

Tanzania Will Never be the Same Again

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Version of 17 November 2025, accepted for publication

Tanzania will never be the same. Widespread protests erupted nationwide amid a sham general election held on Wednesday 29th October. The regime responded by plunging the nation into a six-day internet blackout from which only scraps of reporting and footage emerged. Weeks later, many of the details are still not known, but the picture is clear. The regime visited a terror upon its citizens during those six days. The suppression of protests became a massacre in which it appears that hundreds, perhaps thousands have been killed. In the crackdown that followed, hundreds of activists have been charged with treason, and more still detained by the police. Tanzania's ruling party, CCM, is no stranger to violence. Yet the scale, brutality and extremity of its actions since the election is unprecedented. The upshot was that the CCM-regime quelled the protests, at least temporarily. Yet an unintended casualty of the crackdown it authorized may have been one of the social foundations of its rule. CCM has long-cultivated an image of popularity and benevolence even while practicing authoritarianism. The events of recent days have done untold damage to that image. If this one social foundation is crumbling, so is another: the low-protest steady state in which CCM had long kept Tanzania. A movement was emergent in the protests, at least fleetingly. The carnage of the crackdown was meant to strangle it at birth. Yet whether or not this movement reassembles in new protests, its potential to do so will loom over Tanzanian politics like Banquo's ghost.

All this portends ill for CCM, and its leader, President Samia Suluhu Hassan, who was allegedly re-elected with almost 98% of the vote amid supposedly [record-breaking turnout](#) alongside a CCM-packed National Assembly in the elections. These bad omens for CCM in turn have grave implications, at least in the short-term, for Tanzanian citizens, who stand in line to be future victims of the increasingly destructive means to which the regime is turning to prolong its 64-year tenure. Yet it is a moment of revival for Tanzania's [people power movement](#). The movement lives, even after everything that CCM has thrown at it. All this is profoundly different from the path which Tanzania seemed to be on just a few days ago, when Hassan appeared to be on track to reconsolidate CCM's status as a legitimized if autocratic hegemon. In short, Tanzania is changed. These events, and their aftermath, have profoundly altered the dynamics of political struggle in Tanzania almost overnight. They bring into view a different set of possible futures for this famously once-peaceful nation.

1 The terror

The protests began on the 29th of October in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's commercial capital, as voting was underway. They spread across the cities of Mwanza, Mbeya, Arusha, Geita, Dodoma and a series of towns besides. They often dispersed after confrontations with police, but only to regroup and re-form soon subsequently. The immediate trigger for the protests was regime's manipulation of the general elections. CCM has a long history of using authoritarian means to tilt

the playing field in its favor. Yet in 2025, under Hassan, it crossed autocratic thresholds it had not transgressed in decades. It kept both of Hassan's principal opponents off the presidential ballot. Tundu Lissu, the leader of opposition party Chadema, spent the election campaign in court being tried for treason. Luhagha Mpina, the presidential opponent of ACT-Wazalendo, was disqualified on technicalities. These were merely the most brazen acts in a program of repression which had been gathering pace for some time. The pace of [political abductions and killings](#) had increased sharply. Social media platforms, X, Telegram and Jamii Forums [had been banned](#). In these actions, the regime renewed an authoritarian turn which had been set in motion in 2014 and executed in the 2020 elections. It went beyond [tilting the playing field](#). It all-but-closed the playing field altogether. It ruled as a hegemonic electoral autocracy, not a legitimate one.

Protestors may have been animated by any of a number of material grievances. Yet the demands into which they channeled them were resoundingly political. Footage shows protestors chanting 'we do not want CCM,' alongside other well-worn opposition calls, including 'we want change,' and 'justice for all.' Online, activists popularized a new nickname for the Hassan, Idi Amin Mama, in reference to Idi Amin Dada, the infamous military dictator of 1970s Uganda. Online footage, little of which has been verified, reveals that the protests often took on an emancipatory air. Protestors often appeared angry. Yet they often also seemed high spirited. At least fleetingly, protestors controlled the streets. They challenged, and briefly threw off, the authority of the regime. They were also violent. They tore down posters of Hassan. They [ransacked polling stations](#). They [torched](#) vehicles and [buildings](#). Those belonging to CCM, the police and [the government](#) were especially targeted. So were those associated with regime initiatives and supporters. In the context of this emancipatory mood, there was brief but widespread online speculation that Tanzania's armed forces would come out to shield them from the police. Footage shows protestors hailing army personnel carriers in greeting. This would, of course, have set the stage for a political revolution. It seemed, at least for a moment, as though the regime's authority was ebbing away.

Many details of the protests, and the regime's response, remain difficult to ascertain. Not only did the digital shutdown shroud Tanzania in secrecy. Professional reporting was [impeded](#) by state restrictions and the risks to life it involved. Nevertheless, after the shutdown was lifted, the trickle of amateur footage making its way out of Tanzania became a flood, [some](#) of which has been verified since. The wider picture it paints is corroborated by the [countless eyewitness testimonies](#) and the [increasingly extensive independent reporting](#) which has emerged since.

It was a massacre. It was many massacres at many places and many times. Security forces fired directly at crowds facing them. They fired upon them liberally and indiscriminately. They shot protestors as they fled. They shot bystanders. In the days that followed, they killed more. They [went, armed, into neighborhoods](#), perhaps [searching for organizers](#). Some were arrested. Others were lined up and [executed on the spot](#). Many of these atrocities appear to have been committed by the police, with support from the army, which was deployed. Yet they worked alongside heavily armed men in plain clothes. Much speculation has surrounded their identities. Some have suggested that they belong to the Tanzanian Intelligence and Security Services. [Others have argued](#) that that in the mix were irregular paramilitary groups long tied to the state apparatus in the semi-

autonomous archipelago of Zanzibar. [Others still have alleged](#) that troops from [neighboring Uganda](#) or indeed elsewhere may also have been deployed in Tanzania at Hassan's request.

After three days, this brutal onslaught had achieved its objective. The protests had, at least for the moment, been quashed. [Reports indicated](#) that the streets were largely quiet by the fourth day. Yet internet access was not restored until late on the sixth day. The regime, having perpetrated violence against its own citizens at a terrible scale, began to cover its tracks. Bodies were [removed from the streets](#). They were taken away from hospitals in trucks. It remains a matter of debate where they went. [Some rumored](#) that they were taken to mass graves. [Others alleged](#) that they were incinerated. Whatever the specifics, it seems that the regime began to erase whatever evidence it could. The cover-up will make the work of verifying who was killed, and how many were killed, the painstaking work of years to come. The crackdown did not end with as the internet shutdown did. Instead, it moved to another phase. The government moved to stymie circulation of videos of the atrocities. In parallel, the state prosecution service swung into gear. Soon, [hundreds](#) of those allegedly involved in the protests had been charged with treason, and yet more with other offenses.

2 Breaking the foundations

The brutality of this crackdown marks a point of departure for the CCM-regime. Not only did the regime become yet more authoritarian. The constructed character of its rule changed. CCM has long claimed that its rule is popular. There are contestable bases for this in fact, of course. [56%](#) report feeling close to CCM. Some survey respondents may have skewed their answers, but even if they had, these numbers still show that CCM is, or was, liked by many. Yet more significantly, CCM had worked to establish that claim of popularity as a lived reality for Tanzanians. It was acted-out by CCM and its many supporters at its [record-attended](#) mass rallies. It was [institutionalized](#) in CCM's nationwide infrastructure of party branches. It was materialized in CCM's accompanying apparatus of local party offices. More widely, CCM asserted this claim constantly. CCM's popularity was not a temporary phenomenon that could change with the whims of public opinion, in this understanding. It was everlasting. It was folklore.

In parallel, CCM claimed that it ruled [in the people's interests](#). As it has done so, it has leaned into, and indeed cultivated a national myth about its origins. CCM, it reminded its citizens, is the party of Tanzania's founding father-president, Julius Nyerere. It is [heir](#) to the project of national liberation and national development which he led. These two claims were tied. CCM was popular because it was ruled well. It ruled well, in its telling, because its mass party structure kept its leaders aligned with the interests of the people. In CCM's understanding of itself, [fragments](#) of the system of single-party democracy that Nyerere [had written about](#) years before lived on.

On one level, CCM's long-established autocratic practices contradicted those claims. If CCM was so popular, why did it need to skew media coverage in its favor? Why did it choose to arrest and harass opposition leaders? Yet, simultaneously, those autocratic practices helped to sustain that claim. By degrading opposition capabilities, it was able to suffocate criticism. By having bureaucrats treat it favorably, it systematized its electoral advantage. Through these means, and others, it was able to achieve successive election victories, apparently, [without rigging at scale](#). When Jakaya

Kikwete won the presidency with 80% of the vote in 2005, it was hard to argue that CCM was not popular.

This is not to say that the CCM's image of itself suspended in these claims has not been challenged. CCM's critics have long [argued](#) that CCM is a deeply unpopular regime that rules through manipulation. At times, these counternarratives have broken through, or been on the precipice of doing so. At times, CCM's actions have militated against its own claims. By the end of Kikwete's second term in 2015, a mounting set of [grand corruption scandals](#) undercut the claim that CCM was ruling in the people's interests, rather than its own. By 2020, the [brazenness](#) of Magufuli's tyranny tarnished CCM's reputation for benevolence. Yet even in these moments, CCM's defenders retreated to a reserve position. CCM, they contended, might have problems, and might have made mistakes. Yet it was still, ultimately, committed to Tanzanians' best interests. Even if the mechanisms of multiparty democracy might falter, those of single-party democracy would ensure that CCM corrected course. These claims, then, were at the foundation of CCM's rule. By giving them social life, CCM sustained an image of a regime that was legitimate even in its worst moments. In the terminology of the late Mwesiga Baregu, by materializing these claims, CCM [manufactured its legitimacy](#).

After all that has happened, it is far from clear that CCM can sustain the claims that it is popular and benevolent with the same plausibility any longer. In part, this is about the protests. The popularity of the protests eats away at the notion that the regime is popular. Of course, in reality, governments can be popular and confronted by widespread protests at the same time. Yet protests are routinely presented as [representative](#) of popular sentiment. It was not a minority, but a movement embodying Tanzania itself that rose up in protest, [activists allege](#). The attempts by Hassan and her regime to portray protestors as a cadre of foreign subversives should be read as an attempt to rhetorically shrink the size of this movement. Irrespective of to what extent the protests dislodge the notion that CCM is popular per se, it certainly undermines CCM's claims about *how* popular it is. Next to the images of the protests, Hassan's claim to have won almost 98% of the vote seems even more ridiculous.

Whatever damage the protests did to the regime's legitimacy, it is minor compared to the reputational self-damage that the regime did in its response. Why would a party committed to the people's interests kill so many of its own citizens? Why would so popular a party need to resort to such methods? Ultimately, CCM has presented itself, and how it rules in a different light. It has thrust into the spotlight an image of its rule founded not on dialogue, party meetings and mass rallies, but bullets, militiamen, and midnight executions.

In some parts of Tanzania, especially ones far removed from the sites of protest, this image may be one that CCM can suffocate. It can keep it off domestic media. It can deflect blame. Ultimately, it can minimize and then move on from these events in a national conversation which, in some ways, it still dominates. Hassan's post-election [promises](#) to launch a truth and reconciliation committee and fast-track long-promised constitutional reform indicate that she will take precisely this path. This should be no surprise. She has long presented the [persona of a reformer](#) alongside the actions of an autocrat.

Yet in other parts of Tanzania, the scale and arbitrariness of the violence will be undeniable. There will be communities in which everyone knows someone who was killed, or knows someone who knows someone who was. Neighborhood by neighborhood, branch offices and flag poles will continue to make CCM materially present. Yet in many of those neighborhoods, empty chairs and bullet marks will make the brutality of CCM's crackdown equally present. The Catholic Church [testified to and condemned](#) the regime's actions in strong terms, though [other religious bodies](#) joined CCM in shifting the frame and the blame. This will be a socially lived contradiction in CCM's carefully cultivated self-image unlike any it has tried to sustain before. There will be little avoiding the violence it has visited upon its citizens. Perhaps, as [Michaela Collord argues](#), CCM was facing multiple crises of institutional dysfunction on the eve of the election. Yet the events since have precipitated a crisis which is more profound still. CCM has not only erased Tanzania's reputation as an island of peace, as [Charles Onyango-Obbo remarked](#). It has remade itself in the eyes of many as a regime that rules by terror rather than consent. In so doing, CCM has poured acid over the social foundations of its rule. It has betrayed that it is ready to murder its citizens, perhaps in their thousands, to preserve its rule. The mask has slipped.

3 Suppressing a new era of protest

CCM's ability to sustain those claims in the past rested on another long-standing social fact of Tanzania: its citizens did not protest at scale. There were certainly instances of protest. Tanzanians protested the proceeds of [natural gas extraction in Mtwara](#) and the terms of [gold mining in Geita](#), and elsewhere. [Maasai communities](#) protested their forcible relocation. Yet these protests were localized and they demanded action on specific issues. They were not nationwide. Nor were they partisan; they did not demand the ouster of a government, let alone a regime. Chadema has been [trying to assemble](#) such protests since 2016. Yet it had been largely unsuccessful, despite apparent [widespread rigging](#) in the 2020 elections. By in large, Tanzanians still largely observed longstanding social norms about peace. They still at least outwardly deferred to governmental authority. The security forces, for their part, ran a highly effective campaign of [preventive repression of protests](#). They signaled that protests were not authorized and would be put down without hesitation. Large-scale police and military deployments often preceded them in displays of force. The upshot was that, from the regime's perspective, Tanzania was locked in a well-established virtuous cycle of protest prevention. CCM could have the best of both worlds: no protests, and no blood on its hands from protest repression. In parallel, it could assert its popularity with little contradiction in everyday life beyond the objections of an opposition which it could stifle.

The terrible weight of the regime's response to recent protests should be interpreted in this context. There will be many explanations of why the regime dealt out so much violence to so many, [which](#) should be read in tandem. They will include the cultures of police violence, the dynamics of central control and location action, and the relations between different security actors. They will include the different cultures and institutional orientations of those different security actors, not least those allegedly deployed from abroad. They will include the role and influence of [individual policy-making personas](#).

Yet another explanation should be added to all these: the CCM-regime was not only trying to contain a set of protests, but prevent the emergence of a potential new era of protests. Protests can gain momentum. As they do so, the dynamics of protest formation become [mutually-reinforcing](#). CCM's iron-fisted crackdown reads as an attempt to force the genie back into the bottle. It was intended to signal that it would not hesitate to deploy whatever force was required to quash the protests. In effect, it had an implicit double-message for protestors: your protest is futile, and you are the only ones it endangers. CCM chose maximal force, because its intention was to restore the prior dynamic of protest prevention. Only archives will reveal how closely this cold-hearted logic tracks the thinking of CCM's decision-makers. Yet to discount it would be to give the regime the benefit of the doubt it no longer reserves.

In the wake of the crackdown, the future of the movement hangs in balance. The first test will be the resumption of protests which activists have called for on December 9th, Tanzania's Independence Day. Any movement could break under force of such suppression. However, despite the best efforts of the regime, there are reasons to think that the movement will live on in some form. In part, this is about the practicalities of protest suppression. In the aftermath of the election, not only was the internet shut down for almost a week. In some parts of Tanzania, daily life came to a halt. The streets became unsafe to walk. Freight transport came to a standstill. This was economically painful, for citizens individually, and the country at large. While the crackdown raged, households ran low on essentials. In the days followed, prices for everyday goods spiked. Share prices wobbled. Consumer confidence was shaken. It will be costly for the regime to respond in the same way to future protests. If they persist, the regime may have little choice but to shift to a mode of suppression that is less disruptive to everyday economic life. If it does, protests will become harder to contain.

Meanwhile, the fundamentals that underpinned the protests remain. It is no coincidence that the protest movement that was emergent in Tanzania has sister movements across east Africa, most of all in Kenya. Tanzania, like its neighbors, faces a cocktail of circumstances that is precipitous of protest. Over half of its population is [fewer than 18 years old](#). Much of that population is desperately poor. [72%](#) of Tanzanians work in informal jobs. While economic growth in Tanzania [has averaged 5.5%](#) over ten years, it has taken place alongside a recent [stagnation](#) in Tanzanians' cost of living. Not all of this, of course, is CCM's fault. The plateau in living standards has much to do with the turbulence of the post-Covid global economy. Tanzania has been locked in a international political economy of primary commodity exports and rent-seeking. However, in the public's eye, for four decades, CCM has embraced and become associated with this in some ways dysfunctional neo-liberalism. From 2015, Magufuli broke with that consensus, and renegotiated the terms of Tanzania's engagement in the world economy, [in some ways in performance](#) and some ways in substance. Yet Hassan has reversed course. She has preserved Magufuli's emphasis on infrastructure mega-project, but she has also [prioritized the ease of doing business](#). She has [suppressed the demands](#) of informal workers. She has [brokered deals](#) to run key infrastructure systems on apparently disadvantageous terms which [smacks of corruption](#). This has made it easy to [paint a picture](#) of Hassan and her government as deaf to, if not set against, the interests of Tanzania's numerous poor.

In light of such, CCM may well seek to placate protestors through a show of government action on living standards, alongside the touted constitutional reforms. Newly-appointed Prime Minister Mwigulu Nchemba's [remarks about poverty](#) are indicative of a [renewal of this focus](#). Yet such actions are unlikely to quieten potential protestors, as they have not been in Kenya. The [people power movement](#) reconstituted in Tanzania's protests defines its cause in not only material, but simultaneously democratic terms. It sees its government as a dictatorship. Its demands are substantial rather than cosmetic constitutional reforms that would break CCM's domination and install a democracy. [It envisions democracy as the means](#) to arrest corruption and improve material wellbeing. It is unlikely to be mollified by any other policy changes which CCM might offer. It sees CCM itself as the problem.

In short, the protests and the crackdown that followed have shaken the foundations of CCM's rule. It raises questions not only about whether but how CCM can survive. Some of CCM's sister liberation movements in power show that they can endure in the face of animated protest movements. Yet to do so, they have to come to rely ever more widespread and blatant repression. Zimbabwe in particular is a cautionary tale of the onerous costs of such repression both citizens, and the regime. This prospect itself is destabilizing. There has been a steady stream of speculation about whether Hassan will be forced to resign, or face a back-room intervention by the armed forces. There is much talk about whether the protests will force Hassan to deliver watershed constitutional reform. There are reasons to doubt each of these possibilities. Tanzanian presidents are notoriously powerful. The armed forces, as in so many [revolutionary regimes](#), are wedded to the ruling party. Hassan has a four-year presidential track record of [performing democratic reform](#) while delivering autocracy. Yet the ruinous harm done by CCM to its citizens and its own image makes all of these possibilities more likely in a way that they were not just weeks ago. Tanzania has changed.