essential steps. Without these, the disconnect between leadership and citizenry will only widen, jeopardizing both national and regional stability as well as Ruto's global credibility.

CONCLUSION

This article positions *Kenya* within broader debates about how leaders navigate the dual imperatives of maintaining domestic legitimacy and international relevance—a balance increasingly difficult to maintain in an era of economic tension and digital activism. President Ruto's early presidency (2022–2024) epitomizes the tensions between global leadership and domestic legitimacy. Internationally, he has emerged as a leading voice for climate justice, hosting the 2023 African Climate Summit and advocating for fair global credit ratings and de-dollarization. Domestically, however, austerity measures, tax hikes, and allegations of corruption in his administration fuelled widespread protests, culminating in the June 2024 #RejectFinanceBill movement. President Ruto's administration finds itself at a critical juncture: its international standing is rising, yet its domestic foundation is increasingly unstable.

This paper concludes that, building a positive global reputation rests on delivering inclusive development back at home while managing external expectations. Weak accountability and transparency often exacerbates discontent, particularly when global

engagements are perceived as elitist or disconnected from local needs. The resulting mass protests in Kenya in 2024 - led by a mobilized youth demographic - have exposed a deep rift between the government and its citizens, with many Kenyans perceiving the administration as out of touch and unresponsive to their daily struggles. Beyond its borders, Kenya's reputation as a sanctuary for political refugees and asylum seekers is under threat. Recent abductions and forced returns of foreign nationals have drawn condemnation from international human rights organizations and cast doubt on the government's commitment to upholding international protection standards. This erosion of Kenya's government moral authority and its declining commitment to human rights not only weakens its regional influence but also risks diminishing its status as a hegemon in East Africa and the Horn.

This case reinforces the idea that global reputation cannot be divorced from domestic performance. As the *Domestic Sources of International Reputation* framework suggests, a state's international image is shaped not just by its foreign policy, but also by how it governs internally - particularly during times of economic and political stress. For Kenya to sustain its regional influence and global leadership aspirations, it must rebuild trust with its citizens. This requires more than policy reform; it demands a shift in how power is exercised and how accountability is practiced. Ultimately, Kenya's experience offers a cautionary tale - and a learning opportunity - for leaders across the continent. In an age where domestic dissent travels as swiftly as diplomatic applause, sustainable leadership requires a unified front at home and abroad. President Ruto's legacy, and Kenya's place in the regional and global order, will depend on whether the government can bridge this divide.

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