

Kenya's #RejectFinanceBill2024 Protests: Security, Privacy, and Safety Concerns and Behaviors

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Abstract

Protesters and activists around the world are increasingly relying on technology to organize and coordinate protests. Yet, this also poses serious security, privacy, and safety risks. During the finance bill protests that erupted across Kenya in 2024 against proposed taxation hikes, participants (mostly young Kenyans) organized using social media platforms such as X. However, the use of technology also left many of them vulnerable, as hundreds were abducted and detained during the protests because of their social media activity. To better understand how protesters organized using technology, their perceived risks as well as mitigations they took, we plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with those who participated in these protests. This work will broaden our community's understanding of the security and privacy challenges and needs of protesters in Kenya, an otherwise understudied population in the literature, potentially leading to the design of tools that better support their needs.

1 Introduction

In May 2024, the Kenyan government proposed a legislative bill, termed Kenya Finance Bill 2024, that would increase taxes for various goods, including a 16% value-added-tax (VAT) on food items, such as bread, potatoes, and onions, and tax increases for other daily essentials, including diapers and sanitary products [4]. Although met with considerable resistance from Kenyan citizens, members of Parliament approved the bill, leading to nationwide demonstrations. The protests took place in multiple cities [5], but most of the

protesters gathered in Nairobi, including on June 25th, 2024, when protesters stormed the parliament building in Nairobi after demands evolved beyond the finance bill to include discontent with the government's leadership and unchecked spending [8].

A unique aspect of these protests was the fact that demonstrators declared they were not led by a specific individual, but rather they functioned as a grassroots movement composed of motivated young Kenyans who primarily mobilized online. In fact, on X, the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024 alone was engaged with more than 15 million times by 400,000 unique users [3]. While protesters initially planned for peaceful demonstrations, they were met with violence from police who used water cannons, tear gas, and even bullets in an attempt to disperse those gathered [5–8], leaving at least 39 dead, 361 injured, and 627 arrested [4].

Our study will explore how young Kenyan protesters used digital tools including social media to organize during the protests, their security and privacy (S&P) concerns and considerations (or lack thereof), and how they mitigated them. Our study will further broaden our community's understanding of the S&P challenges and needs of protesters from non-WEIRD populations, potentially leading to the design of tools that account for diverse user needs beyond WEIRD contexts where most previous studies have focused.

Our work seeks to address the following research questions:

- RQ1:** *[Role of Technology]* How did the finance bill protesters in Kenya use technology to organize? Which considerations did they make when choosing digital platforms?
- RQ2:** *[Security Behavior]* Which security and privacy threats came up during the demonstrations? What security measures did protesters take in response?
- RQ3:** *[Advice Sources & Perception]* What security and privacy advice did the protesters receive? From whom did they receive it? Did the users consider the advice helpful?

2 Methodology

To inform our interview protocol, we first conducted an exploratory analysis of 5,167 tweets posted between 18th June and 28th August 2024 and examined 45 posts in detail as they discussed S&P concerns and behavior. We compiled a list of search terms based on our lived experience. In our preliminary manual search, we relied on keywords such as *#RejectFinanceBill2024*, *#RutoMustGo*, and *#OccupyParliament* to filter the textual data on X. We then exported the tweets as CSV files using a free browser extension that scrapes and exports tweet data as one scrolls through their timeline [1]. We aimed for diversity and not completeness of the data, as our primary goal was to use this data to inform our interview guide. Therefore, we discarded tweets that did not address security and privacy concerns if at least one member of the research team considered them irrelevant.

Our preliminary tweet analysis revealed some S&P advice with much of the focus on how to stay physically safe, including safe locations within the Nairobi city center, instances of police sightings so protesters could avoid them, and recommendations to avoid escalations with the authorities. However, there was also scattered advice related to digital safety, for instance, about VPN use instead of relying on mobile data and suggestions to remove simcards if one was worried about possible police abduction. Additionally, there were claims of a social media blockade attempt and fears that the government would restrict network availability during the demonstrations. However, many of the references to safety included no concrete advice or actionable steps for protesters.

To better understand how protesters organized, as well as their security, privacy, and safety concerns and behaviors, we will also conduct paid, hour-long, remote semi-structured interviews. We will conduct the interviews in English, Swahili, or both, as the two are Kenya’s national languages. The interviews will be conducted by two members of our team who are fluent in both languages. Foremost, we will ask participants how they kept up with news about the finance bill and the resulting protests and whether they were part of any groups where organizing took place. We will also prompt them for who they considered threats during the protests and any measures they took. We will also specifically inquire about any advice they received on staying safe, including the sources and quality of said advice. Lastly, we also plan to probe on security behavior after the protests, especially because government retaliation of suspected protesters continued even after the demonstrations ended [6, 7].

Our target participants are Kenyan youth who attended the protests in Nairobi. To recruit participants, we will contact people who have participated (as indicated by their social media activity, such as tweets) and reach out to others via our contacts. We will then use snowball sampling, in which participants will share our contact information with other people they know who participated, allowing them to reach out to us

if they wish to be interviewed. We will pilot the study by conducting a mock interview with a qualitative researcher who has recently attended multiple protests. We have submitted this study for review by our university’s ethics committee and are awaiting formal clearance before starting interviews.

2.1 Researcher Positionality

We acknowledge that researchers’ individual personalities often shape how they approach qualitative work. The two members of our research team who are conducting the fieldwork are Kenyan natives in the same age group as most of the finance bill protesters with extensive academic and personal networks in the country. Additionally, two members are S&P researchers with more than six years of experience who have investigated security practices, including during political conflict. Our team also includes two members who have extensively studied the unique S&P challenges of users in the majority world. Therefore, we expect to analyze the interview data from these collective identities and epistemological positions.

3 Anticipated Contributions

Security-usability tension commonly influences users’ security behavior despite how well-informed they might be about best practices [2, 9]. We aim to map out possible adversaries and threat models that protesters considered, how they attempted to mitigate them, and the efficacy of those approaches. We also expect to contribute to ongoing investigations into information sharing, especially on social media, and how protesters consider digital security during crises by focusing on an understudied population: Kenyan youth. More broadly, our findings can also inform advocacy groups’ efforts to provide context-specific, actionable S&P guidance during periods of social unrest. Additionally, we will provide an overview of how young Kenyan protesters protected themselves digitally, which should help developers of privacy-enhancing technologies design more inclusive solutions.

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