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Demonstrators try to obstruct a police vehicle as police use water cannons to disperse protesters during a demonstration in Nairobi June 25, 2024, against Kenya's proposed finance bill to raise taxes. After Parliament passed the measure, it was sent to Kenyan President William Ruto for his signature or other action. In the face of chaos, Ruto rejected the bill June 26. (OSV News/Monicah Mwang, Reuters)

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NAIROBI, Kenya — July 17, 2024
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Catholic bishops in Kenya are urging protesting youth to accept dialogue, while reminding them that remaining intolerant could push the country into anarchy.

On July 16, the youth staged more demonstrations across the country, with police using tear gas to break up the marches. The Kenyan youth protests ignited in June in opposition to a controversial tax law dubbed a finance bill for 2024. But after protesting for nearly a month, the youth have since expanded their demands to more reforms in the political, governance and economic sectors, while rejecting government calls for dialogue.

Organizing themselves under the Generation Z banner, the youth have charged that they are leaderless, belong to no tribe and are fearless. Marching on the streets, the youth carry mobile phones and a Kenyan flag.

"We, therefore, request that you open up yourselves for inclusive conversations so that you are also enriched by perspectives that may not be obvious to you," said Archbishop Anthony Muheria of Nyeri, while reading part of the bishops' statement at a press conference on July 15.

The statement also addressed other issues, including the fight against corruption, police brutality, abductions and respect for places of worship, among others.

"There is a real risk that as you push for a truly transformative system agenda, you become intolerant to ideas and visions that are not similar to yours," said Kenyan bishops.

Muheria urged the youth to allow the bishops to correct them on some vulgar and improper slogans used in the demonstrations.

"We ask you to be cautious that you do not hurt others, which might turn against your great agenda for the country," he said.

The latest bishops' statement comes amid growing public anger over killings, abductions and the disappearance of the protesting young people. Officials said at least 40 of them have died so far in the protests and hundreds are injured.

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The "lawlessness by law enforcers, the horrible and graphic images of abductions we have witnessed in the past three weeks are disheartening," said the statement, signed by Archbishop Maurice Muhatia Makumba of Kisumu, president of the Kenya bishops' conference, in the presence of 29 other bishops.

"We are a country with laws that govern how law and order should be dispensed. This is illegal and criminal. It must stop," the bishops said about violent abductions.

Protests culminated in storming of parliament on June 25 but are now again intensifying despite the fact that President William Ruto withdrew the bill, and a pay rise for legislators and other senior government officials was discarded days later. Recently Ruto sacked the entire cabinet and forced the head of police to resign.

Ruto has since blamed the American Ford Foundation for allegedly funding the protests in Kenya. The organization, established in 1936 by Edsel Ford, the son of Ford Motor Co. founder Henry Ford, operates across the world and aims to advance social justice and promote democratic values.

The U.S.-based foundation rejected accusations by Kenyan president July 16, saying: "We do not fund or sponsor the recent protests against the finance bill."

It said the organization — which has distributed grants to civil and rights groups in the country for decades — maintained a "strictly non-partisan policy for all of our grantmaking."

While it said the Ford Foundation supported Kenyans' rights to peaceful advocacy, "we repudiate any actions or speech that are hateful or advocate violence against any institution, individual, or community," AFP reported.

The Kenyan bishops want the president to consult widely and prioritize the integrity of the people he will choose for his new cabinet. They urged to review all other public appointments.

"The new appointments should inspire hope and a fresh start. Besides, they should reflect the face of Kenya as demanded in the Constitution," said the statement.

Meanwhile, the actions of Kenya youth are inspiring others in African countries to protest. In Nigeria, posters have gone up announcing 10 days of protest to demand better governance. Similar announcements are being made in Malawi and Uganda.