

Kenya: Current Issues and U.S. Relations

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Kenya: Current Issues and U.S. Relations

Long-standing U.S. ties with Kenya have deepened over the past decade, despite some tensions. In May 2024, President Joe Biden hosted Kenya's President William Ruto for a State Visit, marking the 60th anniversary of the U.S.-Kenya diplomatic relationship, established after Kenya's independence from the United Kingdom. Ruto was the first African leader to be invited for a State Visit since 2008, and President Biden subsequently designated 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.

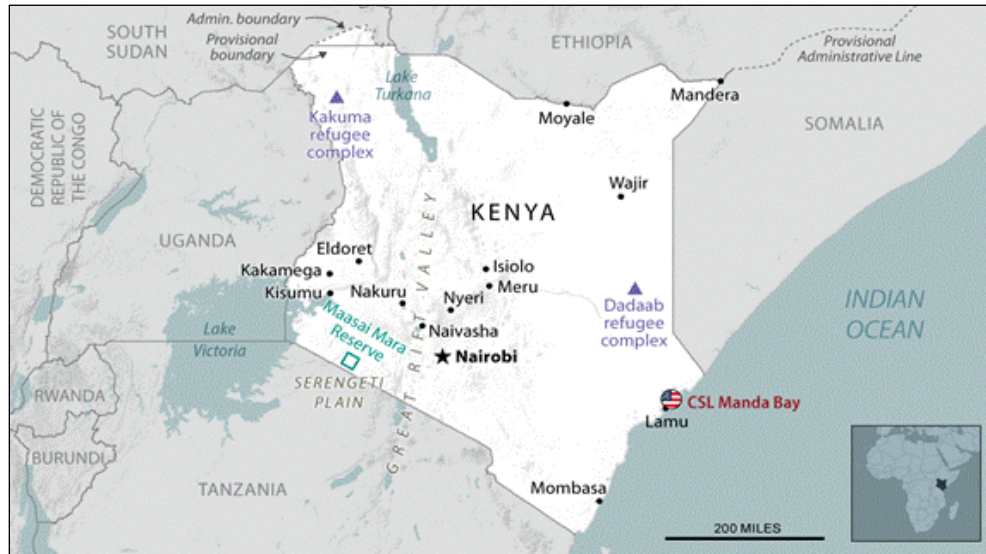
Kenya hosts the largest U.S. embassy in sub-Saharan Africa and has regularly ranked among the top recipients of U.S. foreign aid globally, a majority of it focused on health programs. The country is a frequent destination for congressional travel and routinely receives senior U.S. officials for visits. Kenya has been a leading beneficiary of tariff benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA; P.L. 106-200, as amended). Under the first Trump Administration, the United States and Kenya launched talks aimed at negotiating a free trade agreement, which would have been the first in sub-Saharan Africa. The Biden Administration did not continue the FTA talks, instead launching a Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership (STIP).

Kenya became an important U.S. counterterrorism partner in the aftermath of Al Qaeda's 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy. In 2011, the country launched military operations in neighboring Somalia against regional Al Qaeda affiliate Al Shabaab and subsequently joined the UN-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. Kenya, which served on the UN Security Council in 2021-2022, has participated in Operation Prosperity Guardian, a maritime taskforce launched by the United States in response to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, and it has been one of the only African members of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. With U.S. support, Kenya is leading the Multinational Security Support mission in Haiti.

President Ruto, meanwhile, has faced 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, shook the country in 2024, sparking a political crisis that Ruto, elected in 2022, has struggled to overcome. Facing a heavy debt burden and the threat of default, Ruto tried to raise taxes, which fueled public 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 when legislators passed the tax bill over public opposition, some demonstrators stormed the parliament. Dozens were killed in the police response to the protests, and over a thousand people were arrested. The protests highlighted frustration with economic hardships, public sector corruption, and a perceived lack of government accountability. The display of public discontent was an unprecedented challenge for the government. Ruto reversed the tax bill and reshuffled his cabinet, and he brought several opposition politicians into his government. Human rights groups have since raised growing concern with a spate of abductions and killings of Kenyan government critics, and with a series of forcible extraditions of foreign dissidents from Kenya. Ruto continues to face calls for his ouster and allegations, including from former allies, of corruption, as his government tries to navigate public opposition to new taxes, manage Kenya's debt, and position Ruto for re-election in 2027.

The Trump Administration has yet to articulate what changes it may pursue with respect to the bilateral relationship, but its initial engagement suggests continuity with past administrations. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has spoken more often with President Ruto than any other African leader in his first months in office. In public statements, the Secretary has underscored the value of the U.S.-Kenya relationship, emphasized U.S. appreciation for Kenya's leadership on regional peace and security, and pledged that the United States will continue to support Kenya's deployment in Haiti. Major changes to U.S. foreign assistance by the Trump Administration, which have spurred debate in Congress and legal action, have implications for Kenya and could create new challenges for the relationship. The People's Republic of China, meanwhile, which is Kenya's largest trading partner and bilateral creditor, hosted Ruto for a state visit in April 2025.



Comparative size: slightly smaller than Texas
Population: 58 million, 2.06% growth
Official languages: English and Swahili
Religions: Christian 86%, Muslim 11%, other 2%
Life expectancy: 70.4 years
Median age: 21.2 years
Population under 14 years of age: 35.8%
Fertility rate: 3.16 children born/woman
HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate: 3.2% (2023)
Adult literacy: 83% | male 86% female 80% (2021)

GDP: \$131 billion, 4.8% growth, \$2,468 per capita (2025)
GDP composition: agriculture 22%, industry 17%, services 55% (2023)
External debt: \$33.5 billion (2023)
Health expenditure: 4.5% of GDP (2021)
Electricity access: 76% (2022)
Major exports | partners: tea, cut flowers, garments, gold, tropical fruits | Uganda 10%, USA 10%, UAE 8%, Netherlands 8%, Pakistan 6% (2023)
Major imports | partners: refined petroleum, palm oil, wheat, plastics, garments | China 22%, UAE 14%, India 10%, Saudi Arabia 5%, Malaysia 4% (2023)

Sources: CRS graphic. Data from CIA World Factbook, UNAIDS, and IMF; 2024 estimates unless noted.

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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 third-largest economy and a regional hub for transportation and finance. It hosts the UN headquarters in Africa, one of four major UN 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.¹ 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 counter-terrorism operations in the region. The country has regularly ranked among the top U.S. foreign aid recipients globally, with health funding comprising the greatest share of bilateral aid, and it is among the largest African recipients of U.S. counterterrorism assistance. 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.² 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).³ After Ruto took office, Kenyan courts dropped corruption cases against his running mate (who has since been impeached) and several of his cabinet appointees at the request of the director of public prosecutions, whom Ruto later appointed as intelligence chief.⁴

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.⁵ Politics at home, however, compete with his international agenda.

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

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

³ *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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.”⁶ Ruto appeared to mend ties with Odinga in early 2024 and heavily backed Odinga’s bid to chair the African Union (AU) Commission, effectively the AU’s chief executive. In a blow to Ruto’s foreign policy agenda, Odinga lost the AU leadership election in early 2025.

Ruto and Odinga’s 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 Ruto’s ouster. A spate of reported abductions and killings of government critics has followed. Ruto has reshuffled his cabinet several times, and in late 2024, his allies moved to impeach Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua, with whom Ruto had fallen out. Ruto’s rift with Gachagua poses new political problems for him as alliances shift ahead of the next elections, due in 2027.

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, several high-profile attacks in Nairobi have underscored Al Shabaab’s reach. A U.S. citizen was among 21 people killed in the 2019 DusitD2 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 UN-backed AU Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM, previously known as ATMIS and AMISOM). Al Shabaab says its attacks in Kenya are, in part, 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 reportedly comprise the largest share of its foreign fighters); security force abuses in Kenya have contributed to radicalization.

Kenya launched the U.S.-backed, UN-authorized multinational security support mission in Haiti in June 2024, as the Gen Z protests were escalating at home. Amid competing domestic and regional security concerns, the deployment of Kenyan Police for the mission—slowed by legal disputes and delays in expected international assistance—has been controversial domestically.

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.

⁶ Kenya Human Rights Commission, “Kenya marching slowly into a police state,” July 21, 2023.

For decades after independence, the ethnic groups of Kenya's first and second presidents, the Kikuyu and Kalenjin (the first and third largest ethnic groups), were seen to disproportionately benefit from the allocation of state resources, namely land, government jobs, and contracts. The heartlands of these groups, the central highlands and adjacent central Rift Valley, saw the largest state investment in schools, roads, and health services. Western Kenya (home to the second and fourth largest groups, the Luhya and Luo) and the predominantly Muslim coast and northeast were comparatively underdeveloped. The perception of ethnic favoritism fostered divisions.⁷

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 those polls created a particularly volatile ethnic dynamic, and when the incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu), was declared the winner in 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 UN 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 into the 2007-2008 post-election violence concluded that some of the worst of it was organized by politicians and business leaders and called for a special tribunal to prosecute those crimes. After Kenya's parliament failed to create a tribunal, 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 criminal responsibility 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, which 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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

⁷ For more, see Michela Wrong, *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle-Blower*, Harper Perennial: 2010.

⁸ 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.

⁹ The Prosecutor v. Paul Gicheru, Document Containing Charges, ICC-01/09-01/20-125-Conf-AnxA, March 12, 2021.

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 that treasonous, shutting down media 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.¹⁰ Some Members of Congress and former U.S. diplomats also raised alarm.¹¹

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.¹² 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.¹³ 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. Kenya’s 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 alliance alienated some opposition voters.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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 stopped many Kikuyu from voting for him. 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.¹⁶

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

¹⁰ *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), “Maraga defends Judiciary, says court orders must be obeyed,” February 7, 2018.

¹¹ 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.

¹² *Daily Nation*, “Ruto: Handshake between Uhuru and Raila was a stab in the back,” March 6, 2022.

¹³ Macharia Gaitho, “All you need to know about the clash between Kenyatta and Ruto,” *Al Jazeera*, August 18, 2019.

¹⁴ See, e.g., *Deutsche Welle*, “Kenya’s disillusioned youth shun election,” August 5, 2022; and Nanjala Nyabola, “The Kenyan Kakistocracy,” *The Nation* (New York City), August 17, 2022.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

administration. Kenya invested heavily in election technology, including biometric registration, to improve the credibility of the process; whether it improved public trust is debated.¹⁷

2024 Protests. In June 2024, young Kenyans organized protests against the government's Finance Bill, which proposed some \$2.7 billion in additional taxes to reduce the budget deficit and borrowing.¹⁸ 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 nonessential 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.¹⁹

When police responded to the initial demonstrations, which began in mid-June, with tear gas, water cannons, arrests, and gunfire, the protests grew, and reported abductions by security forces exacerbated public anger.²⁰ 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, some protesters stormed the complex.²¹ The government controversially deployed the military in response to the unrest.²²

The protests were unprecedented in scale, and they highlighted frustration with more than taxes. Polls before the 2022 elections suggested that 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.²³ Ruto campaigned on these issues, and protesters charged that he failed to deliver. Opinion polls reflected a widespread view that cost of living had risen and the economy had further deteriorated after the elections.²⁴ Ostentatious displays of wealth by some legislators and cabinet members spurred public anger.²⁵

Ruto initially took a tough stance on what he termed "treasonous events" on June 25, but in subsequent days he withdrew the tax bill and pledged spending cuts, a pay freeze, and reforms.²⁶ The U.S. Embassy joined other Western embassies in expressing concern about the violence, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the tensions in a June 26 call with Ruto.²⁷ On July 11, Ruto dismissed his cabinet and promised the formation of a "broad-based" new government. The dramatic move underscored the pressure he and Kenyan lawmakers were facing. When the

¹⁷ *The East African*, "Polls body on the spot as Kenyans prepare for region's most expensive election," May 6, 2022; 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.

¹⁸ Job Mwaura, "Kenya protests: Gen Z shows the power of digital activism—driving change from screens to the streets," *The Conversation*, June 22, 2024.

¹⁹ *The Economist*, "A new breed of protest has left Kenya's president tottering," June 27, 2024.

²⁰ Statement by the Police Reforms Working Group Kenya, June 25, 2024.

²¹ *CNN*, "CNN witnesses protesters being shot in Kenya," July 1, 2024.

²² Reuters, "Kenyan activists rethink strategy after protests turn violent," July 4, 2024.

²³ 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.

²⁴ TIFA Research, "Year-end poll: Kenyans' Reflections of 2023," December 29, 2023.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Bloomberg, "Kenya prepares spending cuts after scrapping \$2.3 billion taxes," June 28, 2024.

²⁷ 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.

protests continued into the next month, however, Ruto accused the U.S.-based Ford Foundation of sponsoring anarchy and violence by financing civil society groups he claimed had mobilized the protests. He also reappointed several of the ministers he had initially removed. His government has since faced protests from teachers and health workers over salaries and working conditions.

At least 60 people died and over 600 were injured around the 2024 protests and over 1,370 people were arrested, according to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR).²⁸ Human rights groups have since raised growing alarm over a series of abductions and killings of government critics that they attribute to state agents and characterize as a crackdown on dissent.²⁹ As of January 2025, KNCHR had recorded 89 enforced disappearances and 63 extrajudicial killings since June 2024.³⁰ In January, Justin Muturi, a sitting cabinet member and prominent Kikuyu politician, publicly accused Kenya's National Intelligence Service (NIS) of being behind the abduction of his son during the 2024 protests. Ruto sacked him in late March.

Political Realignments. Kenya's parliament voted in October 2024 to impeach Deputy President Gachagua, who faced allegations of corruption, inciting ethnic divisions, and support for the 2024 protests. His impeachment, pushed by the president's allies, highlighted growing tensions within Ruto's Kenya Kwanza coalition and evolving political alliances. Ruto named interior minister Kithure Kindiki as his new deputy president. Gachagua, who helped mobilize Kikuyu voters to back Ruto's election, has hinted he may run against his former running mate in 2027 and has sought new partners in the opposition. Justin Muturi, Ruto's former attorney general and public service minister, leveled serious corruption allegations against Ruto in early 2025, accusing him of direct involvement in a series of controversial government deals worth over \$2 billion with India's Adani Group and in a purported 2024 money laundering scheme with Russian oligarchs.³¹ Ruto cancelled the Adani deals, worth over \$2 billion, in late 2024 after Adani's directors were charged in U.S. court with bribery and fraud. Gachagua has also accused Ruto of personal business deals with insurgent groups in DRC and Sudan (see below).

President Ruto, meanwhile, has deepened his alliance with former rival Odinga: in March 2025, Ruto announced a new agreement between his coalition and Odinga's party to collaborate and form a "broad-based government," and he appointed additional Odinga allies to senior government posts. The deal appears reminiscent of the one Kenyatta and Odinga struck in 2018.

What the political landscape will look like for the 2027 elections is still unclear, with a crowded field of potential contenders to challenge Ruto's bid for re-election, but the youth vote could be decisive. Polls and voting behavior in Kenya suggest that youth political participation declined over the past decade, but recent developments suggest that is changing. More educated than previous generations, young Kenyans are using new strategies to engage politically. The Gen Z movement, which has described itself as "tribeless" and "leaderless"—salient in a political environment long marked by ethnic identities—may be galvanizing a broader push for greater accountability among elected officials amid growing disaffection with the political class.³²

²⁸ Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), *State of Human Rights in Kenya: July 2023-November 2024*, November 20, 2024.

²⁹ KNCHR, "Surge of abductions and killings in Kenya: A call for immediate action and accountability," October 31, 2024; CNN, "Kenyan government critics mysteriously disappeared. They came back silenced.," January 9 2025; Al Jazeera, "'Very worrying': Fear stalks Kenya as dozens of government critics abducted," March 4, 2025; Defenders Coalition, State of the Nation Address by National Civil Society Organizations, Press Statement, April 14, 2025.

³⁰ Amnesty International (AI) statement on January 31, 2025 citing updated KNCHR figures.

³¹ *Citizen* (Nairobi), "'Irredeemably corrupt': Muturi drops bombshell linking President Ruto to shady multi-billion deals," April 4, 2025

³² Gabrielle Lynch, "Kenya has changed: Gen-Z protests and what they mean," *Democracy in Africa*, July 16, 2024.

LGBTQ Rights. Human rights groups have raised concern that Kenya could follow Uganda in passing strict anti-LGBTQ legislation.³³ A colonial-era law criminalizes “acts against the order of nature,” but Kenya has been a relative refuge from persecution for LGBTQ persons in East Africa. Its Supreme Court ruled in 2023 that the government’s refusal to register an LGBTQ rights group discriminated against the LGBTQ community’s rights and was unconstitutional; the court later reaffirmed the community’s right to associate. The rulings prompted a backlash, led by conservative politicians and evangelical churches, and anti-gay protests.³⁴ Ruto, who has asserted there is “no room” for homosexuality in Kenya, expressed respect for the court decision but said, “it doesn’t mean we have to agree with it.”³⁵ The stalled 2023 Family Protection Bill echoes Uganda’s anti-homosexuality law. If adopted, it would criminalize “promoting” homosexuality; 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; and prohibit LGBTQ parades and assemblies, related advocacy, and cross-dressing.

The Economy

Kenya is East Africa’s largest economy (passing Ethiopia in 2025, per the IMF) 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, fueled hardship. Efforts by the government to slow the pandemic’s spread, including a curfew, school closings, restrictions on movement, and social distancing measures, had negative impacts on livelihoods. The economy rallied, but many Kenyans are struggling due to inflation.

Former President Kenyatta sought to improve Kenya’s business environment and attract foreign investment during his tenure, but his development agenda and spending ballooned public debt.³⁶ The People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China) financed and built major infrastructure projects, including a railway and a port near the coastal town of Lamu, a UNESCO World Heritage site.³⁷ The railway cost a fifth of the national budget; 90% of it was funded with loans from China’s Export-Import Bank.³⁸ The port 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 raised concerns with the project. Plans for Kenya’s first coal-fired power plant, also in Lamu, were suspended in 2019 when a court ruled that authorities had failed to do a thorough environmental impact assessment.

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.³⁹ Ruto pledged to cut spending, promised greater

³³ Reuters, “Kenya could follow Uganda as East African nations wage war on LGBTQ rights,” June 23, 2023.

³⁴ *The Guardian*, “Kenya’s LGBTQ community wins bittersweet victory in battle for rights,” March 3, 2023.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ Charlie Mitchell, “Debt or development: What is Uhuru Kenyatta’s real legacy?” *African Business*, August 22, 2022.

³⁷ See, e.g., Abdi Latif Dahir, “The troubles of Kenya’s China-funded train,” *New York Times*, August 9, 2022.

³⁸ Jonathan Kaiman, “‘China has conquered Kenya’: Inside Beijing’s new strategy to win African hearts and minds,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 2017.

³⁹ Total public debt is estimated at \$80 billion, of which \$35 billion is owed to foreign lenders. Per the IMF’s 2023 (continued...)

transparency on loans from China, and signed up for a new IMF package to reduce debt risks.⁴⁰ The IMF offered additional funding, bringing its total commitment to over \$4.4 billion. Kenya asked China for another \$1 billion to finish stalled road projects in late 2023, and for a slower repayment schedule. The IMF lauded Ruto's initial economic reforms, but protests underscored the domestic opposition to his tax proposals, and his government has struggled with how to balance public resistance to new taxes against IMF pressure to increase tax revenue and the risk of debt default.⁴¹ 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.⁴² In March 2025, the IMF and Kenya prematurely terminated a four-year \$3.6 billion deal; Kenya seeks to negotiate a new program. The Kenyan government has, meanwhile, taken a new \$1.5 billion loan from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to help finance its budget.

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.⁴³ (Ruto has, meanwhile, continued to express support for mining Kenya's coal deposits.⁴⁴) As chair of the Committee of African Heads of State on Climate Change, he has led Africa's negotiating group at the UN 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.”⁴⁵ 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 wants to attract investment from companies seeking to build factories powered by renewable energy to reduce their carbon footprint.⁴⁶ 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. Pastoral communities were hit hard by a prolonged 2020-2022 drought in which 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 facilitated some drought recovery, but also brought devastating flooding that killed almost 300 people and displaced 280,000.⁴⁷ Some experts say poor urban

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.

⁴⁰ Reuters, “Kenya publishes loan documents for Chinese-built railway,” November 7, 2022.

⁴¹ *Deutsche Welle*, “Kenya: Bumpy first year in office for William Ruto,” September 12, 2023; *New York Times*, “Behind the deadly unrest in Kenya, a staggering and painful national debt,” June 26, 2024.

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

⁴³ 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.

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

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

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ AP, “Poor Kenyans feel devastated by floods and brutalized by the government's response,” May 11, 2024.

planning and land management have added to the country's flooding problems.⁴⁸ An estimated 2.8 million people in Kenya are expected to face high levels of acute food insecurity between April and June 2025, with over 290,000 people facing emergency levels of need in the arid north.⁴⁹

Refugee Issues. Kenya hosts roughly 837,000 refugees and asylum seekers, 87% of whom live in camps.⁵⁰ A majority are from Somalia and South Sudan, where insecurity and humanitarian need have driven refugee numbers in Kenya to rise to 475,000 and 196,000, respectively, in early 2025. The government's stance toward refugees has shifted significantly over the past decade. In 2016, the Kenyatta government declared 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 threatened to close Dadaab again in 2019 and told the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2021 that camp residents would be expelled if UNHCR did not devise a plan to close both the Dadaab and Kakuma complexes by 2022. Humanitarian activists, arguing returns to Somalia and South Sudan were not sustainable, urged the government to offer refugees durable solutions within Kenya.

The country has since adopted a progressive law that provides new opportunities, rights, and protections for refugees within Kenya. Refugee advocates say it offers a promising model for refugee integration at a time when many countries are tightening restrictions.⁵¹ The new policy, which aims to move from a camp-centric model toward one of local integration, enjoys public support, but bureaucratic impediments pose challenges to its implementation.⁵² Under the new Shirika Plan, Dadaab and Kakuma will be transformed into integrated municipalities. Over 423,000 refugees currently reside in the Dadaab camps; 302,000 live in Kakuma.

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.⁵³ The uptick occurred in parallel with a major Somali offensive against the group. Al Shabaab attacks in Kenya declined in 2024, when 188 fatalities were recorded.⁵⁴ In 2025, the AU mission in Somalia transitioned to a new mandate and name, AUSSOM, with continued Kenyan participation. AUSSOM faces funding challenges as international donors continue to differ on an AU proposal to use UN assessed contributions to support the mission, which the United States has opposed.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Sean Avery, "Kenya's devastating floods expose decades of poor urban planning and bad land management," *The Conversation*, May 1, 2024.

⁴⁹ IPC, *Kenya: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for February-March 2025 and Projection for April-June 2025*.

⁵⁰ UNHCR, *Kenya: Registered Refugees and Asylum-Seekers, as of 28 February 2025*.

⁵¹ Refugees International, *Removing Red Tape to Get Kenya's Refugee Act Right*, March 13, 2025.

⁵² *The New Humanitarian*, Kenya embraces refugee integration – and citizens are on board," April 21, 2025.

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ ACLED data.

⁵⁵ Amani Africa, "Update briefing on the status and operations of the AU Support and Stabilization Mission in (continued...)"

Alongside terrorist threats, Kenya has been plagued by pastoralist militia activity, including cattle-rustling and banditry, in the northwest.⁵⁶ The government deployed the military into the area in 2023 to curb attacks and small arms proliferation, which reduced the scale of violence, but ongoing insecurity has fueled public frustration with the police deployment to Haiti.⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸ The State Department's most recent 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 2013.⁵⁹ Missing Voices, a coalition that tracks police killings and disappearances, documented over 800 cases from 2019-2023, including 118 killings and 10 enforced disappearances in 2023.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ In 2023 and 2024, police responded to protests with violence that reportedly resulted in dozens of deaths, and senior government officials dismissed allegations of excessive force.⁶² A taskforce directed by Ruto to study police problems recommended far-reaching changes to the police and prisons services, identifying underfunding, "endemic" corruption, leadership gaps, and poor human capital management as key challenges.⁶³ 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. The Biden Administration announced \$7 million in new aid during Ruto's 2024 State Visit 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 a troubled region, hosting the talks that led to Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and facilitating negotiations on conflicts 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

Somalia," April 10, 2025; Institute for Security Studies, "Funding for Somalia's new AU peace mission hangs in the balance," February 19, 2025. See also UN Security Council Resolution 2767 (2024), December 27, 2024.

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ *The New Humanitarian*, "Kenya's security paradox: Police sent to Haiti as banditry plagues North Rift," September 4, 2024; *Nation*, "Renewed bandit attacks in Kerio Valley undermine government peace efforts," January 28, 2025.

⁵⁸ 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 UN Development Program, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, September 2017.

⁵⁹ 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.

⁶⁰ Missing Voices, *End Police Impunity—2023 Annual Report*, April 23, 2024.

⁶¹ AFP, "Kenyan police charged with crimes against humanity over 2017 crackdown," October 28, 2022.

⁶² *Citizen* (Nairobi), "Mudavadi says police brutality, use of excessive force do not happen in Kenya," February 15, 2024; and *The Standard* (Nairobi), "Interior CS Kindiki refutes claims of police brutality," July 25, 2023.

⁶³ *Report of the National Taskforce on Police Reforms*, November 2023.

ceasefire deal between Ethiopia's government and Tigray authorities in 2022 and a Kenyan general leads the AU ceasefire monitoring team there. Kenya continues its efforts to mediate among South Sudan's political and armed factions; Ruto has tapped Odinga to act as an envoy in regional efforts to deescalate the mounting tensions in the country.

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 has continued to position Kenya as a facilitator for peace talks on the eastern DRC crisis, despite apparent suspicion by some Congolese about Kenya's interests in the country. Regional leaders have tapped Kenyatta and four other former African presidents to advance the peace process.

President Ruto has also offered to facilitate talks between Sudan's warring parties, but Sudan's military government has accused him of bias toward the insurgent Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Kenya's relations with Sudan's government deteriorated in 2024 after Ruto hosted a visit by RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka "Hemedti," and hit a new low in February 2025 when Kenya allowed the RSF to hold an event to announce a parallel government in a Nairobi conference facility owned by the Kenyan government. Sudanese authorities called it "tantamount to an act of hostility."⁶⁴ Ruto's former deputy has accused him of allowing the RSF to launder money from gold through Nairobi.⁶⁵ Kenyan officials assert that they are neutral on the conflict and have called for sanctions on the warring parties' leaders for obstructing humanitarian aid.⁶⁶

In April 2025, former Deputy President Gachagua publicly alleged that Ruto was profiting from the conflicts in Sudan and DRC and helping warring factions smuggle gold from those countries through Kenya to the Middle East.⁶⁷ According to Gachagua, Ruto has had business ties with RSF leader Hemedti since 2023, and also has links with the M23 rebel group in DRC. Kenya has been named, alongside Uganda, as a hub for illicit gold flows from the region.⁶⁸

Haiti.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ The UN Security Council authorized the Multinational Security Support mission (MSS) in October 2023, with Kenyan police expected to comprise roughly half 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, 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.⁷¹ Per the High Court ruling, a "reciprocal arrangement" with a host government is required for a police

⁶⁴ *New York Times*, "Amid regional diplomatic furor, Sudan's paramilitaries forge a rival government," February 23, 2025.

⁶⁵ *Middle East Eye*, "Kenya's former vice president calls for Ruto to be sanctioned over Sudan war," April 10, 2025.

⁶⁶ *Nation*, "Mudavadi: Kenya wants warring Sudan leaders sanctions," April 16, 2025.

⁶⁷ *The Africa Report*, "Kenya: Ex-allies lambast Ruto, accuse him of war profiteering," April 11, 2025; *The Standard* (Nairobi), "Gachagua drops diplomatic bombshell on Ruto," April 8, 2025.

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, *Tarnished hope: Crime and corruption in South Sudan's gold sector*, May 31, 2023;

⁶⁹ 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*.

⁷⁰ Foreign Minister Alfred Mutua (@DrAlfredMutua), X Post, July 29, 2023.

⁷¹ *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.

deployment. Kenyan and Haitian officials subsequently signed that agreement in March 2024, but when Haiti's prime minister subsequently resigned amid escalating gang activity, Kenya paused the deployment. The first contingent deployed in late June 2024, following the formation of a new Haitian government. As of April 2025, the MSS had only reached 40% of its planned force strength, with over 700 Kenyan police deployed. Kenya suffered its first fatality in February.

Israel/Gaza. Kenya has long-standing ties with Israel, which Kenyan officials call a “special partnership.”⁷² Ruto expressed solidarity with Israel over the October 2023 attacks by Hamas, but faces domestic pressure over Israel's military operations in Gaza.⁷³ Kenya often votes in support of Israeli positions at the United Nations, but has also voted in favor of full UN membership for Palestine. Kenya supported 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 UN Security Council.⁷⁴ 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 Africa.⁷⁵ Ruto did not attend Russia's 2023 Africa Summit, and in early 2024, Kenya joined the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, a coalition of countries that supports the defense of Ukraine.

China. China is Kenya's largest trading partner and largest bilateral lender. PRC loans, estimated at over \$8 billion, account for almost 17% of the country's external debt (the World Bank is Kenya's largest external creditor).⁷⁶ While Ruto has sought to strengthen U.S. ties, he has also sought to maintain a “robust friendship” with China, despite his anti-China rhetoric during his campaign.⁷⁷ When Ruto was Kenyatta's deputy, their coalition cultivated ties with the Communist Party of China, an effort Ruto's party continued after his election.⁷⁸ Ruto attended China's 2023 Belt and Road Forum and its Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2024, and in April 2025, China hosted him for a state visit. China's foreign ministry described the visit, the first by an African leader since FOCAC, as aimed at deepening the bilateral relationship and “promoting the solidarity and cooperation of the Global South.”⁷⁹ Ruto, for his part, sought funding for new infrastructure projects, cooperation on green energy initiatives, trade deals, better loan terms, and China's support for reforms to multilateral institutions.⁸⁰ Chinese companies reportedly signed

⁷² *The East African*, “Kenya, Israel agree to enhance cooperation on health and security,” July 29, 2021.

⁷³ *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.

⁷⁴ *NPR*, “Kenyan U.N. Ambassador compares Ukraine's plight to colonial legacy in Africa,” February 22, 2022.

⁷⁵ *BBC*, “Russia's grain deal exit is a stab in the back—Kenya,” July 18, 2023.

⁷⁶ Fergus Kell, “Kenya's debt struggles go far deeper than Chinese loans,” Chatham House, May 31, 2023; Africa Center for Open Governance, *Kenya's Debt Treadmill: The China Portfolio 2000-2024*, December 2024.

⁷⁷ 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.

⁷⁸ *CapitalFM*, “Kenya: UDA seeks support of Communist Party of China to Strengthen Structures,” August 17, 2023.

⁷⁹ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Conference, April 17, 2025.

⁸⁰ *Citizen*, “Inside President Ruto's China State visit,” April 20, 2025. *Star* (Nairobi), “President Ruto takes the mic in Beijing, calls for global shake-up,” April 23, 2025.

deals worth \$823 million in new investments. In polls, Kenyans have expressed greater support for the United States as a model than the PRC, but a majority of Kenyans view China positively.⁸¹

Renditions. Human rights groups have expressed alarm over a series of abductions and renditions of foreign dissidents from Kenya, which Amnesty International describes as part of a “growing and worrying trend in transitional repression.”⁸² Several prominent cases were reported in 2024, including the rendition of Ugandan opposition leader Kizza Besigye in November, four Turkish refugees in October (seven Turkish nationals were abducted; three were released), and 36 Ugandan opposition supporters in July.⁸³ A Rwandan human rights defender, Yusuf Ahmed Gasana, and a South Sudanese dissident, Morris Mabior Awikjok Bak, were abducted in Kenya and forcibly returned to their countries in 2023. Bak’s rendition followed several renditions to South Sudan during Kenyatta’s term; Bak, like the other South Sudanese, was registered as a refugee in Kenya. In January 2025, Tanzanian activist Maria Sarungi Tsehai, a prominent critic of her country’s government, was abducted by unknown assailants in Nairobi but released several hours later. What role, if any, Kenyan security officials played in these incidents is debated, but the cases may tarnish Kenya’s reputation as a relative safe haven in the region.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ Kenya lost an estimated \$1 billion in tourism-related revenue during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁸¹ Per a 2024 survey, 78% of Kenyans have a favorable view of the United States, while 73% have a favorable view of China. Pew Research Center, “More people view the U.S. positively than China across 35 surveyed countries,” July 9, 2024; Afrobarometer, “Africans welcome China’s influence but maintain democratic aspirations,” November 15, 2021.

⁸² AI, “Uganda: Opposition politician’s abduction in Kenya continues a ‘growing and worrying trend in transitional repression,’” November 20, 2024.

⁸³ OHCHR, Comment by UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk on abduction of Ugandan opposition leader Kizza Besigye,” November 21, 2024; BBC, “UN ‘deeply concerned’ Kenya returned Turkish refugees,” October 21, 2024.

⁸⁴ *The Africa Report*, “Is Kenya the new haven for international abductions?” January 17, 2025; BBC, “‘We live in fear – forced expulsions taint Kenya’s safe haven image,’” November 6, 2024; VOA, “Top Kenyan official claims Kenya is ‘safe haven’ as cases of state-sanctioned abductions surge,” November 28, 2024.

⁸⁵ Andres Schipani, “How Kenya turned the tide against ivory poachers,” *Financial Times*, April 27, 2021.

⁸⁶ Bloomberg, “Kenya tourism earnings jump 32% to surpass pre-pandemic level,” March 30, 2024.

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.⁸⁷ Among other environmental initiatives, 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.⁸⁸

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 American tourists. U.S. Embassy Nairobi is designated a high-threat, high-risk post, given terrorism concerns, and 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 two decades. The ICC cases were a point of friction, and President 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.

Relations continued to improve under the Biden Administration. Kenya was the opening stop on Antony Blinken's first trip to sub-Saharan Africa as Secretary of State, and 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, when a memorandum of understanding on civil nuclear cooperation was signed. First Lady Jill Biden visited Kenya in early 2023, and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin went to Kenya on his first sub-Saharan Africa tour in 2023, during which a five-year Framework for Defense Cooperation was finalized. The Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation Directors both visited in 2024.

The Biden Administration 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,

⁸⁷ Lisa Fuchs, "Kenya's logging ban has been lifted—it's a political decision and a likely setback for conservation," *The Conversation*, July 22, 2023.

⁸⁸ NPR, "The toughest plastic bag ban is failing: A tale of smugglers, dumps and dying goats," August 9, 2023.

among other issues.⁸⁹ They announced new initiatives on education, climate action, clean energy, carbon management, and sustainable development, and unveiled a partnership on semiconductor manufacturing in Kenya to strengthen the global supply chain. They launched the Nairobi-Washington Vision, which called on the international community to help developing countries manage debt while investing in economic growth. The Biden Administration 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, recognized Kenya's strategic importance to the United States and celebrated the 60th anniversary of bilateral ties.

President Biden's ambassador to Kenya, prominent American business executive Meg Whitman, focused on pitching Kenya to U.S. businesses and investors, and trade and investment were top priorities for Kenya during Ruto's State Visit.⁹⁰ 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 visit that brought the DFC's Kenya portfolio to over \$1 billion. The Biden Administration, instead of continuing FTA negotiations, pursued a Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership (STIP) with Kenya, which the U.S. Trade Representative described as an "ambitious roadmap for enhanced cooperation." For more, see CRS In Focus IF11526, *U.S.-Kenya Trade Negotiations*.

U.S. goods trade with Kenya totaled \$1.5 billion in 2024, with over \$782 million in U.S. exports to Kenya, up over 61% from 2023, and \$727 million in imports from Kenya. The U.S. goods trade surplus for 2024 was over \$45 million. Kenya has been a leading exporter under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) trade preference program and the largest textile exporter to the United States under AGOA. The country now faces a 10% tariff on exports to the United States per the Trump Administration's April 2025 trade action. Kenya has appealed for the extension of AGOA, which expires in September, and sought relief from the U.S. tariff decision, sending a delegation to negotiate trade terms with U.S. officials in mid-April.⁹¹ The U.S. Trade Representative highlighted Kenya's 50% tariff on imports of U.S. corn and "burdensome regulatory requirements" on corn imports among "unfair trade practices" facing U.S. exporters.⁹²

The Trump Administration's stance toward Kenya appears positive, despite the trade dispute. Secretary of State Rubio has spoken repeatedly with President Ruto and lauded Kenya's role in the turbulent region. Rubio and Ruto have discussed the conflicts in DRC, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan, and Rubio has expressed appreciation for Kenya's Haiti deployment. The Trump Administration's aid cuts and decision to close the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have implications for U.S. relations with the country, although the full impact of assistance cuts in Kenya is not yet clear.

U.S. Assistance. Kenya has routinely been among the top recipients of U.S. foreign aid in sub-Saharan Africa. The Biden Administration allocated roughly \$477 million in FY2023 bilateral aid for Kenya, largely focused on HIV/AIDS and other health programs; more than \$340 million in FY2023/FY2024 emergency humanitarian aid; and over \$60 million in FY2023/FY2024 for early recovery, risk reduction, and resilience (ER4) food security programs.⁹³ With U.S. assistance, the

⁸⁹ White House, *Fact Sheet: Kenya State Visit to the United States*, May 23, 2024.

⁹⁰ Nahal Toosi, "Meg Whitman's trying to be a different kind of US ambassador. Washington is noticing," *POLITICO*, May 22, 2024.

⁹¹ See, e.g., William Ruto (@WilliamsRuto), X post, March 26, 2025.

⁹² U.S. Trade Representative (@USTradeRep), X post, April 7, 2025.

⁹³ USAID, *Kenya Assistance Overview*, August 2024. For aid obligations, see foreignassistance.gov/cd/kenya/.

World Food Program has been supporting approximately 650,000 refugees in Kenya with food rations. The Biden Administration requested over \$496 million in bilateral aid for FY2025.

The United States has been 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 2000-2020.⁹⁴ The United States has cumulatively invested over \$8 billion there under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) since 2003. From 2013 to 2023, HIV infections in Kenya fell 78% and related deaths dropped by 68%. The U.S. Embassy reported in 2023 that Kenya, which has roughly 1.4 million people living with HIV-AIDS, was 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).⁹⁵

Some implementers of U.S.-funded health programs in Kenya have reported that the Trump Administration's suspension of most U.S. foreign assistance in late January 2025 has constrained their ability to maintain programs, despite public directives from Secretary Rubio to continue life-saving activities, including under PEPFAR.⁹⁶ Reports suggest dozens of aid contracts in Kenya have been terminated, although the Administration has not published data on how much aid previously obligated for Kenya has been affected.⁹⁷ PEPFAR represents over half of the funding for Kenya's HIV programming, and while the United States and Kenya were planning a transition toward self-sustainability for the HIV response by 2030, the abrupt changes have reportedly left Kenyan health authorities struggling to find nearly \$260 million to sustain critical programs.⁹⁸

UNAIDS reported in April 2025 that the U.S. funding disruption had resulted in HIV treatment facilities working at reduced capacity, human resource shortfalls, and HIV prevention programs scaled down.⁹⁹ Per UNAIDS, roughly 41,500 health care and community health workers funded under PEPFAR in Kenya were sent home or directed to stop work under the initial freeze; by the end of March, 11,000 of them were back at work.¹⁰⁰ The U.S. funding freeze has also reportedly affected tuberculosis treatment and malaria programs in Kenya.¹⁰¹ Kenya's health ministry has reportedly warned President Ruto that U.S. aid disruptions have triggered a "domino effect that imperils every link in the healthcare chain."¹⁰²

The U.S. assistance disruptions have implications beyond the health sector. In early March, protesters and police clashed in Kakuma refugee camp after the World Food Program reduced rations due to funding shortfalls.¹⁰³ U.S. assistance for wildlife conservation, primary education, food security, anti-corruption, and election integrity in Kenya are among the contracts reportedly

⁹⁴ State Department, "The United States and Kenya: Strategic Partners," November 16, 2021. Alongside U.S. foreign assistance programs, 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 donated over 12 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Kenya.

⁹⁵ U.S. Embassy Nairobi, "PEPFAR in Kenya," August 10, 2023, available at <https://ke.usembassy.gov/pepfar/>.

⁹⁶ See, e.g., *Washington Post*, "Trump's PEPFAR cuts upend the lives of Kenyan families battling HIV," April 5, 2025.

⁹⁷ Justin Sandefur and Charles Kenny, "USAID Cuts: New Estimates at the Country Level," Center for Global Development, March 26, 2025.

⁹⁸ *Washington Post*, "Trump's PEPFAR cuts upend the lives of Kenyan families battling HIV," April 5, 2025.

⁹⁹ UNAIDS, "Impact of US funding freeze on HIV programmes in Kenya," April 5, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ *Washington Post*, "Trump's PEPFAR cuts upend the lives of Kenyan families battling HIV," April 5, 2025.

¹⁰¹ *New York Times*, "Tuberculosis resurgent as Trump funding cut disrupts treatment globally," March 11, 2025.

¹⁰² Devex, "Kenyan govt internal memo warns of 'domino effect' of US health cuts," March 26, 2025.

¹⁰³ *POLITICO*, "People will die': UN food aid agency warns Trump-led Western donor cuts will see millions starve," March 21, 2025.

terminated.¹⁰⁴ An analysis of the reported cuts by the Center for Global Development suggests that the Trump Administration has terminated roughly \$225 million in assistance for Kenya.¹⁰⁵

Security Cooperation. The United States has supported an array of efforts to help build Kenya's capacity to counter terrorist attacks, secure its borders, and foster police accountability. The extent to which these programs are affected by the foreign assistance changes in 2025 is not yet clear. Kenya has been 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.¹⁰⁶ Separately, the Department of Defense (DOD) has notified Congress of over \$400 million in CT "train and equip" support to Kenya in the past decade, including to support its role as a major troop contributor in the AU mission in Somalia. State Department-funded security assistance has also supported Kenya's deployment to Somalia, and ongoing deliberations over funding for AUSSOM have implications for the future of that mission. The Massachusetts National Guard is paired with Kenya in the State Partnership Program.

The Biden Administration was a leading advocate for the MSS mission in Haiti and Kenya's role in it. Under Biden, the State Department and DOD pledged over \$380 million in support for the mission to facilitate training, equipment, logistics and life support services, and salary support for participating officers; the Biden Administration reportedly overrode congressional holds in mid-2024 to obligate some of that funding for Kenya's deployment.¹⁰⁷ Some Members of Congress have expressed reservations about the mission, but Secretary Rubio stated in his confirmation hearing that Kenyans "deserve a lot of credit for being willing to take on that mission," and he asserted in early 2025 that the United States would continue to support the MSS and that such support would be excepted from the Administration's aid freeze.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, U.S. officials have asserted that "America cannot continue shouldering such a significant financial burden," and have called on other international donors to step up support.¹⁰⁹ The Administration has not indicated how much additional assistance, if any, it plans to provide for Kenya's deployment. Kenya reported in April 2025 that it has over 260 police officers trained and ready to join the mission, but they lack the equipment and logistical support to deploy.¹¹⁰

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¹⁰⁴ Devex, "How the US foreign aid freeze threatens African conservation work," February 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Sandefur and Kenny, "USAID cuts: New estimates at the country level."

¹⁰⁶ Reuters, "After Westgate Debacle, Quick End to Latest Kenyan Attack Shows Progress," January 20, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Risch on Biden Admin's Decision to Override Congress on Haiti MSS Funding," June 20, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ SFRC, Hearing on Pending Nominations, January 15, 2025; and State Department, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Dominican President Luis Abinader at a Joint Press Availability, February 6, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ US. Mission to the United Nations, Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Haiti, April 21, 2025.

¹¹⁰ Associated Press, "Haiti could face total chaos without more international support, UN envoy warns," April 21, 2025.

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