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Daniel Paget, Aikande Clement Kwayu

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Tanzania: reform-washing autocracy

Dan Paget and Aikande Kwayu

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Author bio

Dr. Dan Paget is a lecturer at the University of Sussex. His essays have twice appeared in previous issues of the *Journal of Democracy*.

Dr. Aikande Clement Kwayu is an analyst of Tanzanian politics. Her research has been published in *Party Politics* and *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*.

Abstract

President Hassan has been celebrated as a democratic reformer, but her goal increasingly appears to be to deliver not reform, but the performance of reform. Sustaining that performance, while forestalling reform, is her new strategy of regime survival. So far, it has delivered. Hassan has won widespread approbation, and dampened criticism. She has done so by using promise, process, and delay to hold her true motivations in suspense, and by adopting a ‘good governance’ style which contrasts with Magufuli’s own. However, beneath that performance, repression has persisted, and electoral manipulation has returned. Hassan no longer deserves the benefit of doubt.

When Samia Suluhu Hassan was sworn-in as the President of Tanzania on the 19th of March 2021, many democrats saw it as a windfall. Her predecessor, the late John Pombe Magufuli, had presided over a six-year authoritarian turn which was interrupted only by his death in office. Despite serving as Magufuli’s vice-president, Hassan indicated that she would enact democratic reforms. She soon began to deliver the first of them, and journalists, among many others, showered her with praise.

At home, praise came not only from government-controlled media houses, but some of the most independent and critical. Abroad, praise came, from, among other places, liberal media houses like *The Economist* and *The New York Times*, which had so vilified her predecessor. However, more than four years on, the picture has grown more complicated. Hassan's reforms have come with setbacks, delays and contradictions. Most recently, her party won, or awarded itself, 99% of positions in nationwide local elections. The liberal journalists who had praised Hassan's reforms have wrestled with how to incorporate these developments into their portrayals of her. Is she now a proponent or opponent of reform? Reflecting on precisely this tension, commentator Charles Onyango-Obbo remarked in February 2024 that it is "surprising... that Samia has not yet carved out a definitive image of herself."¹

So many have struggled to define Hassan, because they have been asking the wrong questions. The question should not be whether Hassan *is* a reformer, but *how* she is and is not reforming and *why*. Over time, the growing contradictions in her actions have betrayed an ulterior motive. Her intent is not the achievement of reform, but the impression of reform. She has carefully fashioned an image of reform as an ongoing process, , the greatest outcomes of which are forever just over the horizon. Sustaining that image, even while contradicting it in practice, is the key to the latest strategy of survival for the authoritarian regime of which she is the most recent in a long line of custodians. In that strategy, Hassan tries to have things both ways. She and the regime benefit from the acclamation and renewed legitimacy of reform, while withholding as much reform as possible for as long as possible. Put simply, Hassan is not a reformer. She is a performer.

Seeing Hassan's reforms as a performance is important. It throws into relief how we should think about her claim to be a reformer, and how we should not. Hassan is neither a driver nor obstacle to reform per se. For her, reform is an instrument: a means to reform-wash autocracy. While she stays this course, Hassan will continue to release just enough reform, crumb by crumb, to keep

alive the possibility that more and better is coming in the future. If she chooses to pause or reverse her reforms in critical moments, she will dangle the possibility of recommencing them in the future. She will choose reforms which enable everyday repression to continue unabated. Seeing Hassan's reforms as a performance is also important, because it is the first step towards better understanding how various audiences themselves have come to understand Hassan. In fact, recognizing that Hassan's reforms are the core of a strategy of performance makes it possible to pose another question: why has she been so successful in selling this performance? For she has indeed been successful. Her success lies in the coverage she has won from journalists and academics alike in a nexus of liberal media which connects Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, London, New York and beyond. She has been successful on the many occasions that media in this nexus have celebrated her reforms, of course, but also on the many more occasions that they have concluded that it is too soon to judge them. Even when they have declared that we must wait and see whether she takes her reforms further and deeper, they have entertained the idea that she might. Even when they have questioned whether she is pausing or contradicting her initial reforms, they have continued to emphasize that she did undertake initial reforms.

The secret of Hassan's success lies in a terrible truth: that Hassan has not only deftly blended promise, ambiguity and incrementalism. She has recognized that liberal journalists themselves trade in and sustain mediated ideas about what autocrats look like and how they behave. She has adopted a persona and style which stands in contrast to this mediated image of the autocrat. Thereby, she has made her self-presentation as a democrat more compelling in the eyes of those journalists than her concrete reforms merit. Put otherwise, she has used journalists' own ideas against them. Finally, seeing Hassan a performer of reform is important for how we analyze the dynamics of politics to come. It has implications for the branching pathways of brinkmanship, democratization and autocratization which lie before Tanzania. Chief among them is that Hassan's status as a reformer so alters regime legitimacy that, in years to come, reform, repression, boycotts,

protests and more will not only be undertaken in struggles to change the rules; they will simultaneously be deployed in attempts to preserve and undermine her reformer-status.

The measure of reform

Before the authoritarian turn which Magufuli's oversaw, Tanzania was no paragon of democracy. Its party of government, CCM (*Chama cha Mapinduzi*, or the Party of the Revolution), is the longest-ruling party in Africa. It was formed by the merger of two socialist parties. One led Tanganyika out of British colonial rule in 1961. The other led a revolution on the archipelago state of Zanzibar in 1964. Later that year, they joined to form Tanzania. Their socialist program did not survive the changing circumstances of the 1980s, but their party did. CCM initiated a transition from single-party to multi-party rule in 1992, and controlled the process. It ensured that it preserved the authoritarian laws, institutions and practices which undergirded its dominance. It kept news media in the orbit of the regime. It kept a tight leash on associational life, and stymied signs of criticism towards the state wherever it could. It made regime-loyalty ever-more critical to business success. It kept the ruling party better funded than its rivals. All the while, it preserved its privileged links with the security services, to whom, presumably, the covert as well as occasionally overt violence and disappearances can be attributed. This authoritarian apparatus sustained CCM's electoral dominance for the first two decades of multipartyism.²

Nevertheless, by 2015, the opposition had acquired electoral strength.³ In that context, the regime began an authoritarian turn which gathered pace during Magufuli's presidency. It enacted draconian laws which gave it new powers to censure speech; to deregister journalists; to take media outlets out of print and off the air; and to monitor, punish or even deregister political parties. It used these new powers, and old ones, at a tempo which broke with the past. It repeatedly suspended media outlets. It banned many outright. It held, charged and jailed innumerable

journalists, activists and opposition politicians. It banned rallies. Alongside these overt activities were many more covert ones. The pace of assaults, killings and disappearances increased dramatically. So did the pace of illegal detentions. In the 2020 election, the regime left nothing to chance. It raised the intensity of repression, and it appeared, for the first time, to intervene to rig election outcomes systematically on the mainland, all while directing a policy of censorship-backed covid-denialism.

It is in this most draconian of contexts, in which Hassan assumed the presidency. In some regards, Hassan oversaw notable initial changes. Many of these changes relaxed constrictions on public speech. She relicensed a number of media outlets banned by Magufuli. In January 2023, she lifted the ban on public rallies. These measures expanded the scope of who could publicly communicate and how. More widely, she issued a succession of clemencies. Various opposition partisans and activists being held or on trial were released. Among them, eventually, was Freeman Mbowe, the then-chairman of Tanzania's leading opposition party, Chadema (*Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo*, or The Party of Democracy and Development). She gave assurances to other opposition politicians who had fled Tanzania fearing arrest or assassination, that they could return safely and freely. Alongside these changes, there was a temporary slackening in the tempo of everyday repression.

Nevertheless, the democratic reforms which Hassan undertook pale in comparison to the authoritarian reforms which preceded them. Hassan's reforms were limited in scope. Magufuli's authoritarian reforms were striking for the variety of forms they took. Presidential writ, legislation, and the action of numerous government agencies were brought to bear in concert to advance the frontiers of authoritarianism in Tanzania. In contrast, as many critics have remarked, Hassan's reforms were concentrated in the domain of executive action to the exclusion of legislative action. Three acts ostensibly dedicated to embedding these reforms in law were enacted in April 2024.

However, in substance, they did little to repeal prior draconian legislation, and in ways they consolidated it, as the Centre for Strategic Litigation's assessment details. Put simply, Hassan's democratic reforms were no match for the task of unwinding the authoritarian turn which had gathered pace since 2015, let alone the wider task of dismantling Tanzania's deep authoritarian architecture.

Keeping them guessing

One might not have expected Hassan's democratic reforms to be so meagre in scale if one had read how they have been covered in liberal media, whether domestic or international. On the contrary, Hassan, and her reforms, enjoyed a warm reception. At home, *The Citizen* described her initial reforms as "the beginning of a new era."⁴ Abroad, *Deutsche Welle* wrote that her "approach raises hope of change."⁵ Coverage was not always so kind. The recurrent spates of authoritarian action which I have described all precipitated criticism and revision in assessment in some quarters. Nevertheless, the tone of this praise largely continued until the middle of 2024. In January 2023, the esteemed Tanzanian commentator and Magufuli-critic Jenerali Ulimwengu wrote that "there can be really little doubt that Samia is determined to put her country on a new trajectory."⁶ In April 2024, commentator Nicodemus Minde wrote that Hassan "has reversed most of the retrogressive policies introduced by Magufuli."⁷

It is not that this praise was unreserved. Aside from a series of consistent Hassan sceptics,⁸ much coverage of Hassan's reforms came with the qualifier that it needed to be extended, and institutionalized. The phrase on which many settled, to describe how they saw Hassan's reforms, was "cautious optimism."⁹ Yet even when coverage and commentary came with reservations, it was a boon to Hassan. Optimism, no matter how cautious, is a sentiment of expectation. To be optimistic about Hassan's reforms is to anticipate, albeit with qualification, that they will continue.

Commentators interpreted Hassan's reforms as signs that more reforms were yet to come. Activist-commentators had another, related motivation to talk-up Hassan's reforms. They speculated that Hassan might be more likely to lean into future reforms if she was praised for her initial ones.

Whatever the rationale, journalists and commentators constructed the set of reforms to be judged as including not only the reforms already achieved, but other reforms which lay ahead. Commentators still constructed such future reforms when, like Minde, they phrased their assessments in the conditional, like demands: "to Restore Tanzania's Democracy, Samia Must Solidify Her Reforms."¹⁰ They even constructed such narratives when, like the hawkish *Washington Post*, they warily wrote that Hassan's announcements were "fueling both hope and skepticism."¹¹ Altogether, commentators, national and international alike, were more generous in their portrayals of her than the content of her concrete reforms merited and sometimes more generous than they intended to be.

Journalists portrayed Hassan's democratic reforms as the part of an ongoing program of reform, in part, because she herself did. In an open letter published in *The Citizen* in July 2022, she wrote that "my administration will initiate reforms... reforms in the electoral laws will create a level playing field in our politics and give the electorate an opportunity to elect the leaders they want."¹² More widely, she presented the health of Tanzania's democracy as one of the causes to which her reforms were in service. In this context, she and her ministers presented the concrete democratic reforms which they undertook, no matter how modest, as initial instalments which gave credibility to the promises of a wider schedule of reforms to come.

In this regard, the sprawling character of Magufuli's authoritarianism worked in Hassan's favor, in two ways. First, it gave her a long menu from which to select measures to overturn. She chose to reverse measures which had symbolic potency. The freeing of political prisoners, the release of

opposition leader Freeman Mbowe, the re-licensing of media outlets and the lifting of the ban on rallies were all highly visible and meaning-laden steps for Hassan to take. Second, after the extremity of that program, any change, no matter how minor, seemed like a major improvement, even if they left Tanzania's authoritarian architecture intact. As *The Economist* put it, "Tanzania's new president surely can't be worse than the old one."¹³

An equally crucial part of this strategy of forestalling reform, even while preserving the credibility of the promise of reform, was timing. Hassan drip-fed her reforms. The first media licenses were reissued in April 2021, the next in February 2022, and the next in January 2023, for instance. While staggering the delivery of some reforms, Hassan created pretexts to delay other changes, especially the constitutional ones for which democracy activists have clamored the most. Nine months into her presidency, December 2021, she announced the formation of a taskforce to review the options for political reforms. However, by the time it had submitted its final report in October 2022, the pivotal discussion of reform had been shifted to another venue, and another process. In May that year, Hassan had begun a process of bilateral talks with the leading opposition party, Chadema. What the content of further reforms would be became subject to the outcome of these negotiations. While these reforms dragged on, Hassan kept the prospect of future progress alive, first by unilaterally lifting of the ban on rallies in January 2023, and then by announcing in March that plans for legislation were in-motion. Only in September 2023, did she announce that constitutional reform would have to wait. The reason given was that citizens should be educated about the existing constitution before they were consulted about a new one, and, incredibly, that this process would take three years. However, simultaneously, to stay the judgements of any sceptics, she announced that the promised legislation would come before parliament that November. When they did, the possibility of that they might be amended was sustained during their passage through parliament.

By thus layering reforms, staggering their delivery, changing position, and switching process, Hassan has forestalled serious democratic reform, but nevertheless held in suspense whether or not she is a democratic reformer, even while maintaining oscillating levels of everyday repression. With time, coverage has become more critical, led by some of the Tanzanian commentators quoted above. At the extreme, *The Economist* concluded in March 2024 that Hassan “has shied away from meaningful political reforms.”¹⁴ Similarly, farsighted commentator Sammy Awami judged as early as September 2023 that Hassan “has failed to back them [her promises] up with concrete actions.”¹⁵ More liberal media houses have become critical in their coverage in the closing months of 2024 amid rising repression and local elections. Nevertheless, there are silver linings in this coverage for Hassan. Most of it did not jettison the notion that Hassan is a reformer altogether. Instead, it complicated it. For instance, Andres Schipres wrote in *The Financial Times* in September 2024 that “Hassan has moved away from her predecessor’s hardline policies and embarked on political reforms... But last month police rounded up several hundred supporters.”¹⁶ Similarly, Minde wrote that “After introducing numerous reforms... [Hassan] is finding it difficult to sustain them.”¹⁷ While such portrayals draw out the contradictions in Hassan’s reforms, they still center those initial reforms in her action and identity. This presentation of reforms and repression side-by-side has muddied the waters of even critical coverage. For example, even as Cai Nebe and Okeri Ngutjinazo offered critical coverage of Hassan’s tenure in *Deutsche Welle*, they quote a commentator who remarks that “she [Hassan] has done far better in terms of democracy than Magufuli.”¹⁸

Keeping the playing field closed

Of course, it remains possible that Hassan is a lone democrat in an autocratic regime playing a long game. The inner politics of CCM are often impenetrable, and Hassan’s motivations are, ultimately, known best to herself. Nevertheless, the actions of Hassan and her regime make this theory unlikely. Her drip-feeding, forum-shopping and pretext-inventing all smack of attempts to

fool the public, rather than government insiders. They are only compatible with the most elaborate of theories of Hassan as a democratic triple-agent, who presents her reforms to regime elites as a charade meant to garner legitimacy, all while ultimately intending to betray those elites and make good on those reforms. Equally, Hassan's steady consolidation of power also makes the notion that she is beholden to a shadow-state ever-harder to swallow. As her tenure has lengthened, she has made waves of appointments and dismissals to party, state, military and intelligence services which put her in increasing command of every facet of the regime.

However, what counts most against the possibility that Hassan is a would-be democrat constrained by those around her is the recurrent program of repression which she has overseen alongside her reforms. While everyday harassment has periodically abated, it has never ceased, and it has always subsequently recovered its prior vigor. Mbowe was only released in 2022 after first being held for 226 days under the presidency of Hassan, who maintained that his case was for the courts to decide, up until the moment she had it withdrawn. Equally, while hundreds of activists were released through 2021 and 2022, many more were arrested and charged in subsequent crackdowns in 2023 and 2024. At the extreme, in August 2024, 520 were arrested at a single protest, including opposition leaders. Alongside these arrests, extra-judicial violence has continued apace. Activists and Chadema officials have been abducted or attacked. A number have been killed. In August 2024, the Tanganyika Law Society released a list of 83 such disappearances. Equally, while the media censorship temporarily eased, it has risen since. Most recently, *Mwananchi Communications* were slapped with a 30-day ban for reporting the attacks described above.

The first nationwide (local) elections under Hassan's presidency took place in November 2024. In them, repression and manipulation approached the extremities of the Magufuli era. In campaigns, the levels of everyday repression intensified. Opposition meetings were interrupted and obstructed. Candidates were harassed. Numerous activists were arrested, attacked, or abducted.

Several were killed. In parallel, there were signs of systemic electoral manipulation. Opposition candidates were blocked from standing en masse. Chadema alleged that they had submitted nominations for 65% of the over 80,000 village, sub-village and street chairpersons, but that almost half of these, or over 25,000, had been rejected on clerical errors and technicalities. While these precise figures cannot be confirmed, the pattern is clear. Opposition nominations were rejected at scale; CCM ones were not. On election day, many opposition agents were kept out of polling stations on similar technicalities. Activists recorded and shared online many instances of alleged ballot-stuffing, turnout-buying and other irregularities. Perhaps relatedly, in the official results, turnout reached 86%, the highest level since the introduction of multiparty elections. The nominal outcome was a landslide, in which CCM won 99.0% of the 16,535 village and street chairpersonships, and a further 98.2% of 63,949 sub-village positions, and 99.2% of 230,882 village council memberships.

What proportion of these extraordinary results can be attributed to CCM manipulation is unclear, and most of the allegations of manipulation remained unsubstantiated. However, this is in part because the system prevents their substantiation. The judiciary remains captured, and the electoral commission is independent in name only. To boot, the election was not even administered by this nominally independent commission. Instead, it was overseen by the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government, which is not only, as the name suggests, directly accountable to the president, but run by her son-in-law. In those circumstances, these elections have no integrity. They leave one with no choice but to resort to conjecture to judge whether and how much these elections may have been manipulated.

The extremity of these actions is a strike against the theory of Hassan as a lone democrat doing her utmost. However, what makes this strike all the more decisive is the context in which those actions were undertaken. Chadema and the opposition at large have gone to extraordinary efforts

to rebuild their support and organizational apparatus, especially since rallies were unbanned in January 2023. Yet there is little indication that they were in a position to win the local government elections outright. Indeed, it is possible that, had the 2024 local elections been free and fair, opposition gains might have been relatively modest. In a representative national survey run in early 2025, 5.8% said that they would vote for Chadema, and 78.2% for CCM. These figures should be read with caution, on three counts. First, fearful of sanction by survey enumerators or others present during interviews, Tanzanians systematically underreport support for the opposition. In 2015, Chadema outperformed its polling in the presidential election by between 10% and 15%, depending on the poll. Second, other question wording reveals a more complex picture of public opinion, in which Chadema support is deeper, and CCM shallower. When, in a survey placed in early 2024, respondents were asked not *whether* but *how much* they supported Chadema, 5.6% said “completely,” but a further 12.1% said “a lot.” When asked the same about CCM, 29.9% said “completely” and 34.2% said “a lot.” Third, answers to other questions in the 2025 survey reveal what appears to be a wider base of at least potential opposition support. For instance, 35.5% overcame acquiescence bias to disagree with the statement that the regime is not corrupt. 32.7% disagreed with the statement that the government does not use its power to give its candidates advantages in elections. 43.1% disagreed with the statement that the constitution does not need to be changed. In other words, when citizens are asked questions which do not directly implicate them in overt opposition support, a much wider proportion reveal deeper regime-critical and opposition-aligned opinions.

Nevertheless, only the most optimistic reading of this survey data suggests that Chadema would have won a majority of positions if the 2024 local elections had been free and fair. In this context, the actions of Hassan and her regime reveals what appears to be an underlying strategy: to not only stop the opposition from winning elections, but to ensure that official opposition gains are so meagre that they never even look like a party which could one day win them. There is an

underlying continuity that runs through this objective of Hassan's administration and that of Magufuli's. Paget described in these pages how Magufuli's authoritarian turn amounted to an attempt to reverse years of opposition gains by leaving them so debilitated and demoralized that they would lastingly demobilized.¹⁹ The rise in the intensity of repression and the 99% local elections seem bent upon redoubling that effort. In other words, despite token reforms, Hassan's regime remains like Magufuli's in a crucial respect. It does not resemble a competitive electoral autocracy which permits electoral competition while tilting the playing field in its favor. Instead, it resembles a hegemonic electoral autocracy in which, in effect, no such competition is permitted at all. Altogether, Hassan's actions are consistent not with those of a genuine but constrained reformer, but instead with those of a media-savvy autocrat might, who deflects for enduringly intensive opposition repression with impeccable image management.

The image of a reformer

Of course, this underlying motivation is easier to read with hindsight. Yet one needed neither extraordinary powers of deduction nor deep cynicism to anticipate that Hassan's ultimate intent at least *might* have been to thus reform in order to conserve. Indeed, some have long argued that Hassan's ultimate loyalty would be to the regime.²⁰ This raises the question: why has Hassan been so successful in sustaining her performance of reform? Put otherwise, why did so many liberal journalists entertain it, albeit cautiously? The answer becomes clearer if one widens the aperture to consider not only how Hassan's democratic reforms were presented and appraised, but how her wider person and presidency was.

Hassan outwardly promised continuity with Magufuli. However, in many respects, she sharply departed from Magufuli's policy platform. She reversed his covid-denialist health policy. Likewise, she stepped out of Magufuli's anti-imperialist posture. On the diplomatic level, Hassan undertook

an international charm offensive. On a domestic policy level, the extra-legal tax raids, contract tear-ups, and interventions in private enterprise ceased. In their place, policy was re-dedicated to the ease of doing business and the solicitation of foreign investment.

In one reading, these policies served to placate international, especially Western concern. Perhaps, this interpretation goes, Tanzania was changing course in every domain except the democratic in the hope that, in exchange, donors would turn a blind eye to its enduring authoritarianism. However, in another reading, these policies were part of a broader picture in which Hassan's claims about democratic reforms became more compelling. Of course, these wider policies have no *necessary* relation to the democratic reforms that Hassan was promising to implement. Autocrats can reject or embrace medical science. Small-d democrats can be internationalists or isolationists. Yet Hassan's sharp departure from her predecessor's policies became a crucial part of the context in which commentators assessed her claims to be embarking on a program of democratic reform. It became part of that context, in particular, in juxtaposition to Magufuli as he had been constructed in media, especially international liberal media. Many writing for these publications had described Magufuli as a populist.²¹ They meant that he belonged to a constructed canon of anti-imperialist, anti-business, science-denying, egomaniacal, Bonapartist tyrants alongside the likes of the late Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, and Robert Mugabe. No matter what one thinks of this characterization, or this conception of populism, their circulation in liberal media created a pattern of associations, a mediated imaginary of what sort of leader Magufuli was, and what its opposite would be.

In this perspective, Hassan's policies took on further significances. They each added a layer to a story of Hassan moving from a constructed Magufuli pole of leadership towards a constructed opposing pole defined by the technocratic, internationalist and business-friendly.²² They enriched a picture in which she was overseeing not just reforms of particular policies, but reform writ large.

This added sense to the claim that she was – she must be - initiating *democratic* reforms. Hassan herself painted such a picture. She presented “reform,” rather than democratic reform, as her goal. In an open letter in *The Citizen*, she presented it as one of what she called four Rs, alongside reconciliation, resilience and rebuilding.²³

Aside from the above, there was one domain in which Hassan ostentatious turned away from her predecessor, above others: gender. Magufuli had drawn particularly acute scorn, not least in international liberal media, for a wide front of misogynistic remarks and policy. As Hassan ascended to the presidency, she became the first female executive head of state in Tanzania, and the only at that time in Africa. She leant into that mark of distinction. She presented her very presidency as a blow struck against those who doubted that a women could lead. She reversed Magufuli’s ban on adolescent mothers attending school. She prioritized contraception access. In these ways, and others, she integrated, as she might put it, women’s inclusion and empowerment into government policy. This is not to say that she would see eye-to-eye with other feminists today. Nevertheless, she made it on the Times 100 List 2022, with a glowing epigraph from Africa’s first elected head of state, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson. This has made her performance of democratic reform yet more compelling.

Hassan made this constructed departure from Magufuli, with everything it connoted about her democratic reforms, not only in policy, but performance. Magufuli’s vilification as a “populist” in international media was not only about substance, but style. Journalists characterized him, rightly or wrongly, as impulsive, temperamental, bellicose, intolerant of criticism and disinterested in the facts. They have described Hassan, often in direct comparison to Magufuli, in polar opposite terms. They have portrayed her manner as calm and measured, her tone as civil and conciliatory, her speech as considered and succinct, and her decision-making as thoughtful and deliberate. Of course, as a black, hijab-wearing, Muslim, African and now elderly (65 years-old) woman, it is of

little wonder that Hassan has developed such a public persona. Nevertheless, there are numerous ways in which she has played into it as president.

In her actions, she has made policy by assembling committees and expert taskforces. She has convened public forums to solicit public engagement. She has prioritized meeting her counterparts, both in her international diplomacy, and her dialogues with stakeholders. She has extolled the importance of “civilized politics and...conversation and dialogue.”²⁴ Altogether, Hassan’s manner and mode of rule should be seen not as something innate to her person, but rather something which she performs, and therefore, something which she can inflect to her advantage. As president, she has fused respectability and professionalism in a style which she embodies and practices. Commentator Elsie Eyakuze remarked, in reference to this style, that “thanks to Samia [Suluhu Hassan] it is going to be quite ‘boring’ in Tanzania.”²⁵ Boring may have been precisely Hassan’s intention, and not only because it disperses media attention. This style has added depth to her constructed departure from Magufuli. It is wholly congruent with the conception of good governance on which her policies and government converged as constructed in media. Through this performance, and through those policies, she has created a rich and compelling picture, with an implicit message: could someone like me really be a dictator?

Breaking the spell

How long Hassan can sustain this performance of reform is an open question. If Hassan holds her current course, the evidence of her true intentions will continue to mount over the years to come. If Hassan and her regime approach elections in 2025, and beyond, as they have the 2024 local elections, the disjunction between her performance of reform and her execution of repression will become increasingly stark. Furthermore, in 2027, Hassan’s three-year postponement of constitutional reform will have come and gone. Hassan may find another pretext to delay

constitutional change, or manage a cosmetic process, rather than eventually aborting the process altogether. Yet even such half-way house choices will provide further evidence of her ulterior motive. The souring of media coverage in recent months illustrates this potential.

Nevertheless, this does not make the de-masking of Hassan inevitable, or fast-approaching. Media coverage did not turn critical of Hassan in most quarters during the first three-and-a-half years of her tenure, even though there was plenty of evidence for a clear-eyed analyst to read. Likewise, while much coverage of the 2024 local elections was (ambivalently) critical, overall, coverage remained scarce. Even in her worst hour in liberal media thus far, Hassan succeeded in dissipating media attention almost as much as Magufuli attracted it. More widely, the lesson from Hassan's presidency so far is that if such critical opinion continues to harden, she will simply change up the promised schedule of reform. A new concession will be offered, the schedule for constitutional reform will be brought forward, or whatever she judges needs to be done, and can be done, to throw her true motives back into doubt and muddle critical coverage.

Tanzania's opposition seems to have reached the same conclusion. In January 2025, assassination-attempt survivor Tundu Lissu was elected as chairman of Chadema, defeating the incumbent chairman of 21 years, Freeman Mbowe. With Lissu's election, Chadema's anti-regime posture has shifted, and hardened. Lissu ran on a platform of 'no reform, no elections.' He has declared that if reforms are not forthcoming, not only would Chadema not participate in the presidential, parliamentary and ward-councilor elections scheduled for October 2025, but Chadema would mobilize support at home and overseas to ensure that those elections did not take place at all. This puts Chadema on-course for a historic showdown with the regime. While the opposition has boycotted local and Zanzibari elections before, it has never boycotted presidential or parliamentary elections nationwide, let alone campaigned against them taking place.

This change in posture should be read in a dual context. The first is about Tanzania's enduring depth of the regime's authoritarianism. Lissu and Chadema seem to have concluded that they have little to lose by refusing to participate in such elections. As Hassan seems determined to prevent Chadema from not only winning, but from acquiring an electoral foothold, even if Chadema did participate, it would gain few seats. Worse still, it would legitimate the elections themselves, and the official humiliating results. The second is about Hassan's performance of reform. While Hassan has had success in sustaining her mediated performance until now, that does not mean that it is stable, or inevitable. Chadema's 'no reforms, no election' resolution reads not only as a strategy of brinkmanship negotiation, but an attempt to break the spell of Hassan's performance. It seems designed to carry spectators at home and abroad over a threshold of disbelief, in which they come to question not only particular actions in Hassan's performance, but the performance as a whole. Boycotting, or threatening to boycott elections, gives dramatic weight to Chadema's longstanding claims about Hassan's insincerity and her regime's authoritarianism by performatively rejecting the political system. It draws attention to those claims by breaking with convention and turning, or threatening to turn a national election in an empty ritual in a deviation from normal practice. Finally, if it translates into the campaign of civil disobedience which Lissu has called for, it will create dramatic showdowns between activists and state authorities which will throw the regime's enduring authoritarianism into sharp relief. Altogether, whether or not 'no reforms, no election' achieves electoral reforms immediately, it seems designed to engender a moment of rejection in which Hassan's performance of reform unravels.

The performative viability of this new strategy, if Chadema does stick to it, remains unclear. If Chadema does indeed not nominate candidates for elections, it is at best an open legal question whether it will be eligible to convene rallies during the campaign period, and so Chadema will very likely surrender a pivotal stage on which to broadcast its popularity and viability. In Chadema's absence, CCM can be expected to take full advantage of this stage and put its considerable

organizational and financial heft into turning the elections in a celebration of CCM's enduring supremacy, in which it will be free to dispense with many of its repressive or manipulative tactics. While an alternative for Chadema is to convene protest and illegal meetings, beyond a committed core, Chadema supporters have proven reluctant to brave confrontations with police, and its protests have been muted. In short, Chadema's challenge will be to find compelling modes of performance which it can deliver and sustain beyond the electoral space. Without them, its message of resistance may not cut through.

Whatever the future holds for this opposition strategy, the Hassan's performance of reform looks set to lie at the center of Tanzanian politics. The regime's legitimacy and international status involves sustaining this performance even as it continues Magufuli-era repression. The opposition's future involves achieving mass disillusionment with that performance as a first step towards rolling back that repression. For democrats, the lessons to be learned are clear: don't be duped. Hassan has received the benefit of the doubt. She has taken advantage of it. This is not only about what Hassan deserves. It is what democratic concessions can be extracted from her. Hassan wants to be seen as the reformer. If citizens, journalists and foreign actors alike become less credulous, she will have to deliver more democratic reforms to win back their goodwill.

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