The Chronicle

WEEKLY

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Why Kenya can't arrest its way out of political violence

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How Kenyan By-Elections Became Proxy Wars

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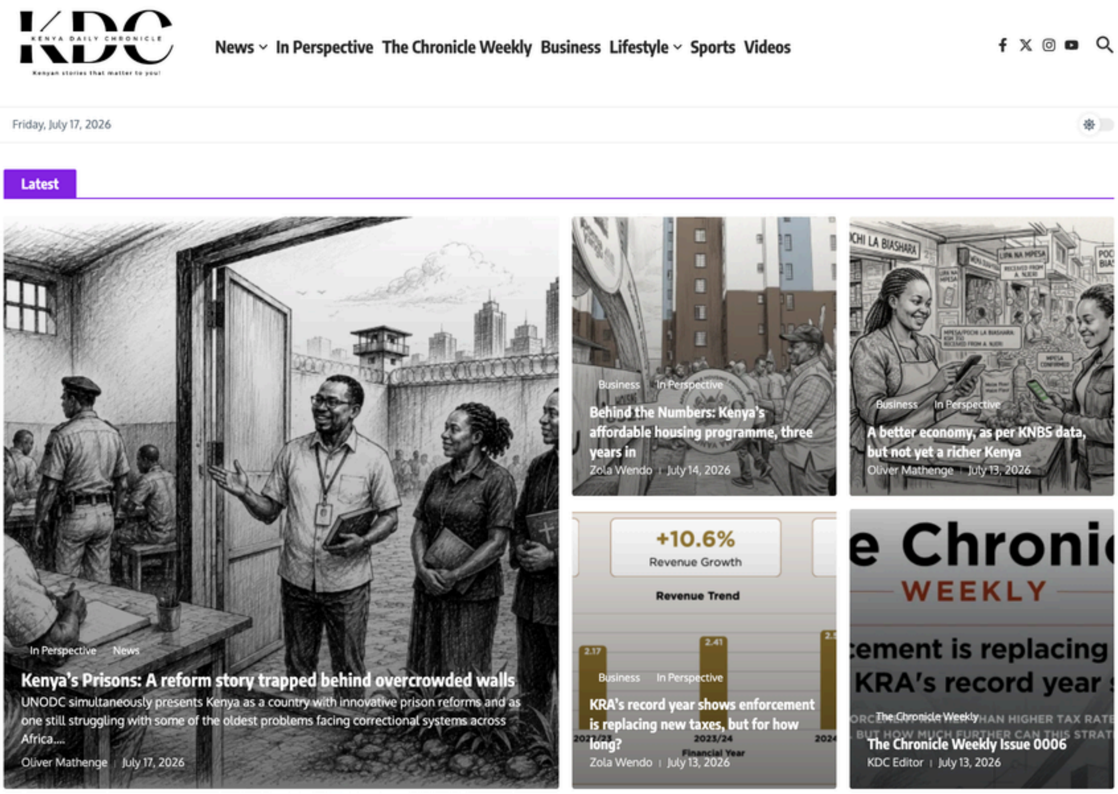

The Chronicle Weekly is the flagship publication of the Kenya Daily Chronicle, Kenya's trusted digital news platform owned by StrategiCrest Ltd.

While the Kenya Daily Chronicle delivers a mix of breaking news and real-time updates across politics, business, health, sports, and lifestyle, the Weekly is its considered, curated counterpart; a deeper read for audiences who want more than headlines.

Published every Monday, The Chronicle Weekly distils the most important stories of the preceding week into a single, authoritative edition. It brings together the Kenya Daily Chronicle's signature editorial strengths: rigorous political reporting, sharp business analysis, contextual perspectives, and vibrant community coverage, in a format designed to be read, saved, and shared.

The Chronicle Weekly occupies a distinct space in Kenya's media landscape: it is neither a wire-driven news feed nor a long-form magazine, but a weekly newspaper of record; structured, comprehensive, and grounded in the journalistic values that define the Kenya Daily Chronicle. Every edition is built around the belief that informed Kenyans make better decisions, stronger communities, and a more accountable nation.

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Editorial Note

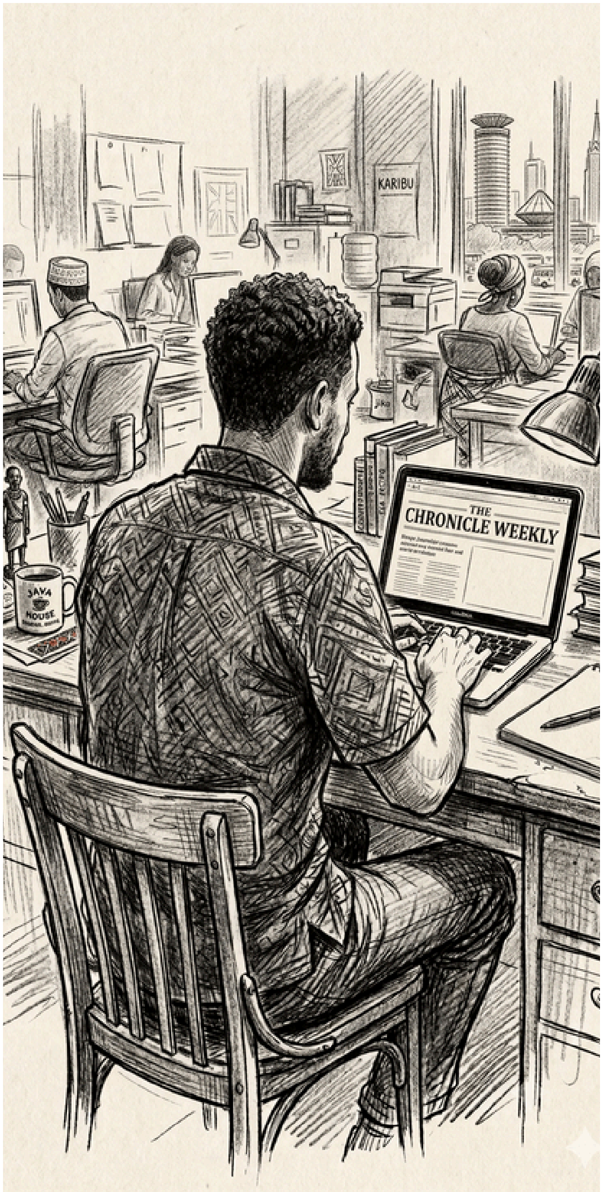
This week, we lead with a question the government would rather we didn't ask: not "how do we stop the goons," but "who is paying them, and why does no administration ever find out?"

Our cover story argues that Kenya's political violence is not a security failure but a functioning labour market, one that recruits easily because it pays better than casual work, and survives because the people with the power to shut it down often have no incentive to.

Every crackdown arrests the workers. Almost none touches the employers. That asymmetry is not an accident. It is the story. It felt right to run that piece alongside two others that, on the surface, look unrelated. Our data story on the 2027 electoral map shows registration numbers redrawing where political power will actually be contested, Nairobi, Kiambu, an emerging swing corridor most campaigns haven't started paying attention to yet.

And our Politics feature on Ol Kalou asks why a single parliamentary by-election, in a constituency of fewer than 100,000 voters, drew Cabinet Secretaries, live national television coverage and the full weight of two rival camps.

The connection is not incidental. As by-elections turn into proxy wars for 2027 and swing counties multiply, the incentive to control physical space through mobilisation, intimidation and street muscle, rather than argument, will only grow.



Goonism, the permanent campaign and the shifting electoral map are not three separate stories. They are one story about how power is being contested in Kenya right now.

Elsewhere in this issue, we turn to a quieter but related theme: who builds things, and who gets to claim them. In Business, we look at a shift already reshaping the digital economy, platforms starting to reward originality over recycled content, and what it might mean for a Kenyan creator economy still largely built on aggregation.

Our Life & Culture desk asks why Kenyan fashion, despite genuine talent, still hasn't broken onto the global stages that Nigerian and South African designers now treat as routine.

And in Sports, as Talanta Sports City rises and Kasarani is rebuilt ahead of AFCON 2027, we ask the harder question hiding behind the ribbon-cuttings: are we building stadiums, or an industry that can sustain them once the tournament ends?

The thread running through all five is the same one that runs through most of what we publish: power and infrastructure, political, physical, digital, institutional, are easy to claim and hard to hold accountable. Rallies get staged. Concrete gets poured. Credit gets claimed. The harder work, of following the money and the incentives, gets left for later.

We'd rather do it now.

Kenya Daily Chronicle Team

Why Kenya can't arrest its way out of political violence

When Interior Cabinet Secretary Kipchumba Murkomen declared that the government was dismantling politically sponsored criminal gangs, the statement reflected an increasingly familiar rhythm in Kenyan politics.

Every few years, usually after violence erupts on television screens or public outrage reaches a tipping point, the State promises to restore order. Police operations intensify. Hundreds are arrested. Weapons are seized. Politicians condemn "goons." The cycle appears to reset.

Yet by the next election, or sometimes the next major demonstration, a new generation of organised street gangs has emerged.

This is the paradox at the centre of Kenya's politics. The country does not suffer from a shortage of crackdowns. It suffers from an abundance of incentives that reproduce the very violence those crackdowns are supposed to eliminate.

The uncomfortable truth is that Kenya's goon economy is less a security failure than a functioning political marketplace. It operates because it satisfies demand. It recruits because there is an abundant supply, and it survives because those with the power to dismantle it often benefit from its continued existence.

The men throwing stones on the streets are the most visible part of the enterprise. They are also the least important. The real story lies several layers above them.

Political Service

Political campaigns have changed dramatically over the past two decades. Mass party structures have weakened while grassroots ideological mobilisation has largely disappeared.

Political party membership cards now matter less than WhatsApp groups, and permanent political organisations have increasingly given way to temporary campaign machines assembled every electoral cycle. That transformation has created an entire informal industry around politics.

We have consultants organising rallies, digital influencers manufacturing narratives, transport contractors ferrying supporters, event companies building stages, and somewhere within this ecosystem are individuals whose job is to provide something less visible but often equally valuable: physical control of political space.

Sometimes that means filling rallies with cheering crowds, escorting politicians through hostile neighbourhoods, disrupting opponents' meetings, and intimidating communities perceived to support rival candidates.

Sometimes it escalates into outright violence leading to death, injuries and destruction of property.

The Incentive Scorecard: Who currently has incentives to reduce political violence?		
Actor	**Incentive to Stop Goons**	**Incentive to Use Them**
National Government	Medium	Medium
County Governments	High	Low–Medium
Political Parties	Low	High
Police	Medium	Low
IEBC	High	Low
Youth	High	Low (if alternative livelihoods exist)
Financiers	Very Low	High

Viewed this way, organised political violence is not an aberration. It is another outsourced campaign service where the methods change, but the incentive structure does not.

Labour Market Nobody Talks About

Markets require supply, and Kenya has no shortage when it comes to goons and political violence. Nearly every conversation about politically organised violence eventually arrives at the same demographic reality: young men with limited economic opportunities.

Across informal settlements and rapidly growing urban centres, thousands survive on casual work that disappears as quickly as it appears. Construction sites hire by the day, motorcycle transport is increasingly saturated, small businesses struggle, and formal employment remains elusive for many school leavers and graduates alike.

As a result, politics fills part of that vacuum where campaign seasons create temporary employment opportunities, unlike almost any other sector.

So we see crowds hired, marches organised, posters are distributed, online accounts sought to amplify messaging, security is provided, and opponents are heckled. Sometimes violence becomes another line item within the campaign budget.

This should not be read as a moral defence of those who participate. It is an economic explanation, as people generally respond to incentives which the politics supply.

When a day's mobilisation pays more than a week's casual labour, recruitment becomes remarkably easy.

That is why every election appears to produce new faces rather than exhausting the old ones, and the labour pool constantly replenishes itself.

Arresting Workers While Ignoring Employers

Government responses overwhelmingly target the visible end of the chain. At every cycle, police arrest young men carrying clubs, weapons are confiscated, videos circulate showing suspects lying face down on roads and press conferences announce victories.

These operations are necessary because in any civilised society, violent crime deserves enforcement. But these operations rarely answer the more important question: Who paid them?

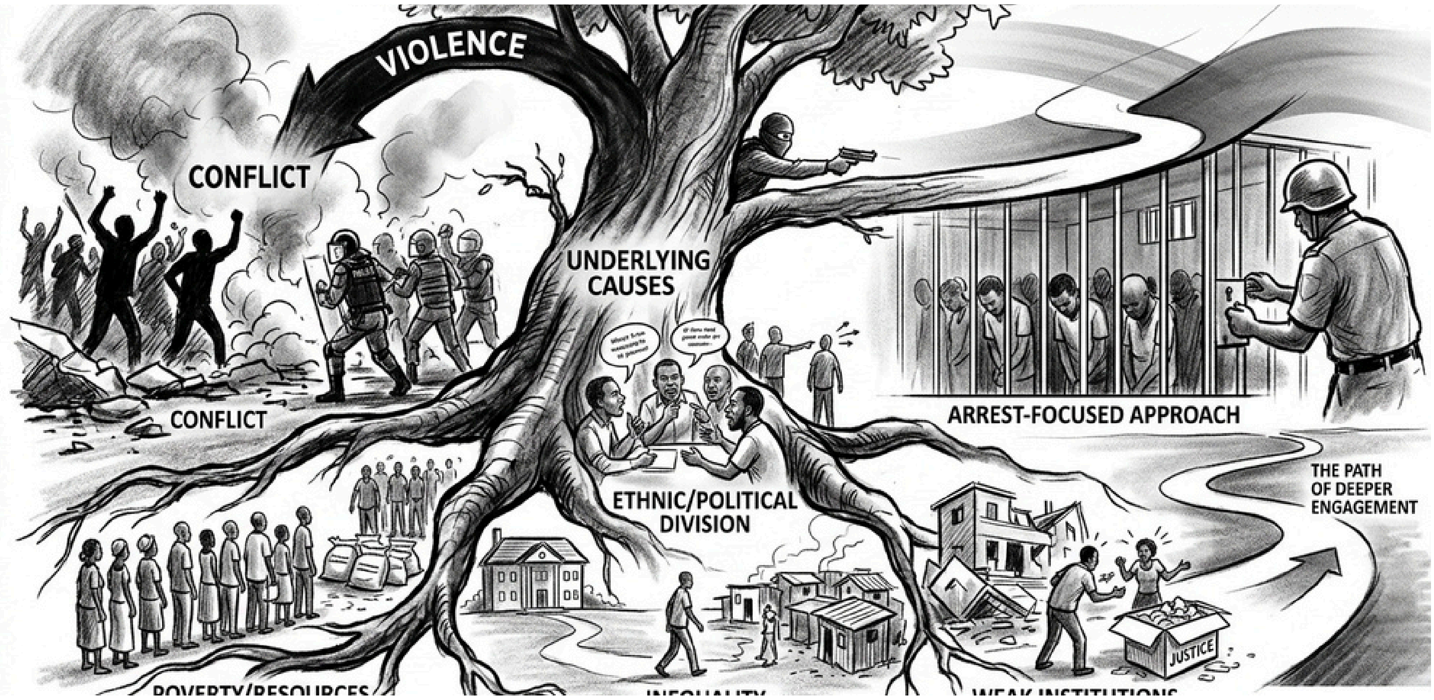
Political violence is one of the few organised enterprises where investigators often stop at the employee.

This is akin to dismantling organised fraud by arresting only bank clerks or fighting illegal mining by prosecuting only truck drivers.

This is often how Kenya approaches political violence, where the financiers remain elusive, and the organisers disappear.

The political violence procurement chain receives remarkably little sustained scrutiny.

Without disrupting financing, enforcement merely raises the operating costs of recruitment for a few weeks before the market adjusts.



The State's Contradiction

This creates an institutional contradiction that no administration has fully resolved. The State has an obvious interest in maintaining public order. Political actors, however, often compete within a system that rewards demonstrations of physical dominance, numerical strength and territorial control.

These incentives do not always align, and successive election cycles have produced allegations, sometimes investigated, often disputed, of politicians sponsoring gangs, local power brokers mobilising youth groups, and security agencies failing to intervene decisively during politically charged confrontations.

In some widely reported incidents, observers have questioned whether police response was delayed, selective, or appeared to coexist uneasily with armed civilian groups. Such episodes have fuelled public perceptions of impunity even where legal accountability has been limited.

The point is not that every politician recruits goons or that every police officer tolerates them. The point is that the political system has repeatedly struggled to impose meaningful costs on those who organise and finance violence. As long as those costs remain low, the market persists.

Counties May Hold One Clue

Interestingly, the most promising interventions have not primarily come from dramatic national security operations.

They have emerged, unevenly, at the county level. Several county governments have expanded CCTV networks, formalised boda boda operations, strengthened community policing structures and invested in youth employment initiatives designed to reduce recruitment into criminal networks.

None of these programmes eliminates political violence, but they attack something national crackdowns often ignore: the supply chain. Every young person earning a stable income represents one less recruit available to political entrepreneurs.

Every transparent licensing system weakens criminal intermediaries, and a functioning local institution raises the transaction costs of organising violence. But these are incremental changes, and markets respond to incremental incentives.

Before 2027

Kenya has less than a year before the country enters the most politically intense phase of the next general election.

The temptation will be to repeat familiar tactics; more police deployments, more arrests, more declarations that criminal gangs have been defeated, despite history suggesting that will not be enough.

Political violence survives because it is economically rational for those who fund it and financially attractive for those who participate in it.

Breaking that cycle requires making sponsorship more expensive than recruitment. That means following campaign money, investigating financiers and strengthening election offence prosecutions.

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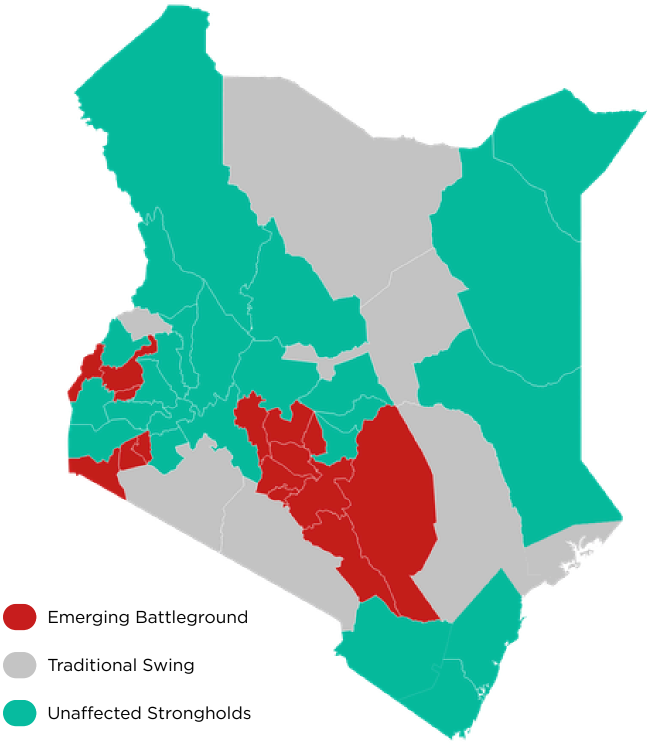
2027 polls: The changing face of Kenya's electoral map



For much of Kenya's multiparty history, presidential elections have followed a remarkably predictable script. The arithmetic rarely changed. Candidates assembled regional and ethnic voting blocs, secured their traditional strongholds, competed over a handful of swing counties and waited for the numbers to add themselves up. By the time campaigns officially began, most of the electoral map had already been coloured in.

That was certainly true in 2022. William Ruto's victory rested on one of the clearest coalition equations in recent political history. Mount Kenya and the North Rift supplied roughly two-thirds of his total vote, while Raila Odinga dominated Nyanza, much of Western Kenya and the Coast.

Only a small cluster of counties, including Narok, Kajiado, Marsabit, Isiolo and Trans Nzoia, remained genuinely competitive. Everything else behaved almost exactly as political tradition suggested it would.

Four years later, that electoral map no longer exists.

What has emerged instead is a far more complicated political landscape where historical loyalties are colliding with internal party fractures, demographic change and rapid urbanisation.

The result is that Kenya heads towards the 2027 General Election with three electoral maps layered on top of one another: the traditional map of ethnic alliances, a new map of fractured political loyalties, and a rapidly evolving demographic map driven by population growth and voter registration.

None of them, on its own, is sufficient to explain where State House will be won or lost.

End of Safe Strongholds

The first and perhaps most dramatic transformation has occurred in Mount Kenya. For nearly two decades, the region has functioned as a remarkably disciplined voting bloc.

Once political consensus emerged, counties from Kiambu to Nyeri, Murang'a, Kirinyaga and Nyandarua generally moved together. That unity delivered overwhelming margins for Uhuru Kenyatta in 2013 and 2017 before transferring almost wholesale to William Ruto in 2022, when some counties handed him more than 80 per cent of the presidential vote.

Rigathi Gachagua's impeachment as Deputy President in October 2024 fundamentally altered the region's political dynamics. Rather than retreating quietly, Gachagua transformed himself into the focal point of opposition within the very region that had powered Ruto's rise.

Through his Democracy for the Citizens Party (DCP), endorsements of rival candidates and an aggressive political campaign centred on Wamunyoro, he has recast the 2022 vote not as a triumph but as a mistake that Mount Kenya must now correct.

President Ruto, meanwhile, has responded with repeated development tours, infrastructure promises and direct appeals to voters, insisting that his relationship with the region extends beyond his former deputy.

Whether Gachagua ultimately succeeds is almost secondary. The political consequences are already evident: counties once regarded as safely within Ruto's column have become genuine battlegrounds.

But the second disruption to Kenya's electoral arithmetic came from an entirely different direction.

Raila Odinga's death in October 2025 removed not simply an opposition candidate but the central figure around whom one of Kenya's most durable political coalitions had been organised for three decades.

ODM suddenly found itself without the individual capable of balancing competing regional interests, managing internal disagreements and speaking authoritatively for the wider opposition.

Although the party has formally maintained its support for the broad-based arrangement with President Ruto, it has deliberately postponed making a definitive decision on its 2027 presidential direction.

That uncertainty leaves an unprecedented political vacuum across Nyanza and parts of Western Kenya. Counties that routinely delivered overwhelming margins for Raila Odinga now face a question they have never previously had to answer: if Raila is absent from the ballot, where do those votes go?

They may remain within ODM. They may fragment among regional leaders. They may reluctantly support President Ruto. Or turnout itself may decline.

None of those outcomes can yet be predicted with confidence, but the assumption that Nyanza automatically belongs to one coalition has become far less certain than it once appeared.

Where the Votes Are Growing

If these political realignments represent one layer of Kenya's changing electoral map, demographics represent another.

The IEBC's Enhanced Continuous Voter Registration exercise added approximately 2.35 million new voters ahead of the 2027 elections.

On paper, that appears to be a routine administrative statistic. In practice, however, the geographical distribution of those new registrations reveals where political influence is increasingly concentrated.

New Voters as % of Unregistered Voting-Age Population (Top 10 Counties)

County	New Voters	Reg. Voters (2025)	Pop Aged 18+	Unregistered 18+	ECVR Capture Rate
Tharaka-Nithi	26,284	233,083	272,931	40,999	**64.11%**
Lamu	9,481	82,003	96,816	15,363	**61.71%**
Kirinyaga	36,617	378,111	438,136	62,135	**58.93%**
Tana River	19,479	141,187	174,305	33,209	**58.66%**
Nyeri	46,552	484,293	569,756	88,124	**52.83%**
Taita Taveta	23,121	184,111	233,052	51,225	**45.14%**
Elgeyo-Marakwet	29,740	214,348	280,193	66,309	**44.85%**
Murang'a	49,791	627,066	740,338	119,409	**41.70%**
Nairobi City	276,886	2,452,358	3,136,008	720,698	**38.42%**
Laikipia	25,780	264,842	333,135	70,123	**36.76%**

Rather than being spread evenly across the country, much of the growth is occurring inside counties that already possess enormous electoral weight. Nairobi alone registered almost 277,000 new voters during the exercise, while Kiambu added more than 128,000.

Nyeri and Murang'a also recorded substantial increases alongside high levels of voter transfers and changes of registration, indicators that political mobilisation is intensifying in precisely those regions now experiencing heightened competition.

This is significant because counties are no longer equal units in presidential politics.

Historically, Nairobi has reflected national political coalitions while remaining ethnically mixed enough to resist easy categorisation. Today it is evolving into something even more distinctive.

It contains the country's largest concentration of young voters, professionals, university students, informal workers and internal migrants.

These voters continue to care about political identity, but increasingly they are also responding to issues such as taxation, unemployment, housing affordability, transport, healthcare and the cost of living.

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That does not necessarily mean Kenya is abandoning identity politics. Coalition-building, local political networks and ethnic mobilisation remain central features of presidential campaigns. But they are now competing with governance, economic performance and generational concerns in ways that previous elections rarely required.

Beyond Nairobi and Mount Kenya lies another layer of competitive territory.

Counties such as Kajiado, Narok, Marsabit and Trans Nzoia were already closely contested in 2022 and remain highly competitive today. At the same time, expanding urban centres including Machakos, Mombasa, Kisii, Bungoma, Busia and Vihiga are steadily increasing both their electoral weight and their political unpredictability.

These are not necessarily the counties dominating today's headlines, but they are steadily becoming more important as population growth and urbanisation reshape Kenya's voter distribution.

The Youth Variable

It is tempting to interpret these demographic shifts as evidence that Kenya is finally transitioning towards issue-based politics. Certainly, there are reasons to believe this may be happening. Many of the fastest-growing counties are also among the country's most urbanised.

Younger voters increasingly cite employment, taxation, governance, housing and economic opportunity among their principal concerns. The anti-Finance Bill protests of 2024, led by the youth, demonstrated a willingness among younger Kenyans to organise around shared national grievances rather than traditional political identities. Yet caution is warranted.

Registration does not automatically translate into turnout, which does not necessarily produce coherent voting blocs. And demographic change alone does not erase years of political socialisation.

The implication for presidential campaigns is profound. Traditional strategy emphasised maximising turnout inside loyal ethnic strongholds before making selective investments in swing counties.

New Voters as % of Unregistered Voting-Age Population (Top 10 Counties)

County	New Voters	Reg. Voters (2025)	Pop Aged 18+	Unregistered 18+	ECVR Capture Rate
Kilifi	65,572	592,815	973,424	384,822	**17.04%**
Kwale	29,375	330,317	505,845	177,592	**16.54%**
Bungoma	73,599	651,816	1,097,333	450,735	**16.33%**
Isiolo	10,632	89,453	169,419	79,915	**13.30%**
Siaya	44,078	535,985	900,815	367,220	**12.00%**
Homa Bay	53,553	553,864	1,007,025	455,954	**11.75%**
Wajir	21,171	209,079	445,797	238,039	**8.89%**
Kisumu	45,280	611,036	1,137,870	531,116	**8.53%**
Garissa	24,575	206,584	512,615	311,142	**7.90%**
Mandera	18,214	217,963	483,288	266,258	**6.84%**

The emerging map demands something different.

Candidates must now defend regions they previously assumed were secure while simultaneously competing for rapidly expanding urban electorates whose political priorities are less fixed than those of previous generations.

Ultimately, the defining question of 2027 is no longer whether William Ruto can repeat the coalition that elected him in 2022. That coalition has already changed.

The more important question is whether the political fragmentation in Mount Kenya, the leadership vacuum within ODM and the country's shifting demographic centre reinforce one another or cancel each other out.

For the first time in many election cycles, Kenya is approaching a presidential contest where victory may depend less on assembling the familiar ethnic coalition than on understanding how three different electoral maps intersect.

The politicians who continue campaigning as though the country still resembles the Kenya of 2022 risk fighting the next election with the arithmetic of the last one.

DATA STORY

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KENYA IN 2027

EMERGING BATTLEGROUNDS AND SWINGS

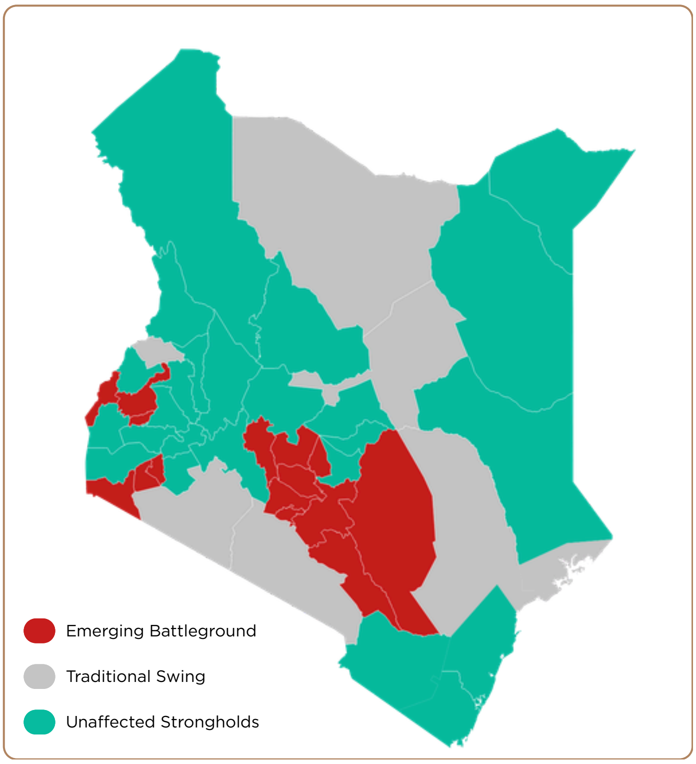
Kenya's electoral map is being redrawn by voter registration numbers, not just political alliances, and the counties that will decide 2027 are not where the old playbook says they should be.

2.35M
New voters registered nationally in the 2026 Voter Registration exercise

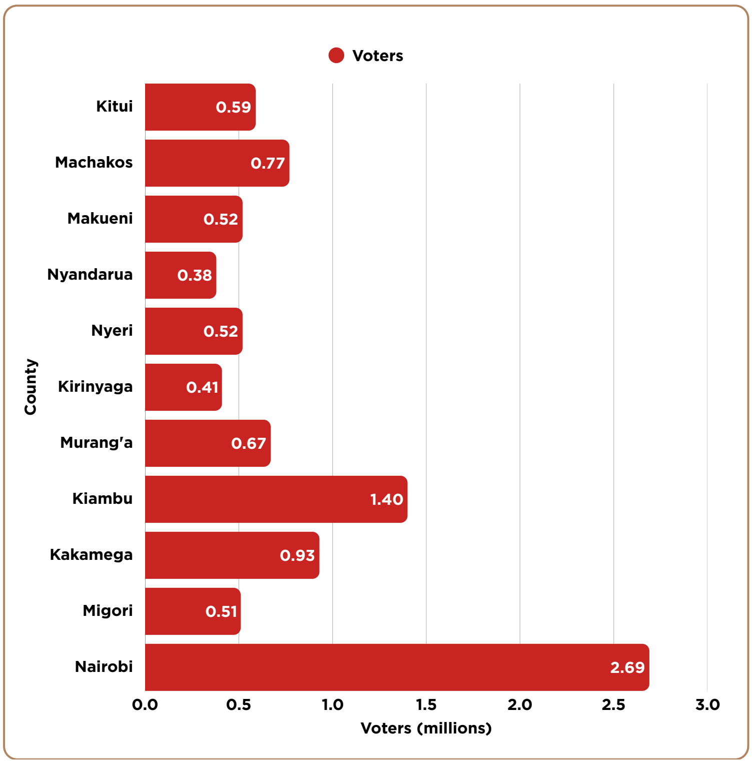
28.5M
IEBC's targeted total registered voters aheadof the 2027 General Election

7M+
Combined projected 2027 voters across the top four high mega counties

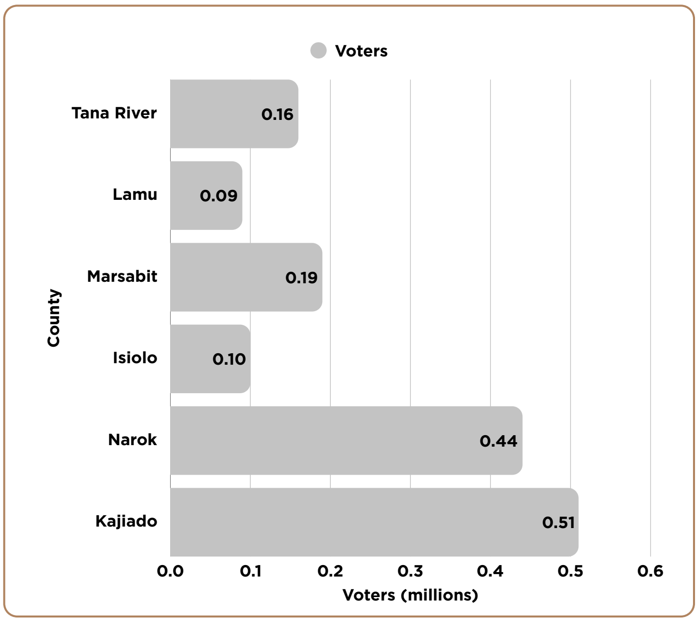
BATTLEGROUND STATUS



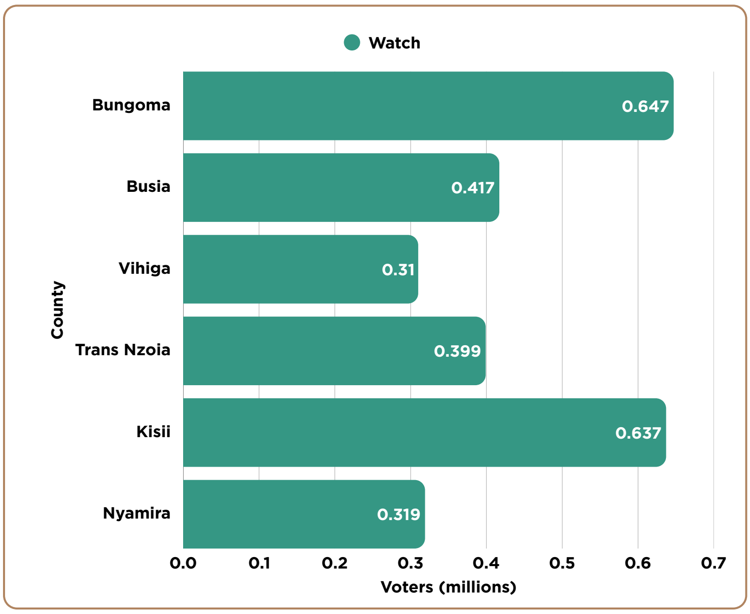
KEY BATTLEGROUNDS



SWING COUNTIES



COUNTIES TO WATCH



Sources: Voter Register; 2013, 2017 and 2022 Results

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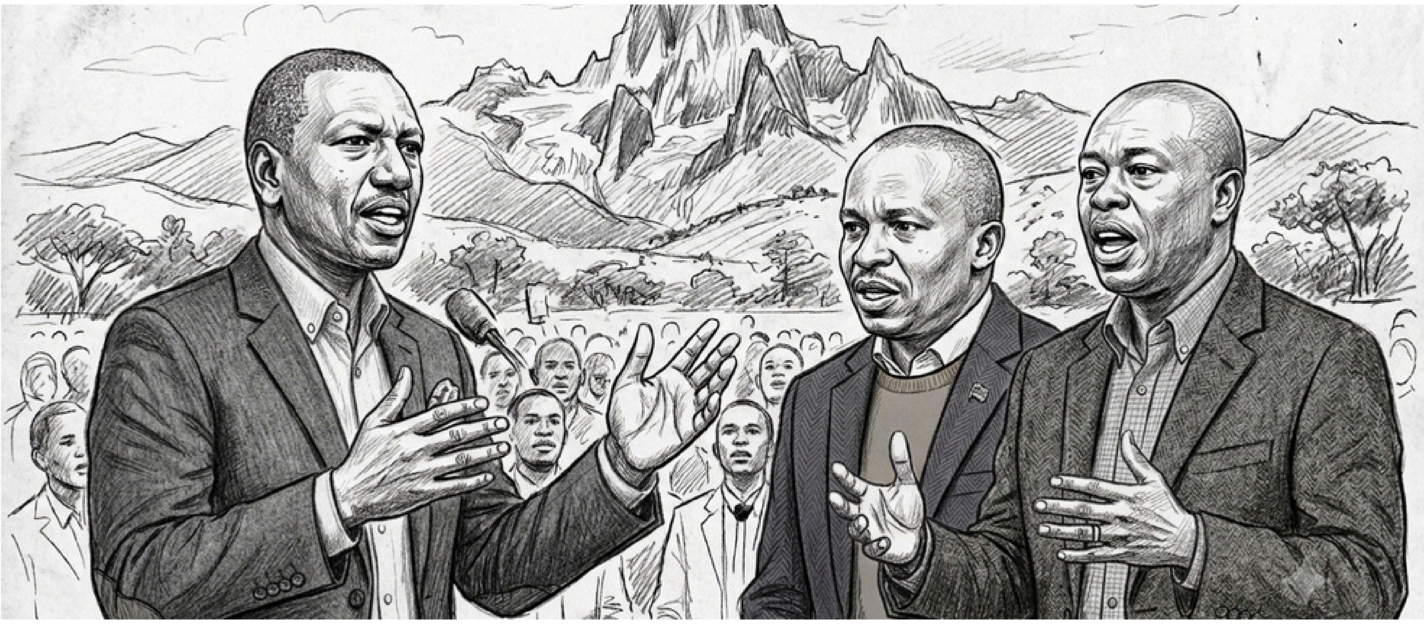
Permanent campaigns: How Kenyan by-elections became proxy wars



There was a time when by-elections were little more than administrative exercises to replace deceased or resigned legislators. Today, they have become something entirely different.

They are national political laboratories where alliances are tested, narratives are shaped and the road to the next general election begins years before polling day.

Ol Kalou was never just about choosing a new Member of Parliament. When voters in Ol Kalou cast their ballots, they were electing a Member of Parliament. Yet anyone observing the campaign could easily have mistaken it for a presidential election.

Cabinet Secretaries descended on the constituency, senior politicians pitched camp for days, and both government and opposition figures treated the contest as though the future of the country depended on its outcome.

National media carried campaign rallies live, while social media amplified every speech, confrontation and endorsement in real time. For a constituency with fewer than 100,000 registered voters, the level of political attention was extraordinary. But it was also revealing.

The Ol Kalou by-election demonstrated how profoundly Kenyan politics has changed.

By-elections are no longer local contests fought over local issues. They have evolved into proxy wars through which political parties measure strength, reassure supporters, attract financiers and test strategies for the next general election.

This transformation reflects a broader shift in Kenya's political culture. There was a time when by-elections revolved around constituency concerns.

Candidates campaigned on roads, schools, markets and healthcare, while national party leaders made only occasional appearances to support their preferred candidates.

Today, those local issues are often overshadowed by national political rivalries. Every by-election is framed as a referendum on the popularity of the government or the strength of the opposition, regardless of the vacancy that triggered the contest.

Ol Kalou was a clear example. The contest quickly became less about who would represent the constituency in Parliament and more about the battle for political dominance in the Mt Kenya region.

President William Ruto's allies portrayed victory as evidence that the Kenya Kwanza administration retained its support in one of the country's most important voting blocs.

Former Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua treated the campaign as an opportunity to demonstrate that he remained the region's most influential political figure despite his fallout with the President.

Neither side was simply chasing a parliamentary seat. Both were competing for the political story that would emerge after the votes were counted.

Politics as Perception

That story matters because modern politics increasingly operates through perception as much as reality.

A by-election victory does not alter the balance of power in Parliament in any significant way, but it can dramatically influence public opinion.

Winning creates momentum. It energises supporters, reassures political financiers and strengthens a leader's claim to be on the rise.

Losing has the opposite effect, fuelling narratives of decline and raising questions about organisational strength.

In that sense, by-elections have become psychological contests as much as electoral ones. Political parties invest disproportionate resources because they understand that the outcome will be interpreted far beyond the constituency itself.

A single victory can dominate headlines for days, influence coalition negotiations and shape conversations about who appears strongest heading towards the next election.

This explains why campaign budgets for by-elections often seem excessive. The investment is not measured against the value of one parliamentary seat but against the value of the national narrative. Political parties are buying more than votes; they are buying momentum.

The media has amplified this transformation. Whereas local elections once attracted modest coverage, today's by-elections unfold before a national audience.

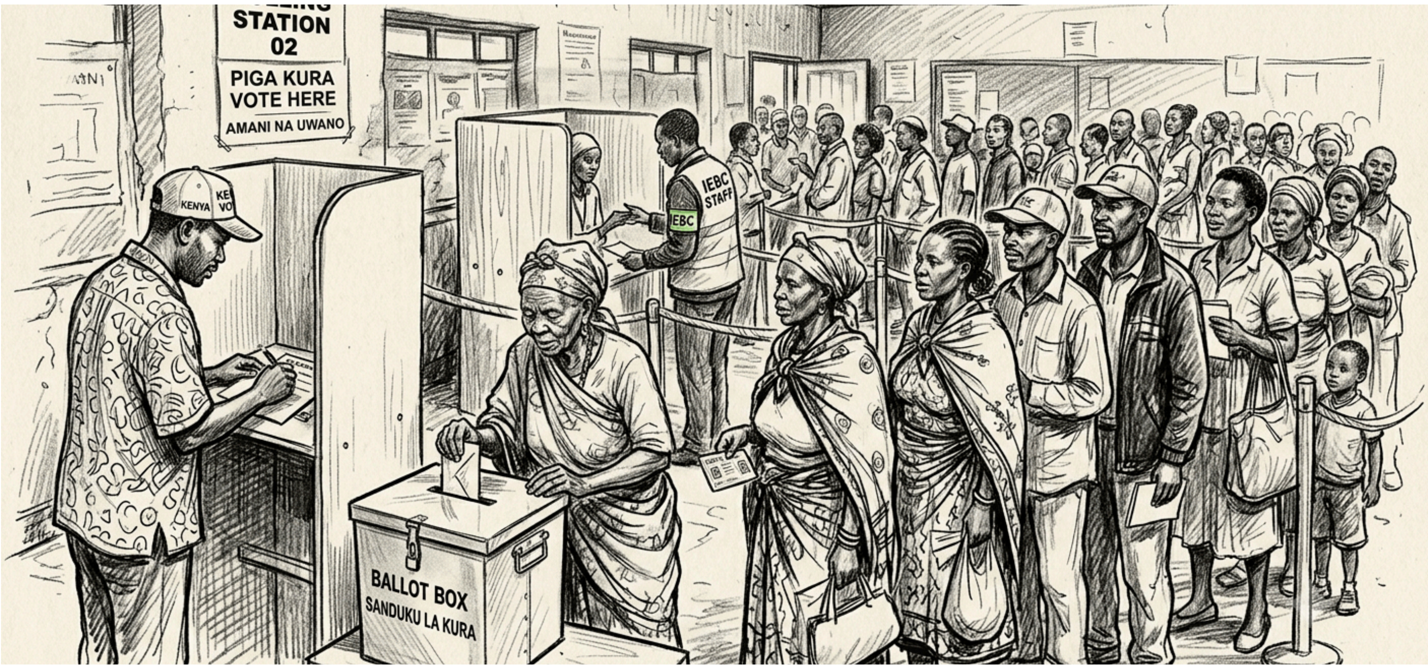
Television stations broadcast campaign rallies live, while digital platforms ensure that every speech, handshake and slogan reaches millions of people within minutes.

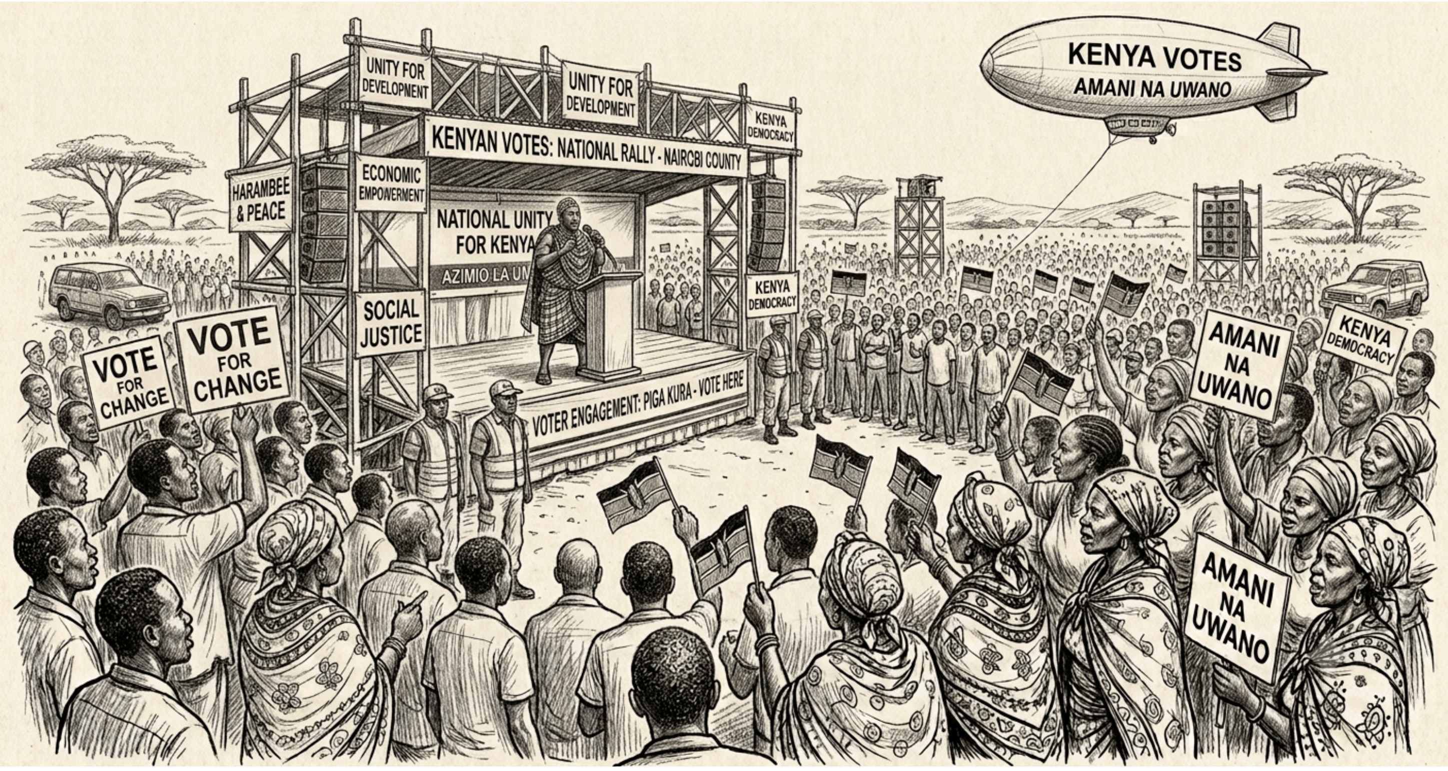
Political influencers dissect each development online, turning even routine campaign events into national talking points.

The result is that by-elections no longer remain local stories. They become media events whose significance is often determined as much by online conversation as by the final tally of votes.

A Rehearsal for 2027

By-elections have also become testing grounds for coalition politics. Kenya's political landscape is increasingly defined by shifting alliances rather than stable party loyalties, and these contests provide opportunities to assess which partnerships work, which messages resonate and which leaders retain influence.





Every campaign serves as a rehearsal for the next general election, allowing parties to refine their strategies years before Kenyans return to the polls. Ol Kalou illustrated this dynamic perfectly.

The constituency became a political laboratory where leaders measured not only voting intentions but organisational discipline, fundraising capacity, crowd mobilisation and message effectiveness.

Every rally doubled as a strategy meeting, while every endorsement offered clues about future alliances. Political actors were not simply contesting; they were gathering intelligence for 2027.

For residents, however, this transformation presents a paradox. National attention can bring roads, promises of development and unprecedented visibility to a constituency that might otherwise be overlooked.

Yet it also risks drowning out the very local issues that prompted the by-election. Conversations about agricultural prices, access to healthcare, water shortages or youth unemployment are displaced by debates over presidential succession and coalition arithmetic.

In effect, local voters become participants in a much larger political drama. The constituency serves as a stage upon which national leaders perform, while the immediate concerns of residents often receive only passing attention.

This is perhaps the defining feature of Kenya's emerging political culture: the country is in a state of almost permanent campaigning.

The distinction between governing and campaigning has become increasingly blurred as political leaders spend much of their time positioning themselves for the next electoral contest rather than focusing exclusively on the responsibilities of office.

Coalition negotiations continue throughout the electoral cycle, political tours never really stop and every by-election feeds into the larger contest for State House.

History is unlikely to remember the names of most by-election winners. What it is more likely to remember is what those contests revealed about the state of Kenyan politics.

Ol Kalou will be remembered not simply because it elected a new Member of Parliament, but because it confirmed that by-elections have evolved into proxy wars where parties test their machinery, leaders measure their influence and competing coalitions seek to shape the political narrative long before the country votes in a general election.

In today's Kenya, there are no longer off-year elections. There are only rehearsals for the next battle.

The Week in Numbers

29,990	38%	69.8%	200MW
VOTES	**PRISONERS**	**DECREASE**	**DEAL**
The gap of votes between Douglas Waweru (DCP) and his closest rival Samuel Muchina (UDA) in the just concluded Ol Kalou by-election.	The proposition of detainees awaiting sentencing in Kenyan prisons, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.	The dip in number of people who sought refuge and asylum in Kenyan refugee camps in Q1 of 2026, according to UNHCR.	The extra amount of electricity that Kenya Power will tap from Ethiopia in new deal that kicks of in December 2026.

Quote of the Week

"What happens inside prisons extends beyond prison walls. Most people in prison will one day return to their communities. We therefore need prison systems that protect dignity, reduce reoffending and create real opportunities for change.

- UNODC Executive Director, Monica Juma

KDC Explainer: What Exactly Is a Swing Vote?

A swing vote is a vote that could go either way; one that is not reliably committed to any candidate or party, and whose movement from one side to the other is large enough to change the outcome.

Most voters in most elections are relatively fixed: they vote along ethnic lines, regional loyalties, or party affiliation, regardless of what candidates do. Swing voters are the pendulum. In a contest where Candidate A has a firm base of five million and Candidate B has a firm base of five million, the voters in the middle are not a footnote. They are the election.

Why it matters more in 2027

Kenya's electoral history is often read through ethnic arithmetic, which community delivers how many votes, which coalition adds up to 50 per cent plus one. That framing is not wrong, but it can obscure the swing dynamics that increasingly shape outcomes.

Three things make swing votes more significant in 2027 than in previous cycles. The Gen Z movement showed that a significant portion of younger Kenyan voters is willing to act outside inherited political loyalties

If that cohort registers and votes in large numbers, they represent the largest swing bloc in recent electoral history.

The broad-based government arrangement has scrambled traditional opposition alignments, leaving voters in ODM strongholds without the cue they previously relied on.

And economic grievance (unemployment and cost of living) is cutting across community lines in ways that create swing potential where little existed.

What campaigns do with swing votes

This is why a presidential candidate spends three days in a county with 400,000 registered voters, because if that county is genuinely in play, the marginal gain from winning it can exceed the gain from reinforcing a base that was already committed. It also explains the timing of policy announcements.

When a government waives debts in a swing region ten months before an election, it is not only governing. It is shoring up a soft vote.

Voters are entitled to notice the difference.

Chronicle WEEKLY

End of easy virality: Why the social media economy is finally growing up

For years, success on social media appeared deceptively simple: find a trending video, repost it with a provocative caption and wait for the algorithm to do the rest. Entire businesses were built around this formula.

Facebook pages accumulated millions of followers by reposting news clips. X accounts monetised viral videos they did not create. TikTok creators stitched together content from elsewhere. YouTube channels repackaged other people's work with minimal edits. The internet rewarded speed over originality, but that incentive structure is now changing.

Platforms including X, YouTube and TikTok are increasingly penalising duplicated content, limiting monetisation for engagement bait and prioritising creators who publish original work. Their motivation is commercial rather than moral. Artificial intelligence has made copying effortless, flooding feeds with low-value content and making it harder for users to find material worth returning for.

And now the age of easy virality is giving way to the age of digital ownership. For Kenya's rapidly expanding creator economy, that shift could be as significant as the introduction of monetisation itself.

When everyone became a publisher

A decade ago, producing a news bulletin or entertainment programme required studios, transmitters and sizeable budgets. Today, anyone with a mobile phone can livestream to thousands of people.

That transformation has produced a vibrant digital economy. Independent journalists, comedians, educators, podcasters and commentators have built loyal audiences outside traditional media.

Some earn advertising revenue, others rely on subscriptions, sponsorships or direct audience support.

But it has also blurred the line between creation and aggregation. Many of the most-followed pages on Kenyan social media do not produce original reporting.

They curate, repost and remix work created elsewhere, and the model has worked because algorithms rewarded engagement, not authorship.

Why Platforms Are Changing

The internet is suffering from a problem of abundance. Artificial intelligence has made it possible to generate thousands of images, videos and articles in minutes.

Automated accounts amplify content at unprecedented speed. Recycled posts often outperform original reporting because they require less investment and are optimised for engagement.

For platforms, this creates a paradox. Users spend more time scrolling, but trust declines. Advertisers become wary of low-quality environments. Distinguishing genuine creators from opportunistic aggregators becomes increasingly difficult.

Not because platforms have suddenly become defenders of intellectual property, but because their long-term business depends on users believing they will discover something new each time they log in.

Challenge for Content Creators

Kenya's content creators, especially newsrooms, face an uncomfortable adjustment. For years, traffic strategies rewarded volume. Publish quickly, optimise headlines, push aggressively on social media and chase trends before competitors. That approach delivered clicks but often weakened distinctive, authentic content.

If platforms increasingly reward originality, news organisations may find that their competitive advantage lies not in publishing first, but in producing reporting that cannot easily be replicated.

Exclusive investigations, data journalism, visual storytelling and expert analysis are harder to copy than breaking news alerts. Ironically, the algorithm may now be pushing content creation back towards its traditional strengths.

The same shift applies to independent creators. The first generation of influencers built audiences through personality and consistency, and the next generation may need to build intellectual property. This will come in the form of newsletters, courses, podcasts, documentaries, and original research.

Beyond Followers

Followers alone are becoming less valuable than loyal audiences, and creators are increasingly resembling entrepreneurs rather than entertainers. The obsession with follower counts has long distorted digital success.

Brands sought creators with the largest audiences, even when engagement was weak. Politicians measured influence by trending hashtags. Businesses celebrated viral moments that produced little commercial value.

The next phase of the digital economy may reward something more durable: trust. This is because trust encourages subscriptions, attracts sponsorships, sustains communities through changing algorithms and cannot be manufactured overnight.

Artificial intelligence accelerates this transition. If anyone can generate a convincing article, image or video in seconds, originality becomes more valuable.

Creators who consistently demonstrate expertise, distinctive perspectives and transparent sourcing will become more valuable than those who simply publish the most material. In that sense, AI may strengthen rather than weaken the importance of human creativity.

Kenya enters this transition with the advantages of a young digital population and high mobile internet penetration. The country has developed one of Africa's most dynamic online creator communities, and the question is whether those creators evolve from chasing algorithms to building businesses.

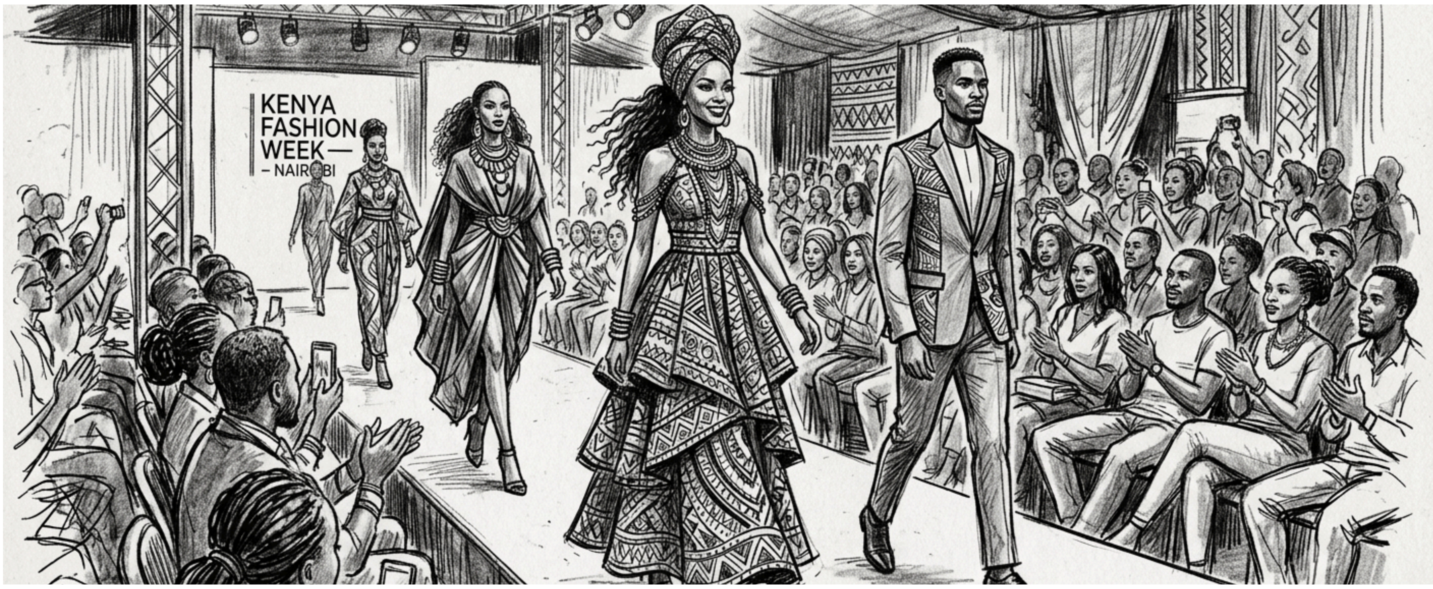
Those who own audiences rather than rent them from platforms are likely to prove more resilient. The internet is not abandoning virality because people will always share compelling stories.

The economics of virality are changing; clicks alone no longer guarantee revenue, and reach alone no longer guarantees influence.

The platforms themselves have realised that a healthier ecosystem requires rewarding those who invest in creating something genuinely new.
That is good news for journalism, serious creators and audiences, but less welcome for those who built businesses on copying others' work.

Chronicle WEEKLY

Kenyan fashion: Dressed for Success, missing from the spotlight



Every year, the world's biggest red carpets become more than celebrity spectacles. The Oscars, the Met Gala, Cannes Film Festival and Paris Fashion Week are among the most powerful marketing platforms in the global fashion business.

A single appearance by a celebrity wearing an emerging designer can transform an unknown label into an international brand overnight, leading to retail partnerships, magazine covers and commercial opportunities worth millions of dollars. Fashion, in these moments, is less about glamour than it is about business.

Over the past decade, African designers have steadily increased their presence on these global stages. Nigerian labels have dressed Hollywood actors and musicians. South African designers have become regular fixtures at international fashion weeks. Moroccan and Ivorian brands have leveraged global interest in African luxury to build export markets. Kenya, despite its reputation as one of East Africa's creative capitals, has yet to establish a similar presence.

This absence is striking because the country possesses many of the ingredients required for success. Kenya has internationally recognised models, innovative designers, a vibrant fashion community and generations of craftsmanship in textiles, leatherwork and beadwork.

Nairobi has become a centre for contemporary African design, while local consumers are increasingly embracing homegrown brands. Yet these individual successes have not translated into sustained international visibility.

Talent Without an Industry

The explanation lies in a distinction that Kenya often struggles to make across many sectors of its economy: the difference between talent and industry. Kenya has no shortage of talented designers. What it lacks is the ecosystem that transforms creative talent into globally competitive businesses. Behind every internationally recognised fashion house sits an extensive commercial infrastructure that extends far beyond the designer's studio.

Manufacturers, textile suppliers, financiers, photographers, stylists, public relations agencies, export specialists and international buyers all form part of the value chain that takes a sketch from a notebook to a celebrity wardrobe or luxury boutique.

In Kenya, much of that ecosystem remains fragmented. Many designers successfully build loyal local client bases, producing bespoke garments for weddings, corporate events and social occasions. The challenge begins when they attempt to scale beyond small-scale production.

Access to affordable financing remains limited, forcing many businesses to rely on personal savings rather than investment capital. Production costs are high, quality fabrics are often imported, and manufacturing capacity is geared more towards fulfilling contracts for foreign brands than supporting the growth of local labels. Export logistics, meanwhile, remain expensive and unpredictable, making it difficult for small businesses to compete internationally.

The result is what economists describe as a "missing middle." Kenyan fashion businesses are often too sophisticated to remain informal enterprises but too small to compete effectively in global markets.

The Business of Visibility

The absence of Kenyan designers on the world's biggest red carpets also reflects another reality: visibility in fashion is rarely accidental. Luxury brands spend heavily on international public relations firms, celebrity stylists, fashion editors and showroom representation. Designers do not simply wait for celebrities to discover their collections. They invest strategically in the networks that shape global fashion conversations.

These investments require resources that many emerging African designers simply do not have. Consequently, while Kenyan designers continue producing work that rivals international standards in creativity and craftsmanship, they often lack the commercial infrastructure necessary to place that work before the influential gatekeepers of the global fashion industry. The issue, therefore, is not whether Kenyan designers are good enough. It is whether they can consistently access the markets where reputations are made.

This challenge mirrors a broader pattern within Kenya's economy. The country has become an important manufacturing hub for garments destined for international markets, particularly under export arrangements such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Yet much of that production takes place on behalf of foreign brands. Kenyan factories manufacture the products, but the intellectual property, branding and much of the profit remain elsewhere.

The same dynamic affects fashion. Manufacturing creates jobs, but brands create wealth. Countries that dominate the global fashion industry do so not because they produce the most garments, but because they own the labels that consumers aspire to wear.

From Creative Scene to Creative Economy

There are, however, reasons for optimism. Digital commerce has lowered some of the traditional barriers to entry, allowing designers to reach customers directly through social media and e-commerce platforms.

A growing middle class is increasingly willing to support local brands, while the Kenyan diaspora provides a ready-made international market for products that combine contemporary design with African identity.

Younger consumers are also placing greater value on authenticity and craftsmanship, trends that favour independent designers over mass-market luxury labels.

Yet technology alone will not build a globally competitive fashion industry. Sustainable growth will require deliberate investment in institutions that support designers beyond the creative process.

Fashion councils, export promotion programmes, access to patient capital, specialised design education, international trade exhibitions and stronger protection of intellectual property all play a role in building industries rather than simply celebrating individual success stories.

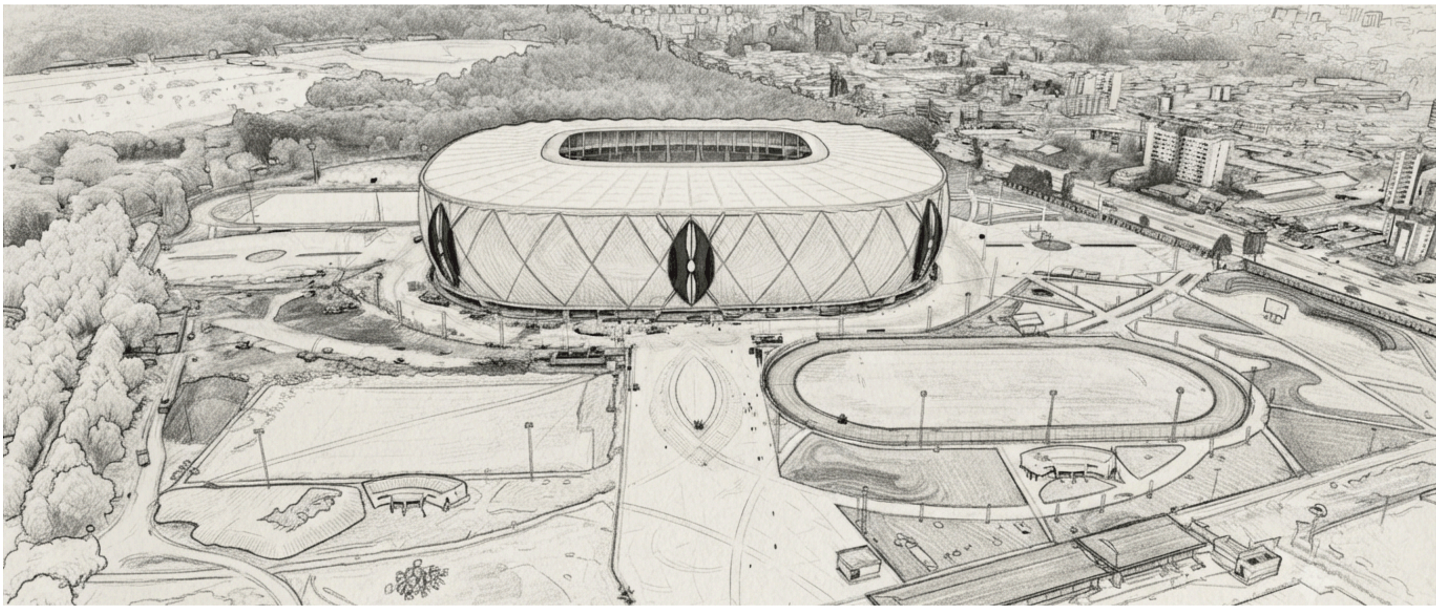
Ultimately, the absence of Kenyan labels from the world's most prestigious red carpets is not the real issue. Those red carpets are merely the most visible expression of a deeper structural challenge. They reveal a country that consistently produces exceptional creative talent but struggles to commercialise that talent at scale.

If Kenya is to become a recognised global fashion player, the conversation must move beyond celebrating individual designers and begin focusing on the systems that enable creative businesses to grow.

The countries that dominate international fashion have mastered the art of turning creativity into commerce. Kenya has already demonstrated that it possesses imagination. The next challenge is building an industry capable of taking that imagination to the world.

Chronicle WEEKLY

Kenya is building stadiums, but is it building a sports industry?



There is something seductive about stadiums. They are visible symbols of national ambition. They dominate skylines, feature prominently in political speeches and provide tangible evidence that governments are investing in sport.

Few infrastructure projects photograph better than a stadium rising from an empty field. Across Kenya, construction is accelerating.

Talanta Sports City is taking shape. Kasarani and Nyayo National Stadium are undergoing major renovations. Regional facilities are also receiving attention as the country prepares to co-host the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations with Uganda and Tanzania.

Government officials speak confidently about meeting international standards and positioning Kenya as a continental sporting destination. Those ambitions are welcome, but they also raise an uncomfortable question. Are we building stadiums, or are we building a sports economy?

History is full of countries that built impressive venues only to discover that concrete alone does not create an industry.

Infrastructure Vs Industry

Sport is often discussed as entertainment, while in reality, it is one of the world's largest industries. Globally, sport generates trillions of dollars through broadcasting rights, sponsorships, merchandising, tourism, ticket sales, licensing, betting, hospitality and digital media.

The stadium is only one part of a much larger value chain. A successful sports industry begins long before fans enter a venue and continues long after the final whistle.

It includes youth academies, coaching systems, sports medicine, athlete management, event production, data analytics, media rights, sports marketing and private investment.

Without these supporting ecosystems, even the most modern stadium risks becoming an expensive monument used only occasionally. Kenya's challenge is therefore not merely to complete construction projects. It is to create sustainable economic activity around them.

The Legacy Problem

The world has countless examples of what economists call "white elephants." Olympic venues that rarely host major events. World Cup stadiums that struggle to attract spectators. Multi-billion-dollar facilities that consume public money while generating limited commercial returns.

The problem is rarely construction quality but utilisation. A stadium used for ten football matches each year cannot sustain itself. Nor can one that depends entirely on government funding for maintenance.

Successful venues operate almost continuously. They host football, athletics, concerts, religious gatherings, corporate events, exhibitions, conferences and community programmes.

They become commercial districts rather than sports facilities. This is where Kenya's real test begins.

Most Kenyan stadiums are designed around events, while international examples are designed around business. Visit the best-performing stadiums in Europe, North America or parts of Asia, and one quickly notices that football is only part of the enterprise.

Restaurants operate daily, retail outlets remain open throughout the week, museums attract tourists, office space generates rental income, and hotels serve travelling supporters and conference delegates. The stadium functions as an economic hub, and match day is simply its busiest day.

Kenya has traditionally approached stadiums as public infrastructure rather than commercial assets, and that mindset limits their economic potential.

The Television Economy

The biggest revenues in modern sport rarely come through the turnstiles but through television and digital broadcasting. The English Premier League earns billions because broadcasters compete for exclusive rights.

The National Basketball Association has become a global media business. Even smaller leagues increasingly depend upon streaming platforms and digital subscriptions.

Kenya has not yet unlocked that opportunity, with domestic football still struggling to generate consistent broadcast value.

Governments often justify stadium construction by pointing to employment. Construction certainly creates jobs, but those jobs are temporary. The more significant question concerns what happens after.

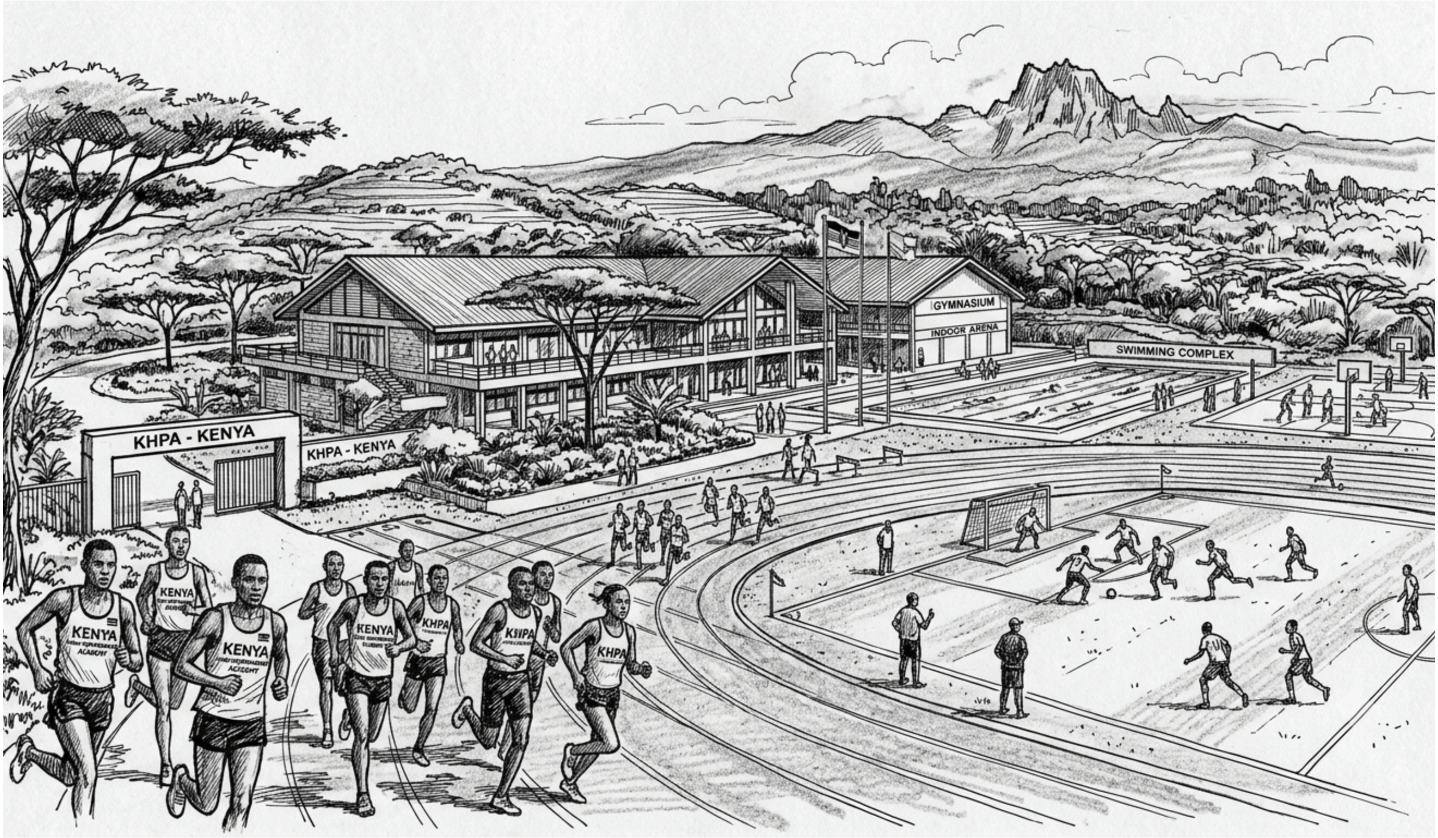
A thriving sports industry creates permanent employment for groundskeepers, broadcast technicians, sports marketers, nutritionists, physiotherapists, data analysts, security personnel, hospitality workers, event managers, sports lawyers and many others.

Around the world, these occupations support thousands of livelihoods. Kenya has the opportunity to expand this ecosystem if infrastructure is accompanied by deliberate investment in skills and enterprise.

Can Private Capital Play?

One of the weaknesses of Kenya's sports sector has been its heavy dependence on public funding. Internationally, successful stadiums often rely on mixed financing models.

Private operators manage facilities, corporate sponsors purchase naming rights, businesses lease commercial space, clubs share revenue with venue managers and entertainment companies book concerts years in advance.



This diversification reduces pressure on taxpayers while encouraging innovation. Kenya's new generation of stadiums presents an opportunity to rethink governance. If they remain purely public assets, their commercial potential may remain underdeveloped. If they attract private participation without compromising public access, they could become genuine economic anchors.

Sport As Export

Kenya already exports sporting excellence. Its athletes dominate global distance running, and that success has created international recognition but relatively limited domestic economic spillovers. Too often, Kenyan talent leaves the country to train, compete and commercialise elsewhere.

A mature sports economy would capture more value locally through international training camps, sports science centres, regional competitions, sports tourism, merchandising and high-performance academies. These industries are less visible than stadiums but potentially more transformative.

Hosting AFCON will bring visitors, television audiences and international attention. Those benefits matter, but mega-events are fleeting.

The more important question is what remains after the tournament ends.

Will Kenya possess better sporting institutions? More commercially viable clubs? Stronger youth development pathways? Greater private investment? More sustainable employment?

If the answer is yes, then the stadiums will have justified their cost. If not, they risk becoming impressive reminders of opportunities only partially realised.

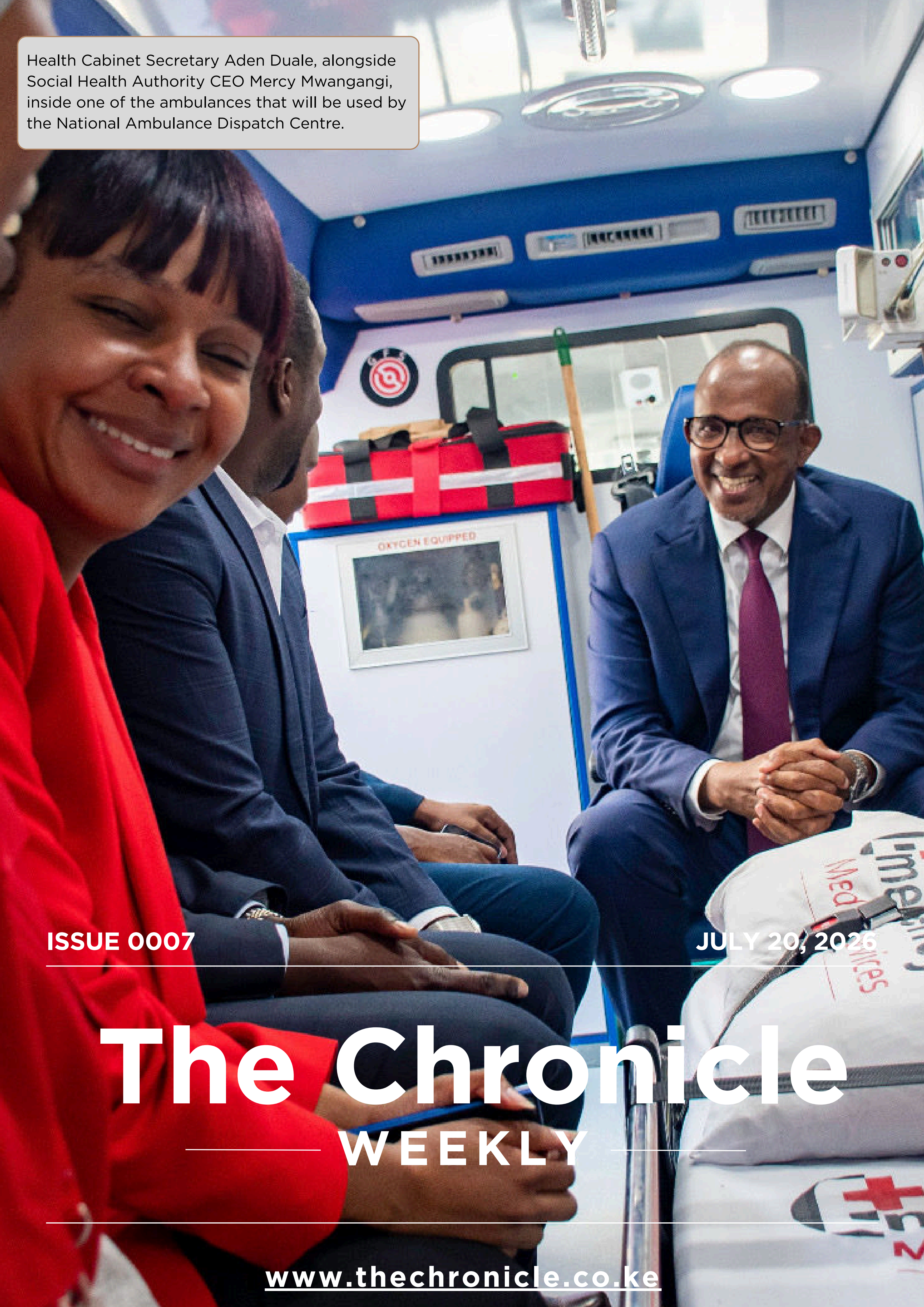
The real scoreboard

Politicians naturally celebrate ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and citizens understandably admire modern infrastructure, but concrete is only the beginning.

The success of Kenya's stadium programme should ultimately be measured not by the number of seats installed or roofs completed, but by the industries, businesses and careers that grow around them.

A stadium should not simply host sports. It should generate commerce, attract investment, and create jobs. It should anchor neighbourhood economies, and most importantly, it should continue earning long after the applause fades.

That is the difference between building a stadium and building a sports industry. Kenya has begun the first task, and the second will determine whether these billion-shilling investments become national assets or merely expensive landmarks.



Health Cabinet Secretary Aden Duale, alongside Social Health Authority CEO Mercy Mwangangi, inside one of the ambulances that will be used by the National Ambulance Dispatch Centre.

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