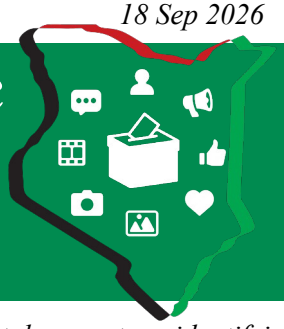
Ad hoc report *18 Sep 2026*

Digital Pulse: Online Xenophobic & Anti-Burundian narratives following Ruto's remarks



This snapshot offers an overview of electoral-related narratives in Kenya's digital ecosystem, identifying emerging narratives, key actors, and tactics used in social media conversations. The overview is the first in a planned series of social media analytical reports by zKe and its local partners that seek to support an integrated online/offline approach to peacebuilding and conflict prevention ahead of the 2027 elections.

1. Executive Summary

The following are the main findings of zKe's social media analysis in relation to the anti-Burundian xenophobic narratives emerging in Kenya's online and offline environment:

Key Finding 1: **A pre-existing "fake voters" election-fraud conspiracy became attached to the crackdown, circulating in at least three distinct, mutually contradictory versions.**
Separate from the economic and diplomatic narratives above, a conspiracy theory tied the crackdown to the 2027 election, alleging that Burundians' presence in Kenya was somehow connected to fraudulent voting for Ruto.

Key Finding 2: The anti-Burundian narrative did not emerge spontaneously, it had a documented run-up of over a year.
A comedic TikTok skit normalizing non-payment of Burundian vendors dates to March 2025. Political rhetoric singling out Burundians specifically (Beatrice Elachi) predates the crisis by nearly three months, and ties directly to legislation (the Local Content Bill) that had already cleared committee review by April 2026, months before any public flashpoint. This matters because it shows the "crisis" wasn't a sudden reaction, it was activating sentiment and legislative groundwork that already existed.

Key Finding 3: Kenyans reject xenophobia: broad solidarity mobilisation with Burundians
Despite the harmful narrative, a broad and genuine counter-mobilisation emerged across Kenyan society, celebrities, civil society, legal institutions, opposition figures, and even ordinary bystanders, publicly rejecting the xenophobia framing and affirming solidarity with Burundians.

Key Finding 4: Alleged skits of foreign Burundi nationals being harassed elicit response before

and after Ruto's remarks:
Satire mirrors human nature and societal absurdities: a piece of comedic content, created weeks before the political crisis even began, ended up shaping a real diplomatic response. Even though the creator made a video correcting this and stating that the video was staged, reshares and new versions resurfaced once the crisis peaked.

Key Finding 5: A state-sanctioned counter-narrative emerged, with government and pro-government voices framing the directive as lawful enforcement rather than ethnic targeting.
Officials moved quickly to reject accusations of xenophobia, reframing the directive as a matter of documentation and regulatory compliance, a position that was echoed and amplified in pro-government social media activity.

Key Finding 6: The September 2 directive was followed by mounting panic among Burundians, then by reports of harassment, confirmed violence, looting, and displacement across multiple locations.
What began as anxiety over the compliance deadline escalated, over the course of a week, into reported harassment and then confirmed, witnessed violence against Burundians in several parts of the country.

Key Finding 7: Kenyan public figures and institutions mobilised publicly in solidarity with Burundians, rejecting the xenophobia framing.
In response to the crackdown, a range of Kenyan voices, from public figures to ordinary bystanders, pushed back publicly against the xenophobia narrative, both through statements and direct action.

2. Background and context

This traces back to a longstanding undertone of discontent in Kenya about foreign nationals, especially other East Africans, competing for jobs. Following that undertone, there was a series of events: a viral harassment video, a presidential directive on foreign-owned businesses, looting and assault of foreign-owned businesses, a diplomatic protest from Burundi, and a countrywide "we are not xenophobic" backlash.

On August 28, 2026, small-scale traders staged street protests in Nairobi CBD (Archives, Kamukunji, Gikomba, Nyamakima) against a KRA customs valuation benchmark increase that raised the minimum benchmark for a 40-foot container of consolidated general cargo from KSh 2.5 million to KSh 3.2 million. Traders marched toward KRA's Times Tower headquarters; police used tear gas to disperse them. Press coverage of the protest (Standard Media, People Daily, Kenyans.co.ke, The Kenya Times, Dawan Africa) describes the grievance as taxation and import valuation; none cites foreign traders or Burundians as a stated cause. Traders said they would protest every Friday until the benchmark was reviewed. Ruto subsequently revised the benchmark down to KSh 2 million. Against this backdrop, Ruto met MSME traders at State House on September 2.

President Ruto's September 2, 2026 directive at State House ordered the shutdown of foreign-owned small businesses operating without permits, with a September 7 compliance deadline (Facebook video, directive discussion from around minute 20:00).



Facebook video of President Ruto's directive over foreign-owned businesses (link) (Source: Facebook)

The directive itself didn't name Burundians or any specific nationality. Ruto referenced foreign traders generally, citing China as his example ("someone from China or elsewhere"), and said: "We have not built investor confidence so that hawkers can come to Kenya... The investor confidence we have built is for investors to come to Kenya, not hawkers and traders. People should not confuse us." He told traders: "From next week, all traders doing those small businesses should close them"; this was met with a standing ovation. He directed Trade CS Lee Kinyanjui and National Assembly Majority Leader Kimani Ichung'wah to fast-track legislation reserving certain businesses for Kenyan citizens, saying the government would act administratively rather than wait for Parliament. Traders' umbrella bodies subsequently endorsed the directive.

3. Methodology

This analysis uses social media listening and mainstream media monitoring tools to scan emerging trends and narratives in the Kenyan information environment. The report focuses on content primarily published in English, Kiswahili and Sheng between 02 - 10 September 2026.

The analysis team used **Phoenix**, Build Up's social media monitoring tool, which tracks and maps mentions of specific keywords and individuals across various social media platforms. It provides access to data feeds from Facebook, TikTok and X.

The analysis used specific Boolean[1] search terms to gather relevant data for monitoring and analysis. These search terms were carefully selected to capture relevant content related to the topic of interest. Here is an example of a Boolean search query used:

Query: (Burundians OR Burundi) AND (illegal foreigners Burundians OR "Wezi wa kazi" Burundi OR Waburundi mtoke OR Burundians watoke Kenya OR mtapigwa waburundi OR waburundi warudi kwao OR go back to Burundi OR hatutaki takataka kenya OR kenya sio choo OR Beatrice Elachi wants Burundians out of Kenya OR Monday tunawafinya OR "Kenya sio choo" OR "Waganda warudi kwao" OR "waburundi warudi kwao" OR President wa Kenya alisema warudi kwao OR hate speech against Burundi OR #ThisIsNotXenophobia Kenya OR #ThisIsNotXenophobia Burundi OR #ThisIsNotXenophobia Burundians OR Xenophobia Burundi OR Xenophobia Burundians OR Kenya Burundians OR Kenyans Burundians OR "ni mbaya kama hauna id"))

The full list of keywords used for the data collection can be found at this link.

It is important to note that the general query is used only for an initial search. Based on the results, it is then customised to conduct more specific searches. Although we aim to capture a broad range of relevant content, there is always the possibility of missing posts that do not explicitly match the selected search terms. Additionally, the effectiveness of the Boolean search terms may be influenced by factors such as variations in language use, slang, or evolving terminology. The data gathered for this analysis may have certain limitations. These include:

1. The reliance on publicly available information on social media platforms.
2. The possibility of missing data from private accounts or restricted platforms.
3. The inaccuracy of certain information even if shown on profiles, such as location, gender, or identity in general.

1 *See Glossary section for definition*

4. Key findings

Finding 1: **A pre-existing "fake voters" election-fraud conspiracy became attached to the crackdown, circulating in at least three distinct, mutually contradictory versions.**
Separate from the economic and diplomatic narratives above, a conspiracy theory tied the crackdown to the 2027 election, alleging that Burundians' presence in Kenya was somehow connected to fraudulent voting for Ruto.

This thread predates the crisis by several months: a YouTube video titled *"ANGRY Kenyans ATTACK Ugandans & Burundians Warning Them Against Trying to Vote RUTO in 2027"* was posted on **May 21, 2026** (link), nearly a month before Beatrice Elachi's June 18 remarks (Finding 2).

During the active crisis window (Sept 7–8), the theory reappeared in three distinct, and mutually contradictory, versions:

- **Version A: Burundians are already secretly registered to vote for Ruto, and the crackdown is theatre:** Benson M. Lutavi, in a post reposted across several Facebook groups (Sept 8): "Burundians already have Kenyan IDs and are registered to vote. This guy [Ruto] is pretending to chase them out now so that next year, if accused of foreigners voting [for him], he can say 'we already expelled them long ago.'" Bonface Ateya (Sept 7) put it more tersely: "WORK PERMITS YES, FAKE VOTERS NO." Helena Lyn (Sept 7), mocking people who hold this view, shows the claim was already established enough to be referenced sarcastically: "Weren't you just crying that these people are being given IDs to vote for Ruto? Now he says undocumented people should go home and you're complaining again."
- **Version B: Ruto wanted their votes; they refused, and this is retaliation:** Alee Hussein (Sept 7): "Ruto told Rwandans and Burundians to get votes [register for him], they refused, so he got angry and said they should leave Kenya!"
- **Version C: He's expelling them now specifically so they can return later, freshly documented, to vote for him:** DaviesChumba (Sept 7): "Or is Ruto chasing these Burundians away so they go home, come back with their families, and he gives them IDs so they vote for him next year?"

Sceptical pushback against the theory also circulated. Loony_Kev (Sept 8) directly questioned the logic: *"You're saying Burundians are being given IDs to vote? ... You interact with them as guards and hawkers - you think they'd vote how you want just because you gave them an ID? Not yet!"* StewartMakau (Sept 7) was suspicious of Ruto's motive without committing to a specific version: *"When you see Ruto supporting something, know he wants something. Don't be surprised - with this Burundians thing, what he's after is votes."*

Finding 2: Pre-existing undertone of anti-foreign sentiment on social media expressed as satire: Before the events below, there was a running undercurrent of discontent in Kenya about foreign nationals, especially other East Africans, competing for low-skill and entry-level jobs, along with recurring questions about passport and documentation status. This shows up in casual comedic content and political rhetoric.

One example is an older TikTok skit, dated as early as March 2025, by a TikTok creator with 2.7M views, captioned *"Burundians in Kenya be like,"* which portrays Kenyans buying tea from Burundian vendors and not paying. The comment section includes what read as first-person accounts of the same behaviour.



Sample posts with pre-existing undertone of anti-foreign sentiment on social media (Link 1) (Source: TikTok)

Finding 3: Early political precedent of anti-Burundian rhetoric by politicians:

Legislative groundwork restricting foreign participation in small-scale trade had already been moving through Parliament since October 2025, via the Local Content Bill (sponsored by Laikipia Woman Rep Jane Kagiri) and the Micro and Small Enterprises (Amendment) Bill (sponsored by Manyatta MP Gitonga Mukunji), the same legislation President Ruto would later cite as the basis for his directive. This finding marks the first instance of a politician naming Burundians specifically in connection with the legislation.

On June 18, 2026, at what appears to be an ODM gathering based on visible party merchandise, Dagoretti North MP Beatrice Elachi publicly accused employers of hiring Burundian construction workers over Kenyans because they were cheaper.

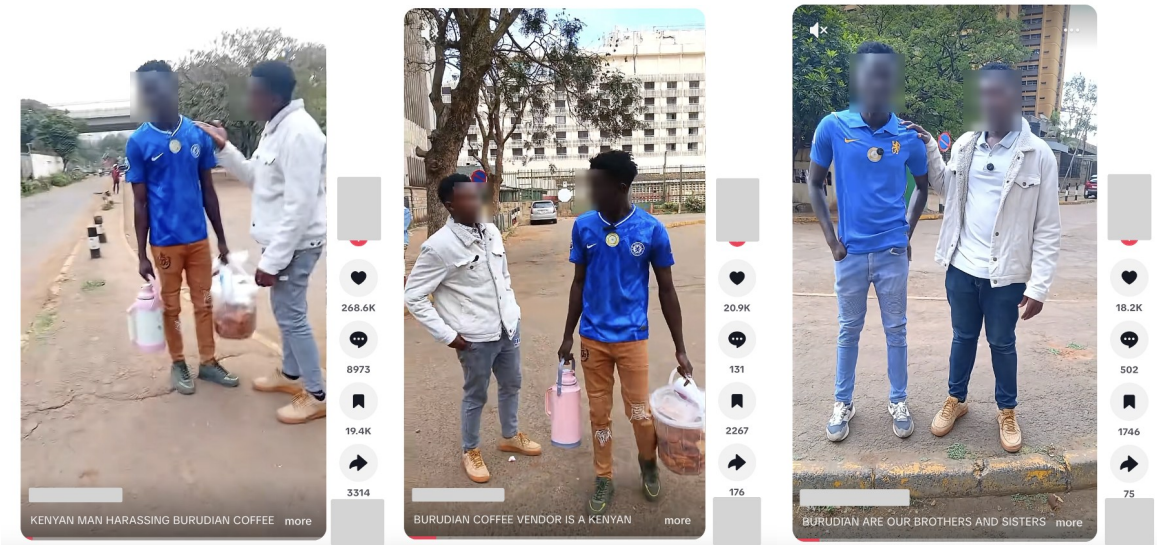


Post from @KenyanSays showing Elachi's accusations against Burundians (Link) (Source: X)

She is quoted as saying, *"I can see some people have taken up many jobs in the construction industry. I am about to disrupt that situation and tell them, 'You cannot come to Kenya and take jobs at 400 shillings a day when Kenyans are paid 700 shillings and above.'"* She extended the complaint to informal trade too, saying Burundians selling coffee and groundnuts were taking opportunities that should go to Kenyans, and said she'd push the issue in Parliament (Burundi Times).

Finding 4: Alleged skits of foreign Burundi nationals being harassed elicit response before and after Ruto's remarks: Satire mirrors human nature and societal absurdities: a piece of comedic content, created weeks before the political crisis even began, ended up shaping a real diplomatic response. Even though the creator made a video correcting this and stating that the video was staged, reshares and new versions of the same resurfaced again once the crisis peaked.

A video originally posted on July 19, 2026, by a TikTok creator garnered over 2.2M views and showed a Kenyan man publicly berating a Burundian coffee and mandazi vendor in Nairobi and accusing him of taking jobs and demanding his goods without paying him. It prompted a public response from Burundi's ambassador Fred Ngoga on X, who distanced the incident from the majority Kenyan sentiment.



Post by the creator alleged to be a staged and comedic video (link1, link 2, link 3) (Source: TikTok)

Due to the widespread response and reaction, the creator later posted a follow-up skit on July 27, 2026, revealing the original was staged and comedic. This did not put the matter to rest, because the video later resurfaced, triggered by the president's inflammatory statements. This prompted the creators to post a video on September 14, 2026, showing the same characters, with the Kenyan man apologising to the Burundian man. The video was captioned *"Burundians are our brothers and sisters"*.

Finding 5: A state-sanctioned counter-narrative emerged, with government and pro-government voices framing the directive as lawful enforcement rather than ethnic targeting.
Officials moved quickly to reject accusations of xenophobia, reframing the directive as a matter of documentation and regulatory compliance, a position that was echoed and amplified in pro-government social media activity.

Trade CS Lee Kinyanjui was the first official to issue a public clarification, on September 6: visa-free entry does not amount to a work or business permit (source).

Government Spokesperson Charles Owino held a press briefing on Monday, September 7 (the deadline day itself), explicitly rejecting the xenophobia framing and announcing the documentation and registration window. The hashtag #ThisIsNotXenophobia was noticed circulating in connection with some, though not all, of this broader government-aligned social media pushback echoing the same rejection of the "xenophobia" label.



"Video of Government Spokesperson Charles Owino addressing the foreign-traders directive and rejecting the xenophobia framing, via @spokespersongok (link) (Source: TikTok)"

Alongside Owino's briefing, other officials issued similar clarifications. Strategic adviser Fred Okango told People Daily: "We must not play politics with these issues, that the president is promoting xenophobia, and that's what I see our critics are saying. He is not." He clarified that visa-free entry does not amount to a work or business permit.

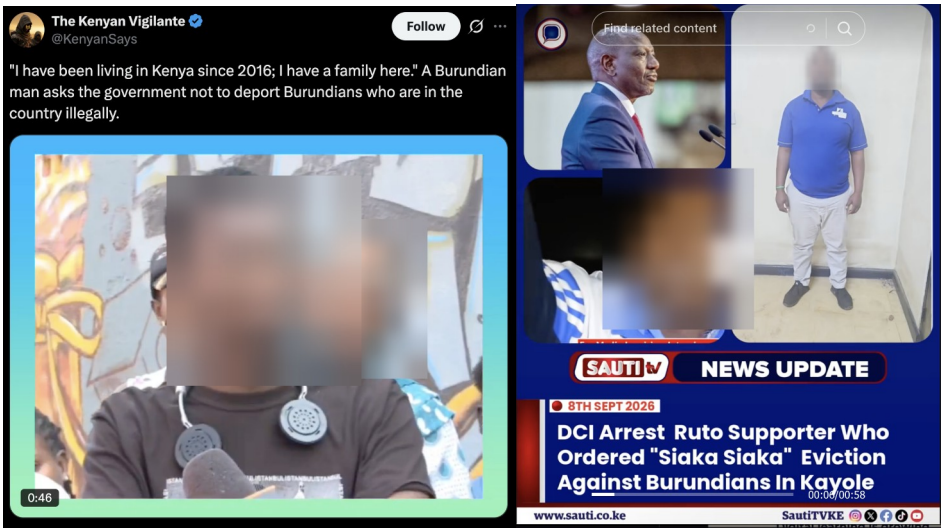
Separately, on September 10, on a local station Dagoretti North MP Beatrice Elachi backed the crackdown on local television, saying foreigners including Burundians should regularise their status: "My request is simple: every person living in this country should work the way a Kenyan works."

Finding 6: The September 2 directive was followed by mounting panic among Burundians, then by reports of harassment, confirmed violence, looting, and displacement across multiple locations. What began as anxiety over the compliance deadline escalated, over the course of a week, into reported harassment and then confirmed, witnessed violence against Burundians in several parts of the country.

On September 5, an X user wrote: "I have met several Burundians today and they are really worried about Monday [the Sept 7 deadline]... One told me he has been in Kenya for 21 years, he has long forgot about Burundi." The same day, @KenyanSays shared a Burundian man's plea: "I have been living in Kenya since 2016; I have a family here," asking the government not to deport Burundians in the country illegally.

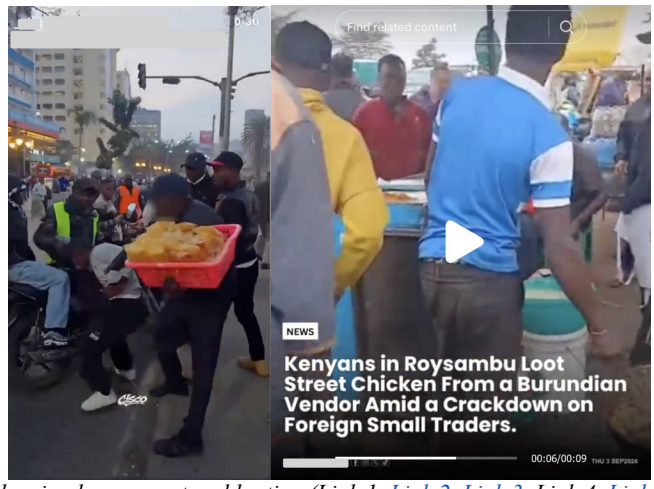


Post describing panic among Burundians ahead of the Monday deadline (link) (Source: X)



Video showing a Burundian man asking the government not to deport Burundians in the country illegally (link) (Source: X) Post showing DCI arrest of a man accused of ordering the eviction of Burundians in Kayole, dated 8th Sept 2026 (link) (Source: Sauti TV)

On September 6, a man made remarks at a Bunge la Mwananchi event at Jacaranda Grounds, Kayole, captured on video, accusing Burundians of taking business opportunities, giving them 24 hours to leave the country, and warning of "serious consequences" for those who stayed. The video circulated widely before his arrest on September 8 (the original post has since been taken down). Also on September 6, unverified posts began circulating alleging Burundians had been harassed, some appealing for help, and vigilante groups reportedly threatened Burundians online, ahead of any confirmed physical incident.



Sample posts with showing harassment and looting (Link 1, Link 2, Link 3, Link 4, Link 5) (Source: TikTok)

Confirmed, witnessed incidents of violence and displacement began appearing from September 7, the compliance deadline, in at least four distinct locations:

- **Eastleigh, Nairobi (Sept 7):** an X user reported a group of Kenyans chasing away Ugandans, Burundians, and Congolese casual laundry workers, writing that Ugandan women and children were "being forced to run."

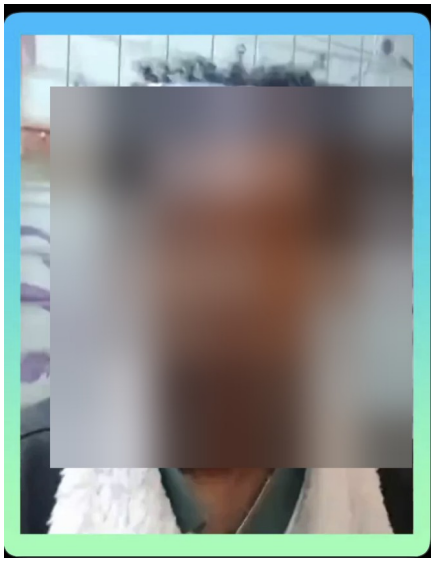


- **Githurai, Nairobi (Sept 7):** an X user reported a Burundian food vendor attacked, with Kenyans making away with his stock.

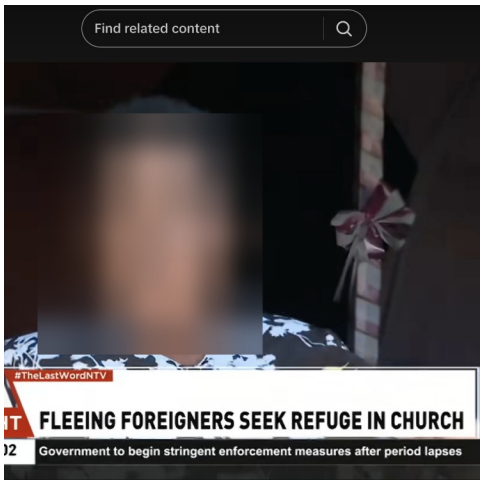


Sample posts with showing harassment and looting (Link 1, Link 2) (Source: TikTok)

- **Nairobi CBD (Sept 7):** @africatodayMG shared video of a Burundian shopkeeper whose store was looted, quoting him directly: "I have lived with you for 10 years & this is how you pay me? You have taken everything, now I have nothing."



- **Likoni/Mombasa (Sept 8):** Citizen TV reported hundreds of Burundians sheltering in a church in Mombasa after being threatened in Likoni, quoting one man: "They told us to leave and go back to Burundi."



Hundreds of Burundians queued at their embassy for emergency travel documents, and authorities arrested six suspects in connection with the Nairobi unrest.

A secondary pattern: the violence itself became a vehicle for ethnic scapegoating within Kenya. Several posts moved past condemning the attacks to attributing them to a specific Kenyan ethnic group or region, rather than describing them as diffuse or unorganised. One user (Sept 7) asked: "Why is it that it's always idiots from one particular region of Kenya who start causing chaos? From the videos going around, those terrorizing the Burundians appear to be mostly from that region, which is famously known for goonism." Another (Sept 8) made a similar claim without naming the group directly: "Why does goonism in Kenya keep coming from the same region? ... How many times do we call a pattern 'random'?" One post (Sept 9) named the group explicitly: "Luos should stop being violent. Those illiterate self-made mechanics from Homa Bay and Migori are looting businesses belonging to Burundi citizens." This produced pushback in the same vein rather than de-escalation: one user (Sept 9) responded by redirecting blame toward Kikuyus instead: "If we're all ready to have this conversation, then we shouldn't start by attacking Burundians. We should first address the Kikuyus; some of them act like Kenya belongs to them." This suggests the violence against Burundians was, for some users, being absorbed into pre-existing inter-ethnic Kenyan political narratives rather than treated as a distinct issue, a risk pattern worth flagging separately from the Kenya-Burundi dynamic itself.

Finding 7: Kenyan public figures and institutions mobilised publicly in solidarity with Burundians, rejecting the xenophobia framing.
In response to the crackdown, a range of Kenyan voices, from public figures to ordinary bystanders, pushed back publicly against the xenophobia narrative, both through statements and direct action.

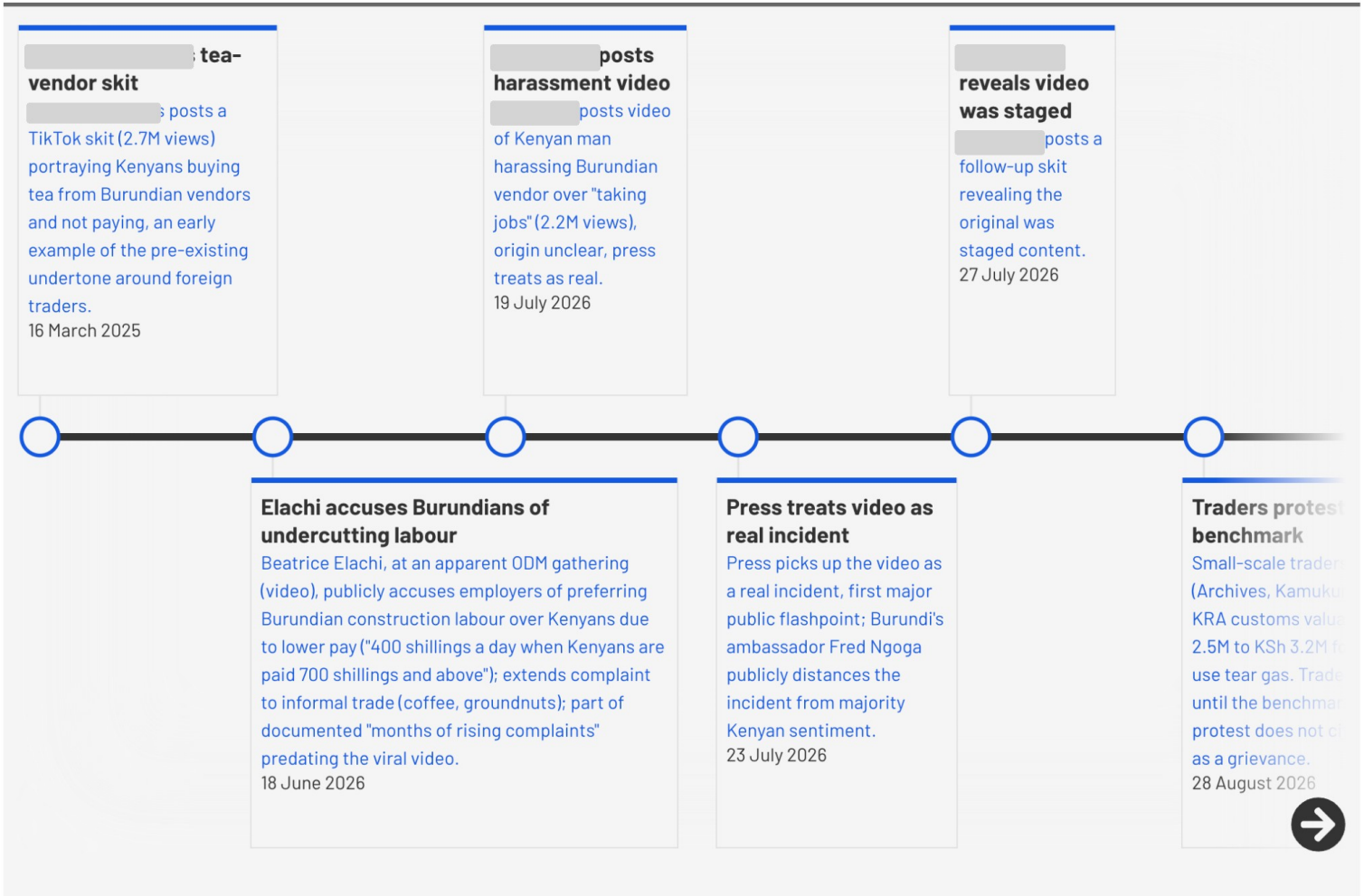
Public figures and online netizens publicly pushed back against the crackdown. Bien-Aimé Baraza of Sauti Sol stated: "An attack on one community is a threat to the dignity of us all. Let Africa be home for Africans." Octopizzo and Kidum joined similar calls, and hashtags rejecting Afrophobia and asserting "we are not xenophobic" circulated widely. Former IEBC Commissioner Roselyn Akombe pushed back specifically on the framing that foreigners were responsible for the cost of living: "They are not the cause of the high cost of living. The culprit is known to all of us." The East Africa Law Society also issued a statement affirming Kenya's right to regulate economic activity while stressing this must be done within its constitutional and treaty obligations.



Post showing Kidum offering transportation back to Burundi(link). Source: Facebook. Post showing people from Juja, an area on the outskirts of Nairobi, defending Burundian business from harassment (Link)

Solidarity also took the form of direct intervention. On September 8, in Juja, Kenyans stopped a man from attacking Burundian vendors. Two independent accounts confirm the incident: one wrote: "Kenyans stood with Burundians and stopped one man from attacking them. He came for their mandazi. Juja chose humanity. Humanity supersedes blind sycophancy. XENOPHOBIA, even when disguised as patriotism or licensed goonism, is still XENOPHOBIA" (link). Another user separately posted: "Today in Juja Kenya, Kenyans stood with Burundians and stopped one person from eating their mandazi and attacking them!!" (link).

5. Full timeline



[Viz Link]