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Kenyan groups urge Parliament to reconsider alcohol bill that could close 10,000 outlets

Opponents said proposals to raise the drinking age to 21, curb restaurant licenses and block daytime deliveries could put 30,000 jobs at risk

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Kenyan business groups, labor representatives, students and motorcycle taxi operators urged Parliament on Tuesday, November 24, to reconsider parts of a proposed alcohol control bill that they said could threaten jobs, close thousands of businesses and shift some consumers toward illicit drinks.

The criticism is focused on the Alcoholic Drinks and Drugs Control Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026, which was published in the Kenya Gazette Supplement on September 18. Among other changes, the bill would raise the legal drinking age to 21 from 18, limit where alcohol licenses can be issued and restrict the transportation of alcoholic drinks during daytime hours.

The debate matters beyond public health policy because the proposed rules could also reshape how beer, wine and spirits are sold and distributed in Kenya, potentially affecting market access for bars, restaurants, retailers, delivery operators and other parts of the beverage trade.

Stakeholders said they support efforts to curb alcohol abuse, protect minors and crack down on illegal alcohol. But they argued that the current draft goes too far by placing broad restrictions on licensed businesses in hospitality, entertainment and transport, without enough regard for employment and investment.

Michael Kiragu Muthami, chairman of the Pubs, Entertainment, Restaurants Association of Kenya, said the bill could expose about 10,000 outlets to closure and put roughly 30,000 jobs at risk. He said the annual economic impact could reach KSh8.46 billion, with damage extending beyond bars and restaurants to suppliers and other linked businesses.

Muthami objected to the proposal to raise the minimum drinking age, saying adults who are legally recognized at 18 should not face a separate threshold for alcohol consumption. He also challenged the proposal to stop licensing alcohol sales in restaurants and other hospitality venues, arguing that such a move would undercut a large part of the sector’s normal business model.

Under the proposed amendment to Section 12 of the Alcoholic Drinks Control Act, licenses could not be granted in a range of premises, including restaurants, universities, colleges and other institutions of higher learning. The bill would also affect public beaches, parks, amusement parks, cinemas, medical facilities, sports facilities, bus parks, bus stops, gas stations, railway stations and ferry stations.

The same bill would amend Section 3(c) of the Alcoholic Drinks Control Act by replacing the word “eighteen” with “twenty-one.” Similar changes are proposed in Sections 13, 21 and 24.

Labor leaders said the impact would not stop with business owners. Sava Wycliffe, secretary-general of the Kenya Hotels and Allied Workers Union, said higher age limits and tighter sales restrictions could force hospitality employers to cut staff. He urged lawmakers to weigh the consequences for workers before advancing the measure.

Wycliffe said the union would prefer targeted rules such as stronger age checks, responsible service standards and tighter compliance with license conditions rather than a broad prohibition on alcohol sales in hospitality establishments.

Student representatives also voiced opposition, saying the changes could reduce training and job opportunities for young people studying hospitality and food and beverage programs. MalcomX, a student leader at Multimedia University, said many students rely on hotels, restaurants, pubs and entertainment venues for internships, industrial attachments and entry-level work.

He argued that raising the drinking age to 21 could create new barriers for students under that age who are trying to gain practical experience in the hospitality industry. He also warned that limiting access to legal outlets without addressing demand could push some young consumers toward illicit alcohol, including chang’aa, a locally brewed spirit that has long raised safety concerns.

The bill has also drawn resistance from Kenya’s motorcycle taxi industry, known locally as boda boda operators. Elly Kegode, chairman of the Kenya Riders and Owners Bodaboda Sacco, said a provision that would prohibit transportation of alcohol between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. could cut off an important stream of income for riders who handle

deliveries.

Kegode also criticized a proposed penalty of KSh10 million or imprisonment for people found transporting alcohol in violation of the law. He said the punishment would be unfair to riders who act only as delivery service providers and do not produce the drinks they carry.

He argued that self-regulation is possible because many riders already work through digital platforms that identify drivers and track deliveries from seller to customer. He added that motorcycle taxi operators also play a role in road safety by transporting customers home after they have been drinking.

The groups said their objections should not be read as opposition to tighter oversight of the alcohol market. They called instead for enforcement that focuses on illegal producers and sellers, stronger age verification for buyers and more practical compliance rules for licensed operators.

Their position reflects a broader policy dispute over how Kenya should balance public health goals with economic activity in sectors that depend heavily on regulated alcohol sales. If enacted in its current form, the bill could alter how licensed restaurants, pubs and entertainment venues serve customers, while also affecting daytime logistics and delivery channels that move alcoholic beverages through the market.

For now, the stakeholders are asking lawmakers to revise the bill before it advances further, saying any new alcohol controls should protect consumers and minors without undermining lawful businesses and the workers who depend on them.