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# Kenya: In Brief

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President Joe Biden hosted President William Ruto of the Republic of Kenya for a State Visit on May 23, 2024. The event marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S.-Kenya diplomatic relationship, established after Kenya's independence from the United Kingdom. (The last African leader invited for a State Visit was Ghana's president in 2008; Kenya's third president, Mwai Kibaki, preceded him in 2003.) Ruto's visit followed a series of trips by senior Biden Administration officials to Kenya, which is a frequent destination for congressional travel.

Kenya hosts the largest U.S. embassy in sub-Saharan Africa and regularly ranks among the top recipients of U.S. foreign aid globally, a majority of it focused on health programs. It is a leading beneficiary of tariff benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA; P.L. 106-200, as amended), and is in negotiations with the United States under a Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership (STIP).

The country became an important U.S. counterterrorism partner in the aftermath of Al Qaeda's 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy. In 2011, Kenya launched military operations in neighboring Somalia against regional Al Qaeda affiliate Al Shabaab and subsequently joined the U.N.-authorized African Union stabilization mission in Somalia. Al Shabaab attacks against soft targets frequented by foreigners, including U.S. citizens, in Kenya's capital raised the group's international profile. In 2020, Al Shabaab killed a U.S. servicemember and two U.S. contractors in an attack on Manda Bay Airfield, a Kenyan base used by the U.S. military near the Somali border. Al Shabaab, which U.S. officials describe as Al Qaeda's largest and wealthiest affiliate, continues to pose a threat in Kenya and the broader region. Kenya hosts U.S. forces supporting regional counterterrorism efforts at Cooperative Security Location (CSL) Manda Bay.

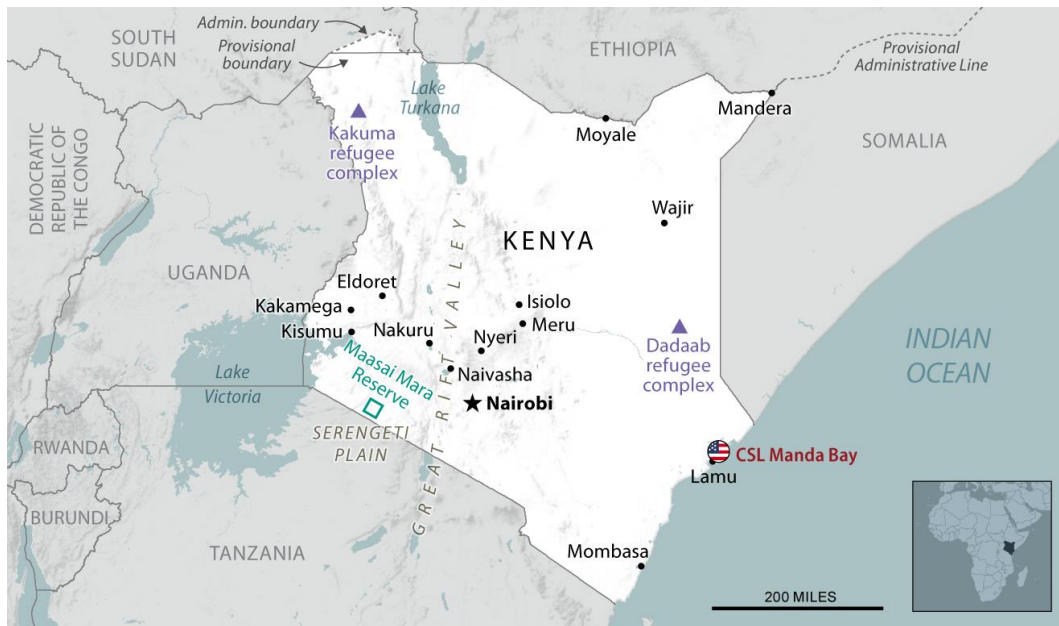
The 2024 State Visit highlighted Kenya's importance to the United States as a strategic partner, not only as a key diplomatic, economic, and security actor in East Africa, but as an African counterpart on shared global priorities. The country, which served on the U.N. Security Council in 2021-2022, is one of the only African members of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. Kenya participates in Operation Prosperity Guardian, a maritime taskforce launched by the United States in response to Houthi attacks against vessels in the Red Sea. With U.S. support, the country is leading a new Multinational Security Support mission in Haiti, where gangs have taken over much of the capital. During the State Visit, President Biden announced his intent to designate Kenya as a Major Non-NATO Ally. Kenya is the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to be granted that status, which conveys defense trade and security cooperation benefits.

President Ruto, meanwhile, faces turbulence at home. Kenya is often characterized as a comparatively stable and democratic anchor state in a troubled region, but a new protest movement, led by young Kenyans, has shaken the country and sparked a political crisis. Facing a heavy debt burden and the threat of default, Ruto has tried to raise taxes, which has spurred anger amidst widespread frustration with rising costs of living. Tens of thousands went to the streets in June 2024 to protest proposed tax hikes, and on June 25, after legislators passed the tax bill over public opposition, some demonstrators stormed the parliament. Dozens of protesters have been killed in the police response to the protests; hundreds have been arrested. The protests highlight frustration not only with economic hardships, but with public sector corruption and a perceived lack of government accountability. The display of public discontent presents an unprecedented challenge for the government, which ordered the military deployed to support police in responding to the protests as the first Kenyan police officers were landing in Haiti. With calls for his ouster, Ruto has pledged austerity measures and subsequently sacked his cabinet. Going forward, he will have to navigate domestic demands amid competing pressures from international financial institutions to reduce spending and raise taxes to manage Kenya's debt.

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## Contents

Overview .....	1
Politics.....	2
The Economy .....	6
Humanitarian Issues .....	8
Security Concerns .....	8
Selected Foreign Relations Issues .....	9
Wildlife and Environmental Conservation.....	11
U.S. Relations and Assistance .....	12

## Contacts

Author Information.....	14
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## Overview

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed Kenya as an anchor state and strategic partner in East Africa, and as critical to counterterrorism efforts in the region. The country is sub-Saharan Africa's fourth-largest economy and a regional hub for transportation and finance. It hosts the U.N. headquarters in Africa, one of four major U.N. offices globally. A major tourism destination known for its biodiversity and conservation efforts, Kenya is a regional leader in clean energy, drawing over 90% of its electricity from renewable sources.<sup>1</sup> The country has a vibrant tech scene that has been dubbed the "Silicon Savannah." Kenya's government has pursued opportunities to speak on behalf of Africa in global forums, including on climate change and debt relief.

Kenya hosts the largest U.S. embassy in sub-Saharan Africa as well as U.S. forces supporting counterterrorism operations in the region. The country regularly ranks among the top U.S. foreign aid recipients globally and is among the largest recipients of U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Africa. Health funding comprises the largest share of U.S. bilateral aid; the United States has provided over \$7 billion in assistance to combat HIV/AIDS in Kenya since 2004. Congressional interests in Kenya are wide-ranging, and it is a frequent destination for congressional travel; legislative action has focused predominately on democracy, human rights, and terrorism concerns.

Economic frustration, historical land disputes, corruption, and police abuses fuel grievances in Kenya, and election-related violence has threatened the country's reputation as an anchor state in a volatile region several times. Perceived impunity for state corruption and other abuses has been a trigger for protests, and police often respond with violence.<sup>2</sup> Freedom House ranks Kenya "Partly Free" in its *Freedom in the World* index, noting that despite regular elections, pervasive corruption and police brutality remain serious problems, and while Kenya's media and civil society are vibrant, journalists and human rights defenders face restrictive laws and intimidation.

Kenya's 2022 elections were the latest in a series of polls that have tested its democratic institutions. With incumbent President Uhuru Kenyatta term limited, the race was a close contest between his deputy, William Ruto, and longtime opposition leader and five-time presidential candidate Raila Odinga. In a twist, Kenyatta backed his formal rival, Odinga, over Ruto. When Ruto, who led a populist, anti-establishment campaign, was declared the winner with just over 50% of the vote, Odinga challenged the result, alleging fraud. The court upheld Ruto's victory.

Shadows from previous election-related violence and corruption allegations hang over Ruto, as they did over Kenyatta; both once faced charges of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>3</sup> After Ruto took office, Kenyan courts dropped corruption cases against his running mate and several of his cabinet appointees at the request of the director of public prosecutions, whom Ruto later appointed as intelligence chief.<sup>4</sup>

President Ruto has sought to court foreign investment and position Kenya as a global voice on climate change and an advocate, on Africa's behalf, for climate finance and reforms to the international financial system.<sup>5</sup> Politics at home, however, compete with his international agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> *Washington Post*, "Kenyan president aims to attract green investment during U.S. visit," May 17, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> *The Conversation*, "Why violence is a hallmark of Kenyan policing. And what needs to change.," June 5, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> *The Economist*, "Who is William Ruto?," August 16, 2022 and "Will William Ruto serve the people or himself and his pals?" October 25, 2022; and *The New York Review*, "The Political Education of William Ruto," March 8, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> On Kenyan civil society concerns, see, e.g., Kenya Human Rights Commission, "Nomination by President William Ruto of Mr. Noordin Haji for appointment of spy chief is an affront to the constitution of Kenya 2010," May 21, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> President of the Republic of Kenya, "Kenya will protect investors," July 13, 2023; *Financial Times*, "Kenyan leader says World Bank and IMF are 'hostage' to rich nations," June 23, 2023; Jaysim Hanspal and Nicholas Norbrook, "Ruto wants 'fair conversation' over climate finance for Africa," *The Africa Report*, June 20, 2023.

His administration faces major economic challenges, including a large debt burden, inflation, and high unemployment. After promising to transform the economy and cut the cost of living, some of his policy decisions have been unpopular, including his effort to cut a costly fuel subsidy that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) deemed unsustainable. The resulting spike in gas prices sparked public anger, prompting the government to partially reinstate the subsidy. Tax hikes, cost of living concerns, and spending choices have fueled anti-government protests. Police reportedly killed 35 people during protests in 2023, prompting a warning that Kenya risked becoming “a police state.”<sup>6</sup> Ruto appeared to mend ties with Odinga in early 2024 and has backed Odinga’s bid to be the next African Union (AU) Commission chair. The politicians’ rapprochement has not allayed public frustration with the government. In June 2024, young Kenyans, dubbed “Gen-Z,” mobilized protests against legislation proposing new taxes. Fueled by a violent police response, the protests grew, prompting a political crisis and calls for his ouster.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Kenya began its deployment of police to lead a U.S.-backed, U.N.-authorized multinational security support mission in Haiti in June (as protests were escalating at home). Amid competing domestic security concerns, the deployment—first proposed in mid-2023—has been controversial in Kenya. Legal disputes slowed the process, as have delays in pledged U.S. assistance, some of which was held due to congressional concerns about the mission (see below).

Kenya—where 213 people were killed and over 4,000 injured in Al Qaeda’s (AQ) 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy—continues to grapple with terrorist threats, most notably from the Somalia-based AQ affiliate Al Shabaab. While attacks near the Somali border are more common, high-profile attacks in Nairobi underscore Al Shabaab’s reach. A U.S. citizen was among 21 people killed in the 2019 Dusit D2 hotel attack; several Americans were wounded in the 2013 Westgate mall attack, in which at least 67 people died. Al Shabaab killed a U.S. servicemember and two U.S. contractors in a 2020 attack on Manda Bay Airfield, a Kenyan base used by the U.S. military near the Somali border. The United States has offered rewards for information related to the Dusit and Manda Bay attacks through the Rewards for Justice program, and leaders of the attacks have been designated for sanctions as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).

Kenya contributes troops to the African Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), the U.N.-backed AU stabilization operation previously known as AMISOM. Al Shabaab says its attacks in Kenya are retaliation for Kenya’s military role in Somalia and characterizes U.S. and Kenyan operations there as part of a Western crusade against Muslims. The group draws recruits from Kenya’s minority Muslim population (Kenyans comprise Al Shabaab’s largest foreign fighter contingent); security force abuses have reportedly contributed to radicalization in parts of the country.

## Politics

**Background.** Kenya was essentially a one-party state from 1964 to 1991. After the transition to a multiparty system, ethnic identity, rather than ideology, became the primary line of political cleavage. No ethnic group in Kenya has a large enough voting bloc for its political leaders to gain or maintain power alone, however, so politicians form cross-ethnic alliances, which periodically shift. This fluidity has helped fuel electoral violence and corruption.

For almost 40 years after independence, the ethnic groups of Kenya’s first and second presidents, the Kikuyu and Kalenjin, were seen to benefit disproportionately from the allocation of state resources, namely land, government jobs, and state contracts. The heartlands of these two groups

<sup>6</sup> BBC, “William Ruto: The ‘tax collector president sparking Kenyan anger,” December 13, 2023; Kenya Human Rights Commission, “Kenya marching slowly into a police state,” July 21, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Al Jazeera, “At least 200 injured, 100 arrested in Kenya tax protests: Rights groups,” June 21, 2024.

(the central highlands and adjacent central Rift Valley) received the greatest state investment in schools, roads, and health services. Western Kenya (home to the country's second and fourth largest ethnic groups, the Luhya and Luo) and the predominantly Muslim coast and northeast remained comparatively underdeveloped. The perception of ethnic favoritism fostered divisions.<sup>8</sup>

Daniel arap Moi, Kenya's long-ruling second president (1978-2002), dominated politics through repression, patronage, and electoral manipulation until, under donor and domestic pressure, he retired. The country's opposition parties came together, briefly, to defeat his chosen successor, Uhuru Kenyatta (son of first president Jomo Kenyatta), in the 2002 elections. The crisis that followed the next elections, in 2007, remains important for understanding Kenyan politics today. Political realignments prior to the 2007 polls created a particularly volatile ethnic dynamic, and when the incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu), was declared the winner of a close race amid allegations of rigging, protests followed and violence ensued, largely along ethnic lines. Some of the worst violence was between Kikuyu and Kalenjin (Kalenjin political leaders backed Kibaki's main opponent, Odinga, a Luo). Over six weeks, some 1,300 people were killed and 600,000 displaced; over 100,000 private properties and almost 500 government properties were destroyed. The crisis hit the economy hard. Kenya was effectively paralyzed for two months before Kibaki and Odinga reached a power-sharing deal brokered by former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, with U.S. support. Kibaki formed a coalition government with Odinga in a new prime minister post, agreeing to draft a new constitution and address sensitive land issues.

#### The ICC cases

An international commission of inquiry concluded that some of the worst of the 2007-2008 post-election violence was organized by politicians and business leaders and called for a special tribunal to prosecute those crimes. When Kenya's parliament failed to create one, the commission gave a list of key suspects to Kofi Annan, who provided it to the ICC Prosecutor. The ICC confirmed charges in 2012 against four people, including then-deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta and leading Kalenjin politician William Ruto—two former Moi protégés on opposing sides in 2007. Kenyatta and Ruto were accused of being criminally responsible for crimes against humanity. Among other crimes, the Prosecutor accused Ruto of involvement in the burning of a church where hundreds of people, mostly Kikuyu, had sought refuge; at least 28 died in the attack. Kenya's government (an ICC state party) objected to the cases. The cases were prominent in the 2013 elections, when Kenyatta and Ruto ran together on a presidential ticket. They portrayed the cases as an international conspiracy and emblematic of racial bias by the ICC. The race was extremely close: Kenyatta avoided a runoff against Odinga by less than 1% of votes.

Political interference and witness intimidation reportedly plagued the subsequent ICC trials. The ICC Prosecutor withdrew the charges against Kenyatta in 2014, and the judges declared a mistrial in the Ruto case in 2016, citing witness intimidation and political meddling. "There was a relentless campaign to identify individuals who could serve as Prosecution witnesses in this case and ensure that they would not testify," per the Prosecutor.<sup>9</sup> Neither Kenyatta nor Ruto were acquitted, leaving the possibility of future prosecution but allowing them to run for reelection in 2017. The ICC opened a new trial in 2022 against a Kenyan lawyer accused of witness tampering "for the benefit, and in coordination with" Ruto; that case was closed when he died weeks after Ruto took office.<sup>10</sup>

**The 2017 Election Overturned, Shifting Alliances.** Violence, rigging allegations, and police brutality marred the Kenyatta-Odinga rematch in 2017. When Kenyatta was declared the winner, the opposition brought a challenge to the Supreme Court, which nullified the presidential result in a landmark ruling, citing "irregularities and illegalities in the transmission of results that affected the integrity of the poll." The court ordered a fresh election, but the opposition boycotted it. After Kenyatta's victory, the opposition contested his legitimacy and held a mock inauguration to name Odinga "the people's president." The government declared it treasonous, shutting down media

<sup>8</sup> For more, see Michela Wrong, *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle-Blower*, Harper Perennial: 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Statement of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Fatou Bensouda, regarding Trial Chamber's decision to vacate charges against Messrs William Samoi Ruto and Joshua Arap Sang, April 6, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> The Prosecutor v. Paul Gicheru, Document Containing Charges, ICC-01/09-01/20-125-Conf-AnxA, March 12, 2021.

outlets and arresting opposition figures. Authorities ignored court orders over the crackdown, leading the chief justice to warn that the government's disregard for the judiciary threatened the rule of law.<sup>11</sup> Some Members of Congress and former U.S. diplomats also raised alarm.<sup>12</sup>

When Kenyatta and Odinga announced a surprise deal—endorsed by the United States—to end the standoff, Ruto treated it as a betrayal, and a major political reconfiguration followed.<sup>13</sup> Ruto's supporters characterized Kenyatta's deal with Odinga (known as “the Handshake”) as intended to prevent Ruto from succeeding him, and when Kenyatta launched an anti-corruption drive, Ruto's allies said it disproportionately targeted politicians linked to him.<sup>14</sup> Kenyatta and Odinga's effort to make constitutional changes, ostensibly to make politics more inclusive, was blocked by the judiciary. Ruto characterized the initiative as intended to extend Kenyatta's power.

**The 2022 Elections.** The 2022 polls occurred amid public frustration with high living costs, disillusion with the political class, and fear of another post-election crisis. Veteran opposition leader Odinga had gained the support of the incumbent president, but that alienated some opposition voters.<sup>15</sup> For some Kenyans, Kenyatta epitomized “the establishment.” Ruto capitalized on economic frustrations and, with a Kikuyu running mate and political allies, divided the Kikuyu vote.<sup>16</sup> Odinga also had a Kikuyu running mate—Kenya's first female candidate on a major ticket—and Kenyatta's endorsement, but that support was not enough to secure victory.

Ruto is reportedly among Kenya's richest men and served for years in government, but during the race he emphasized his humble upbringing, casting himself as a champion for the poor and an outsider running against the establishment. He pitched a “bottom up” economic plan and pledged to reduce the cost of living. As an evangelical Christian, he elevated religion in his campaign. His alleged role in organizing violence against Kikuyu after the 2007 elections appears not to have worked against him with many Kikuyu voters. Some analysts note that the community's political leaders had long branded Odinga as a destabilizing force, and some suggest that economic frustration and grievances against the Kenyatta family factored into votes for Ruto.<sup>17</sup>

Ruto garnered 50.5% of the votes, narrowly avoiding a runoff against Odinga, who gained 48.9%. Turnout, the lowest in 15 years, hinted at voter apathy, particularly among young Kenyans. Observers described the polls as more peaceful and transparent than the three preceding, but like past processes they were marred by rigging allegations and other controversies. Beyond the tight presidential race, the elections were notable in other ways. A record number of women ran, and more won parliamentary seats than ever before. Seven female governors were elected. The polls were reportedly among Africa's most expensive, both in terms of campaign spending and election administration. Kenya invested heavily in election technology, including biometric registration, to improve the credibility of the process; whether it improved public trust is debated.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), “Maraga defends Judiciary, says court orders must be obeyed,” February 7, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Sen. Cory Booker and Chris Coons, “Statement on Current Political Situation in Kenya,” February 7, 2018; Mark Bellamy and Johnnie Carson, “How and why the US should intervene in Kenya,” *African Arguments*, February 2018.

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Nation*, “Ruto: Handshake between Uhuru and Raila was a stab in the back,” March 6, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Macharia Gaiitho, “All you need to know about the clash between Kenyatta and Ruto,” *Al Jazeera*, August 18, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., *Deutsche Welle*, “Kenya's disillusioned youth shun election,” August 5, 2022; and Nanjala Nyabola, “The Kenyan Kakistocracy,” *The Nation*, August 17, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Ruto's running mate, Rigathi Gachagua, faced corruption and money laundering charges during the 2022 elections. Before the polls, a court ordered him to forfeit \$1.7 million in state funds it determined he had illicitly acquired.

<sup>17</sup> Eromo Egbejule, “Courting the Kikuyu: Kenyan politicians split biggest voting bloc,” *Al Jazeera*, August 6, 2022; and Nic Cheeseman et al., “Three critical questions will determine the Kenyan election,” *The Elephant*, July 26, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> *The East African*, “Polls body on the spot as Kenyans prepare for region's most expensive election,” May 6, 2022; (continued...)



**2024 Protests.** In June 2024, young Kenyans (popularly dubbed “Gen Z” in Kenya) organized protests against the government’s Finance Bill, which proposed some \$2.7 billion in additional taxes to reduce the budget deficit and borrowing.<sup>19</sup> The protesters argued that the tax hikes would raise the cost of living for Kenyans already struggling, deter investors, and choke the economy. They raised objections to the government’s spending choices, including on foreign travel, renovations and other non-essential expenditures, pay raises for government officials, and the creation of new executive branch offices, such as those of the first lady and deputy first lady.<sup>20</sup>

When police responded to the initial demonstrations, which began June 18, with tear gas, water cannons, arrests, and gunfire, the protests grew, and reported abductions by security forces exacerbated public anger.<sup>21</sup> On June 25, as tens of thousands protested in Nairobi and other cities, the National Assembly passed the bill (195 votes in favor, 106 against), spurring outrage. Hours later, as police fired on demonstrators outside the gates of parliament, killing several people, protesters stormed the complex.<sup>22</sup> Journalists present described the protesters as largely peaceful, but incidents of looting, vandalism, and property destruction, including fires set in parliament and city hall, spurred speculation that agent-provocateurs had been hired to discredit the protest movement.<sup>23</sup> The government deployed the military in response to the unrest—a controversial decision that prompted a legal challenge.<sup>24</sup> The court upheld the deployment, but ruled that the initial decision fell short of the legal requirements and lacked clarity in scope and timeframe.

The protests highlight frustration with more than taxes. Opinion polls suggest a large majority of Kenyans (87% in one poll) thought that the cost of living in 2023 was higher than the year prior and that the economy had deteriorated.<sup>25</sup> Polls before the 2022 elections suggested Kenyans saw the country heading in the wrong direction, and respondents identified management of the economy as the top issue they wanted their government to address, followed by corruption and unemployment.<sup>26</sup> Ruto campaigned on these issues; protesters say he has failed to deliver. Kenyans also point to ostentatious displays of wealth by some legislators and cabinet members.<sup>27</sup> Polls and voting behavior suggested that youth political participation declined over the past decade, but recent developments suggest a shift in how they are getting involved. More educated than previous generations, young Kenyans are using new strategies to engage politically. Described itself as “tribeless” and “leaderless”, the Gen Z protest movement appears to be galvanizing a broader push for government accountability.<sup>28</sup> (The “tribeless” descriptor is particularly salient in a political environment long marked by ethnic identities.)

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Rose Mosero, “In Kenya’s 2022 elections, technology and data protection must go hand-in-hand,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 8, 2022; Gabrielle Lynch, “Kenya’s elections are proof of change since 2007 violence, but more reform is needed,” *The Conversation*, September 6, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Job Mwaura, “Kenya protests: Gen Z shows the power of digital activism—driving change from screens to the streets,” *The Conversation*, June 22, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> *The Economist*, “A new breed of protest has left Kenya’s president tottering,” June 27, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Police Reforms Working Group Kenya, “Kenya: Abductions of citizens suspected of involvement in protests violates human rights,” June 25, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> CNN, “CNN witnesses protesters being shot in Kenya,” July 1, 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Reuters, “Kenyan activists rethink strategy after protests turn violent,” July 4, 2024.

<sup>24</sup> East Africa Centre for Law and Justice, “Kenyan High Court Upholds Military Deployment,” June 29, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> TIFA Research, “Year-end poll: Kenyans’ Reflections of 2023,” December 29, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Afrobarometer, “For the first time in a decade, Kenyans see management of the economy as their most important problem,” December 26, 2023 and “Dissatisfaction, disengagement mark outlook of young Kenyans,” October 3, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Ellen Ioanes, “What Kenya’s deadly protests are really about,” *Vox*, June 29, 2024; *Africa Report*, “Kenya: How opulence of Ruto’s allies sparked public anger before protests,” July 1, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Hawa Noor, “Why current protests should not be seen as an isolated surprising event,” *Daily Nation*, July 2, 2024.

Human rights groups report that more than 40 people died and over 360 were injured in the first two weeks of the protests, during which over 600 protesters were arrested and more than 30 cases of enforced or involuntary disappearances were filed.<sup>29</sup> The U.S. Embassy joined others in a public statement expressing concern about the violence, calling for restraint, and encouraging dialogue; Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the tensions in a June 26 call with Ruto.<sup>30</sup>

President Ruto initially took a tough stance on what he termed “treasonous events” on June 25, but he subsequently withdrew the tax bill and pledged spending cuts, a pay freeze, and other reforms.<sup>31</sup> (Ruto says the spending cuts will require more borrowing.) On July 11, he went further, dismissing his cabinet and promising the formation of a “broad-based” new government. The dramatic move underscores the pressure Ruto and Kenyan lawmakers are facing, but whether it will result in changes sufficient to satisfy public demands remains to be seen.

**LGBTQ Rights.** Some human rights groups assert that Kenya could follow Uganda in passing strict anti-LGBTQ legislation.<sup>32</sup> While a colonial-era law criminalizes “acts against the order of nature,” Kenya has been a relative refuge for LGBTQ persons in East Africa fleeing persecution. Its Supreme Court ruled in 2023 that the government’s refusal to register an LGBTQ rights group discriminated against the community’s rights and was unconstitutional; the court later reaffirmed that the community has the freedom to associate. The rulings prompted a backlash, led by conservative politicians and evangelical churches, and anti-gay protests.<sup>33</sup> Ruto, who has said there is “no room” for homosexuality in Kenya, expressed respect for the decision, but added, “it doesn’t mean we have to agree with it.”<sup>34</sup> The Family Protection Bill, introduced in 2023, echoes Uganda’s anti-LGBTQ law: it would criminalize “promoting” homosexuality and punish same sex relations with 10-50 years in jail and “aggravated homosexuality” (same sex relations with a minor or disabled person or when a terminal disease is passed on) with the death penalty.

## The Economy

Kenya is East Africa’s second-largest economy and one of the fastest growing and most diverse in Africa. Agriculture is the backbone of the economy, but manufacturing and real estate also drive growth. The services sector leads in job creation. The telecommunications industry is a global pioneer in mobile banking technology. With almost 40% of its population under age 14, a coming surge in the labor force will present both challenges and opportunities. Kenya ranks as a lower-middle income country, but a third of the population lives in poverty, per the World Bank, and a COVID-19-related recession in 2020, Kenya’s first since the 1990s, caused added hardship. Efforts by the government to slow the pandemic’s spread, including a curfew, school closings, restrictions on movement, and social distancing measures, also had negative impacts on livelihoods. The economy has rebounded, but many Kenyans are struggling due to inflation.

Former President Kenyatta sought to improve Kenya’s business environment and attract foreign investment, but his development agenda and spending ballooned public debt.<sup>35</sup> The People’s

<sup>29</sup> Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, “Update on the Status of Human Rights in Kenya during the Anti-Finance Bill Protests,” July 1, 2024.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Embassy Nairobi, “Joint Statement by Ambassadors and High Commissioners on Protests,” June 25, 2024; State Department, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Kenyan President William Ruto,” June 26, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Bloomberg, “Kenya prepares spending cuts after scrapping \$2.3 billion taxes,” June 28, 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Reuters, “Kenya could follow Uganda as East African nations wage war on LGBTQ rights,” June 23, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> *The Guardian*, “Kenya’s LGBTQ community wins bittersweet victory in battle for rights,” March 3, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, “‘No room’ for gays in Kenya, says deputy president,” May 4, 2015; and Reuters, “For LGBTQ Kenyans, court win prompts backlash as threats escalate,” April 20, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Charlie Mitchell, “Debt or development: What is Uhuru Kenyatta’s real legacy?” *African Business*, August 22, 2022.

Republic of China (PRC, or China) financed and constructed major infrastructure projects, including a railway and a port near the coastal town of Lamu, a UNESCO World Heritage site.<sup>36</sup> The railway cost a fifth of the national budget; 90% of it was funded with loans from China's Export-Import Bank.<sup>37</sup> The port in Lamu is part of a large transport corridor project with South Sudan and Ethiopia that envisions a road network, railway, airports, resort cities, an oil pipeline, and industrial areas. Environmentalists have expressed concerns with the project, and with plans for Kenya's first coal-fired power plant. In 2019, a Kenyan court ruled that authorities had failed to do a thorough environmental impact assessment and suspended the coal project. Another Chinese-financed project, an offshore oil terminal, was completed in 2022.

The IMF has warned Kenya to contain its debt, which stood at 68% of GDP when Ruto started his term, up from 42% when Kenyatta took office.<sup>38</sup> Ruto pledged to cut government spending and signed up for a new IMF package to reduce debt risks. The IMF has since offered additional funding, bringing its total commitment to over \$4.4 billion. Ruto publicly promised greater transparency on loans from China.<sup>39</sup> Kenya asked China for another \$1 billion to finish stalled road projects in late 2023, and for a slower repayment schedule. The IMF has lauded Ruto's economic reforms, but his tax proposals are apparently unpopular.<sup>40</sup> His government now faces the challenge of balancing public resistance to new taxes against IMF pressure to increase tax revenue.<sup>41</sup> Ruto has been outspoken in calling for international finance system reforms, asserting that African nations pay more on average to borrow than wealthier countries, and debt burdens leave many struggling to meet development goals and deal with climate change effects.<sup>42</sup>

**Climate Change and “Green Growth.”** Kenya generates most of its electricity from geothermal and hydroelectric sources. The country is developing its wind power capacity, with U.S. support, and is home to Africa's largest wind farm. Ruto has pledged to phase out the use of fossil fuels for electricity by 2030 and urged other African leaders to embrace renewables.<sup>43</sup> (Ruto has, meanwhile, continued to express support for mining Kenya's coal deposits.<sup>44</sup>) As chair of the Committee of African Heads of State on Climate Change, he has led Africa's negotiating group at the U.N. Climate Conference of the Parties (COP) talks, highlighting climate impacts that he calls a “living nightmare for millions of Kenyans, and hundreds of millions of Africans.”<sup>45</sup> Kenya hosted a continental summit on climate action in 2023, and 17 African leaders signed the Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change, Africa's first joint position on the issue. Ruto is pushing a new Africa Green Industrialization Initiative, seeking investment in renewable power projects, and he

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<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., Abdi Latif Dahir, “The troubles of Kenya's China-funded train,” *New York Times*, August 9, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Kaiman, “China has conquered Kenya’: Inside Beijing's new strategy to win African hearts and minds,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Total public debt is estimated at \$80 billion, of which \$35 billion is owed to foreign lenders. Per the IMF's 2023 Debt Sustainability Analysis, multilateral creditors account for 47% of Kenya's external debt and bilateral creditors 28%. Almost 65% of Kenya's bilateral debt is to non-Paris Club members, mainly loans from China.

<sup>39</sup> Reuters, “Kenya publishes loan documents for Chinese-built railway,” November 7, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> *Deutsche Welle*, “Kenya: Bumpy first year in office for William Ruto,” September 12, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> *New York Times*, “Behind the deadly unrest in Kenya, a staggering and painful national debt,” June 26, 2024.

<sup>42</sup> William Ruto, “If you want our countries to address climate change, first pause our debts,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Antony Sguazzin, “Kenya's Ruto breaks ranks, says Africa must leapfrog fossil fuel,” Bloomberg, October 4, 2022; William Ruto, “Walking Our Talk on Climate Action,” Project Syndicate, May 2023.

<sup>44</sup> *Business Daily*, “Treasury targets coal excise duty as President Ruto backs local mining plans,” January 1, 2024.

<sup>45</sup> For Ruto's speech, see <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/full-speech-read-ruto-s-stinging-message-at-cop27-4012092>.

wants to attract investment from companies seeking to build factories powered by renewable energy to reduce their carbon footprint.<sup>46</sup> Kenya is also developing carbon capture facilities.

## Humanitarian Issues

**Drought, Floods and Food Insecurity.** Recurrent drought and high food prices have driven food insecurity in Kenya. Alongside Ethiopia and Somalia, Kenya suffered five successive below-average rainy seasons from 2020 through 2022. Pastoral communities were hit hard—almost 3 million livestock reportedly died, destroying livelihoods. Cattle raids in the north and Al Shabaab threats have also disrupted livelihoods and affected humanitarian access. El Niño-driven rains in 2024 are facilitating drought recovery, but they have also caused devastating flooding. Over 300 people have been killed by floods and mudslides, and government-ordered demolitions of homes and businesses near river banks have caused additional hardship.<sup>47</sup> Some experts say poor urban planning and land management have contributed to the country’s flooding problems.<sup>48</sup>

**Refugee Issues.** Kenya hosts over 770,000 refugees and asylum seekers, 86% of whom live in camps.<sup>49</sup> This total includes over 430,000 Somalis and over 180,000 South Sudanese. In 2016, the Kenyatta government declared that Kenya would no longer host refugees, citing security concerns. Officials later clarified that the aim was to close Dadaab, the largest camp complex, which at the time hosted over 340,000 refugees, most from Somalia. Kenya’s High Court blocked Dadaab’s closure, ruling it discriminatory and unconstitutional. Authorities again threatened to close Dadaab in 2019 and in 2021 told the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that camp residents would be expelled if UNHCR did not devise a plan to close the Dadaab and Kakuma complexes by 2022. UNHCR developed a plan, but humanitarian activists, arguing returns to Somalia and South Sudan were not sustainable, urged the government to offer refugees durable solutions within Kenya.<sup>50</sup> The country has since adopted a law that provides new opportunities, rights, and protections for refugees within Kenya, but it has yet to be implemented. Over 380,000 refugees reside in the Dadaab complex as of May 2024 U.N. reporting.

## Security Concerns

Terrorist activity and conflict in neighboring countries have led Kenya to take an increasingly active role in regional security, but banditry, cattle rustling, poaching, urban crime, and communal disputes place competing domestic demands on Kenya’s security resources. Kenya has suffered multiple international terrorist attacks, and the concentration of potential international and domestic targets in Nairobi is a serious concern for Kenyan and foreign security officials.

Northeast Kenya faced a surge in Al Shabaab attacks in 2023, with 279 reported fatalities.<sup>51</sup> The uptick occurred in parallel with a Somali offensive against the group, and followed Kenya’s

<sup>46</sup> President of the Republic of Kenya, “Green growth is the answer to climate change,” December 2, 2023; and Bloomberg, “Africa’s self-appointed climate champion makes the hard sell,” December 8, 2023; Katharine Houreld, Kenyan president aims to attract green investment during U.S. visit, *Washington Post*, May 17, 2024.

<sup>47</sup> AP, “Poor Kenyans feel devastated by floods and brutalized by the government’s response,” May 11, 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Sean Avery, “Kenya’s devastating floods expose decades of poor urban planning and bad land management,” *The Conversation*, May 1, 2024.

<sup>49</sup> UNHCR, *Kenya: Registered Refugees and Asylum-Seekers, as of 30 April 2024*.

<sup>50</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières, *In Search of Dignity: Refugees in Kenya Face a Reckoning*, December 6, 2021. *The New Humanitarian*, “Why the return of displaced people is such a thorny issue in South Sudan,” January 5, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> ACLED, “Assessing Al Shabaab’s threat to the region as Somalia joins the East Africa Community,” December 8, 2023 and “Kenya-Somalia border: Rising Al-Shabaab threat in the wake of ATMIS drawdown,” September 1, 2023.

declaration that it would reopen its border with Somalia, which Kenya closed when it launched operations in Somalia against Al Shabaab in 2011. Kenya has since postponed the reopening. Ruto has pledged to maintain troops in Somalia after ATMIS's planned withdrawal at the end of 2024 if needed; ATMIS troop contributors and donors are discussing a new mission. Fresh tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia, which contributes the largest number of foreign forces to the fight against Al Shabaab, add to Kenya's regional concerns, as does instability in Ethiopia.

Alongside terrorist threats, Kenya faces pastoralist militia activity in the northwest.<sup>52</sup> Military operations to curb bandit attacks and stem small arms proliferation reduced banditry in 2023, but raids and resulting displacement remain an issue. Kenya's Chief of Defense Forces, Gen. Francis Ogolla, died in an April 2024 helicopter crash while visiting troops deployed in the operation.

### Police Abuses and Calls for Reform

Police abuses and extrajudicial killings (EJKs) in Kenya have repeatedly drawn an international spotlight, including in the context of anti-terrorism efforts.<sup>53</sup> The State Department's latest human rights report lists security force abuses, including torture, unlawful killings, and enforced disappearances among Kenya's most serious human rights problems, noting "numerous reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings... particularly of antigovernment demonstrators in protests that took place between March and July [2023]." It describes impunity as a problem "at all levels of government," and as a serious problem across law enforcement agencies. Accountability mechanisms such as the Independent Police Oversight Authority have been criticized for failing to prosecute misconduct. A Kenyan parliamentary report on EJKs and enforced disappearances in 2021 described the issue as a grave concern, noting the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights' documentation of over 1,000 cases since 2013.<sup>54</sup> Missing Voices, a coalition that tracks police killings and disappearances, has documented over 800 cases from 2019-2023, including 118 killings and 10 enforced disappearances in 2023.<sup>55</sup>

Police abuses around elections have been a recurrent problem; police were implicated in over 400 deaths after the 2007 elections and over 100 deaths after the 2017 polls. Ruto pledged to end police abuse and enhance oversight of the force in his campaign, and shortly after he took office, Kenyan prosecutors charged 12 police officers with crimes against humanity over the 2017 post-election violence.<sup>56</sup> In 2023, though, when the opposition led protests, police responded with violence, which reportedly led to at least 30 deaths; senior Kenyan officials dismissed the allegations of excessive force.<sup>57</sup> A taskforce directed by Ruto to study police problems has recommended far-reaching changes to the police and prisons services, identifying underfunding, "endemic" corruption, leadership gaps, and poor human capital management as key challenges.<sup>58</sup> The taskforce noted that police routinely rank in polls as the country's most corrupt institution, and assessed that the failure to address the problem was fueling a culture of impunity in the force; they also recommended raising police salaries. During the Ruto State Visit, the White House announced \$7 million in new aid to advance and strengthen the modernization and professionalization of Kenya's National Police Service, as well as \$2.2 million to support prison service reforms.

## Selected Foreign Relations Issues

**East Africa.** Kenya has played a peacemaking role in the troubled region, hosting the talks that led to Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and facilitating negotiations on conflicts

<sup>52</sup> For more on pastoralist and ethnic militia activity, see, e.g., ACLED, "Increasing Security Challenges in Kenya," March 2, 2023 and "Kenya: Government operation brings calm to North Rift region," August 4, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., *New York Times*, "Haiti, desperate for peace, turns to police notorious for violence," October 4, 2023; CNN, "Dozens 'disappeared' by security forces, rights group says," July 19, 2016; Al Jazeera, "Killing Kenya," September 23, 2015; and U.N. Development Program, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, September 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Standing Committee on Justice, Legal Affairs and Human Rights, *Report on the Inquiry into Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances in Kenya*, Senate, Twelfth Parliament, Republic of Kenya, October 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Missing Voices, *End Police Impunity—2023 Annual Report*, April 23, 2024.

<sup>56</sup> AFP, "Kenyan police charged with crimes against humanity over 2017 crackdown," October 28, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> "Mudavadi says police brutality, use of excessive force do not happen in Kenya," *Citizen* (Nairobi), February 15, 2024; and David Njaaga, "Interior CS Indiki refutes claims of police brutality," *The Standard* (Nairobi), July 25, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> *Report of the National Taskforce on Police Reforms*, November 2023.

in Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and South Sudan. With U.S. support and President Ruto's approval, former President Kenyatta played a leading role in the AU-mediated ceasefire deal between Ethiopia's government and Tigray authorities in 2022; a Kenyan general leads the AU ceasefire monitoring team. Kenya deployed troops to eastern DRC in 2022 to lead an East African force to stabilize areas affected by a Rwandan-backed rebellion; the force withdrew in late 2023 after DRC authorities complained that East African troops were unwilling to confront the rebels aggressively. Ruto's 2023 offer to mediate between Sudan's warring parties was rejected by its military government, which accused him of bias toward the insurgent Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Sudan recalled its ambassador from Kenya in early 2024 to protest Ruto hosting a visit by RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka "Hemedti." More recently, Kenya has sought to mediate between Ethiopia and Somalia to ease tensions over Somaliland.

**Haiti.**<sup>59</sup> In July 2023, Kenya responded to an appeal by the government of Haiti for help with rising gang violence, offering to lead a multinational force to assist Haitian police restore order.<sup>60</sup> The U.N. Security Council authorized the Multinational Security Support mission (MSS) in October 2023. The Ruto administration plans to deploy 1,000 police officers, with other countries contributing the remainder of the planned 2,000-person force. Kenya's parliament approved the government's request to deploy police to Haiti in late 2023, but Kenya's High Court blocked the deployment in January, ruling it unconstitutional. The opposition politician who brought the case argued that Kenya needs to prioritize its own security challenges; other observers raised concerns about the human rights record of the Kenyan police.<sup>61</sup> Per the High Court ruling, a "reciprocal arrangement" with a host government is required for a police deployment. Kenyan and Haitian officials signed that agreement in March, but when Haiti's prime minister subsequently resigned amid escalating gang activity, Kenyan officials paused the deployment. Following the formation of a new Haitian government, Kenyan police, trained in French, began deploying in late June.

**Israel/Gaza.** Kenya has long-standing ties with Israel, which Kenyan officials call a "special partnership."<sup>62</sup> Ruto expressed solidarity with Israel over the October 2023 attacks by Hamas, but faces domestic pressure over Israel's military operations in Gaza.<sup>63</sup> Kenya often votes in support of Israeli positions at the United Nations, but it has also voted in favor of full U.N. membership for Palestine. Kenya voted for resolutions calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza.

**Russia/Ukraine.** Kenya was a vocal critic of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 when it sat on the U.N. Security Council.<sup>64</sup> The Ruto administration took a more ambiguous stance in early 2023, hosting the foreign ministers of Belarus and Russia and announcing plans for a trade pact with Russia. (Russia-Kenya trade is limited, particularly in comparison to U.S.-Kenya trade; imports from Russia consist primarily of iron, wheat, and fertilizers; Kenya's main export to Russia is tea.) Kenyan officials subsequently called Russia's decision to exit the Black Sea Grain Initiative "a stab in the back" that would disproportionately harm the drought-affected Horn of

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<sup>59</sup> For more on the Haiti situation, see CRS Insight IN12331, *Haiti in Crisis: What Role for a Multinational Security Support Mission?* and CRS Report R47394, *Haiti: Recent Developments and U.S. Policy*.

<sup>60</sup> Foreign Minister Alfred Mutua (@DrAlfredMutua), X Post, July 29, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> BBC, "Kenya court blocks police deployment to Haiti," January 26, 2024; Luke Taylor, "Kenya's offer to send police to Haiti sparks human rights concerns," *The Guardian*, August 5, 2023; *New York Times*, "Haiti, desperate for peace, turns to police notorious for violence," October 4, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> *The East African*, "Kenya, Israel agree to enhance cooperation on health and security," July 29, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> *The Star* (Nairobi), "Kenya stands with Israel, Ruto says amidst war with Palestine," October 8, 2023; President William Ruto (@WilliamsRuto), X Post, February 1, 2024.

<sup>64</sup> NPR, "Kenyan U.N. Ambassador compares Ukraine's plight to colonial legacy in Africa," February 22, 2022.

Africa.<sup>65</sup> Ruto did not attend Russia's 2023 Africa Summit, and in early 2024, Kenya joined the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, an alliance of countries that supports the defense of Ukraine.

**China.** China is Kenya's largest trading partner, and PRC loans—reportedly totaling \$8 billion—account for roughly 64% of its bilateral external debt and 17% of total external debt (the World Bank is Kenya's largest external creditor).<sup>66</sup> While Ruto has sought to strengthen U.S. ties, he has also sought to maintain a “robust friendship” with China, despite anti-China rhetoric during his campaign.<sup>67</sup> He attended China's 2023 Belt and Road Forum. When Ruto was Kenyatta's deputy, their coalition cultivated ties with the Communist Party of China, an effort Ruto's party has continued. After meeting China's ambassador to Kenya in 2023, Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua said, “The United Democratic Alliance is the younger brother of CPC, but it is the party of the future. We want to develop it like CPC.”<sup>68</sup> In polls, Kenyans express greater support for the United States as a model than the PRC, but a majority of Kenyans view China positively.<sup>69</sup>

## Wildlife and Environmental Conservation

Heavily reliant on tourism for foreign exchange earnings, Kenya has implemented measures to conserve its wildlife resources and is recognized as a leader in countering wildlife trafficking in Africa. It has a stringent regulatory and legislative environment around poaching and trafficking, and has enjoyed a dramatic drop in elephant and rhino poaching in the past decade.<sup>70</sup> Many anti-trafficking initiatives are implemented through the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), which enforces wildlife laws and regulations and manages the national parks and reserves. Despite its efforts to curb the illicit wildlife trade, Kenya remains a transit country. Corruption and weaknesses in enforcement and prosecution of trafficking laws are an ongoing concern.

The U.S. government has long partnered with Kenya's government and civil society to address these issues and support other conservation efforts. The United States has provided training and equipment to the KWS and supports programs to protect the country's parks and animals. Roughly 65% of Kenya's famous wildlife live outside its KWS-protected parks, and conservation groups have worked with communities to establish over 200 community conservancies to protect wildlife and promote sustainable land use. The United States has supported these conservancies, which protect over 7 million hectares of land. Tourism, much of it wildlife-related, is an important source of revenue (\$2.7 billion in 2023) and jobs.<sup>71</sup> Kenya lost an estimated \$1 billion in tourism-related revenue during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kenya has sought to stem plastic pollution, including by banning plastic bags and single-use plastics in 2017. With stiff penalties, the law was initially successful, but the smuggling of bags from neighboring countries presents enforcement challenges.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> BBC, “Russia's grain deal exit is a stab in the back—Kenya,” July 18, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Fergus Kell, “Kenya's debt struggles go far deeper than Chinese loans,” Chatham House, May 31, 2023.

<sup>67</sup> During his campaign, Ruto pledged to deport Chinese nationals doing jobs that could be done by Kenyans. On his post-election shift, see, e.g., VOA, “After anti-China campaign, Kenya's Ruto does about-face,” September 29, 2022.

<sup>68</sup> CapitalFM, “Kenya: UDA seeks support of Communist Party of China to Strengthen Structures,” August 17, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Afrobarometer, “Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations,” November 15, 2021; Pew Research Center, China's approach to foreign policy gets largely negative reviews in 24-country survey,” July 27, 2023; Gallup, “U.S. loses soft power edge in Africa,” April 26, 2024.

<sup>70</sup> Andres Schipani, “How Kenya turned the tide against ivory poachers,” *Financial Times*, April 27, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Bloomberg, “Kenya tourism earnings jump 32% to surpass pre-pandemic level,” March 30, 2024.

<sup>72</sup> NPR, “The toughest plastic bag ban is failing: A tale of smugglers, dumps and dying goats,” August 9, 2023.

Deforestation is a long-standing concern. Kenya's Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Prize, was recognized for her tree-planting campaign and broader contributions to sustainable development, democracy, and peace. President Ruto has proposed to plant 15 billion trees over 10 years, but in 2023, he directed an end to a six-year-old logging ban, ostensibly to create jobs. A court suspended the decision, leaving the ban in place. Environmentalists warn that lifting the ban would risk reversing the gains Kenya has made to improve its tree cover.<sup>73</sup>

## U.S. Relations and Assistance

The United States and Kenya have historically close ties. Over 100,000 Americans live in or visit Kenya every year, per the U.S. Embassy; the country is a popular destination in Africa for U.S. tourists. U.S. Embassy Nairobi is designated a high-threat, high-risk post, given terrorism concerns. Over 600 U.S. servicemembers, civilians, and contractors are in Kenya to support counterterrorism (CT) efforts in the region. Some are deployed to Cooperative Security Location (CSL) Camp Simba, a U.S. "base within a base" on the coast near the Somali border.

Governance, human rights, and corruption concerns in Kenya sometimes complicate the bilateral relationship, and abuses by Kenyan security forces have posed challenges at times for security cooperation. Successive U.S. Administrations have pushed for greater accountability for political violence and unresolved corruption cases. In 2024, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), of which the United States is a member, added Kenya to its "grey list" of countries subject to increased monitoring for money laundering and terrorism financing.

Bilateral relations have fluctuated in the past fifteen years. The ICC cases were a source of friction, and Kenyatta looked to other foreign partners, notably China, for diplomatic and economic support. During the tense period after the 2017 polls, U.S. diplomats helped to facilitate Kenyatta and Odinga's rapprochement, suggesting continued U.S. influence despite strains in the relationship. The Trump and Kenyatta administrations took steps to improve ties, and announced a Strategic Partnership when Kenyatta visited the White House in 2018. Nearly \$900 million in commercial deals were announced during the visit, and direct flights, once blocked over U.S. security concerns, started later that year. The Trump Administration launched a Bilateral Strategic Dialogue with Kenya in 2019 and free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations in 2020.

Kenya was the opening stop on Antony Blinken's first trip to sub-Saharan Africa as Secretary of State in 2021, when he attended the Bilateral Strategic Dialogue. He stressed the importance of the strategic partnership and Kenya's regional peacemaking role during the 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, and a memorandum of understanding on civil nuclear cooperation was signed. First Lady Jill Biden visited Kenya in early 2023. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin went to Kenya on his first sub-Saharan Africa tour in 2023, during which he signed a five-year Framework for Defense Cooperation. The directors of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation both visited in 2024.

The Biden Administration has expressed support for a range of Kenyan initiatives, including on climate action and renewable energy. During Ruto's 2024 State Visit, the two governments made commitments on democracy, human rights, public health, security, and countering corruption, among other issues.<sup>74</sup> They announced new initiatives on education, sustainable development, climate action, clean energy, and carbon management, and they unveiled a new partnership on semiconductor manufacturing in Kenya to strengthen the global supply chain. They launched the

<sup>73</sup> Lisa Fuchs, "Kenya's logging ban has been lifted—it's a political decision and a likely setback for conservation," July 22, 2023.

<sup>74</sup> White House, *Fact Sheet: Kenya State Visit to the United States*, May 23, 2024.



Nairobi-Washington Vision, which calls on the international community to help developing countries manage debt while investing in economic growth. The White House pledged new funds for police professionalization, prison reforms, health, education, agriculture, and civil society. Two resolutions introduced during the visit, S.Res. 704 and H.Res. 1254, recognize Kenya's strategic importance to the United States and celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral ties.

U.S. Ambassador to Kenya Meg Whitman has focused on pitching Kenya to U.S. businesses and investors; trade and investment were top priorities for Kenya during Ruto's State Visit.<sup>75</sup> Microsoft and Coca Cola, among other U.S. businesses, announced major private sector deals around the visit. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), which has facilitated investments in renewable energy, e-mobility, digital connectivity, and infrastructure in Kenya, revealed new commitments during the State Visit that bring its Kenya portfolio to over \$1 billion. The DFC plans to open an office in Nairobi in 2025. The Biden Administration, instead of continuing the FTA negotiations, is pursuing a Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership (STIP) with Kenya, which the U.S. Trade Representative describes as an "ambitious roadmap for enhanced cooperation." For more, see CRS In Focus IF11526, *U.S.-Kenya Trade Negotiations*.

**U.S. Assistance.** Kenya is routinely among the top recipients of U.S. foreign aid in sub-Saharan Africa. The United States allocated roughly \$477 million in FY2023 bilateral aid, largely focused on HIV/AIDS and other health programs, for Kenya, which also received over \$250 million in FY2023 humanitarian aid and additional Food for Peace and refugee response assistance.<sup>76</sup> The Administration's FY2025 request of over \$496 million for Kenya is lower than the FY2024 request of over \$511 million. The decrease reflects reduced democracy and governance funding.

The United States is the largest donor to Kenya's health sector, which saw child mortality drop by more than half and life expectancy rise by over 15 years from 2000-2020.<sup>77</sup> The United States donated over 12 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Kenya and has cumulatively invested over \$8 billion there under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The U.S. Embassy says Kenya, which has some 1.4 million people living with HIV-AIDS, is on the verge of achieving the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets (95% of people with HIV diagnosed, 95% of people who know they have HIV on anti-retroviral therapy, and 95% of those on treatment virally suppressed).<sup>78</sup> Kenya's reported prevalence rate has nearly halved in the past 20 years, to 3.7% in 2023, per UNAIDS; new infections are down by 78% and related deaths by 68% since 2013. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research-Africa have long-standing partnerships with Kenya, including on disease surveillance.

The United States has supported an array of efforts to help build Kenya's capacity to counter terrorist attacks and secure its borders. Kenya is the largest sub-Saharan African recipient of State Department-administered anti-terrorism assistance for law enforcement. News reports suggest that training and aid via the U.S. Special Program for Embassy Augmentation and Response (SPEAR) helped an elite Kenyan unit respond rapidly to the 2019 DusitD2 hotel attack in Nairobi, significantly limiting the loss of life.<sup>79</sup> Separately, the Department of Defense (DOD) has notified Congress of over \$400 million in CT "train and equip" support to Kenya in the past

<sup>75</sup> Nahal Toosi, "Meg Whitman's trying to be a different kind of US ambassador. Washington is noticing," *POLITICO*, May 22, 2024.

<sup>76</sup> USAID, *Kenya Assistance Overview*, April 2024.

<sup>77</sup> State Department, "The United States and Kenya: Strategic Partners," November 16, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> U.S. Embassy Nairobi, "PEPFAR in Kenya," August 10, 2023, available at <https://ke.usembassy.gov/pepfar/>.

<sup>79</sup> Reuters, "After Westgate Debacle, Quick End to Latest Kenyan Attack Shows Progress," January 20, 2019.

decade, including to support its role as a major troop contributor in the AU mission in Somalia. The Massachusetts National Guard is paired with Kenya in the State Partnership Program.

The Biden Administration has been a leading advocate for the MSS mission in Haiti and Kenya's role in it. To date, the State Department and DOD have pledged over \$380 million in support for the mission to facilitate training, equipment, logistics and life support services, and salary support for participating officers. Some Members of Congress have expressed reservations about the mission; the State Department obligated \$109 million in late June, despite congressional holds, for equipment to enable the Kenyan deployment.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Risch on Biden Admin's Decision to Override Congress on Haiti MSS Funding," June 20, 2024.