

Why Tanzania's attacks on free speech break with Nyerere's legacy

By [Nick Westcott](#)

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I visited Tanzania recently for the first time in five years, and the first time since John Magufuli was elected President. I have been visiting the country regularly since 1976 - spending a year as a student in 1979 and three years as a diplomat in 1993-6. I have followed its fortunes through the decades with close interest, meeting all its Presidents (except the incumbent) at one time or another.



The statue of founding president Mwalimu Julius Nyerere in Tanzania's political capital Dodoma. Credit: WikiCommons.

While I was there on this occasion, the journalist Erick Kabendera was [picked up by police and kept incommunicado for several days](#) until he was suddenly re-appeared in court and improbably charged with [economic crimes and tax evasion](#).

This is not a lone incident: since 2015 it has become more frequent for independent journalists to face [harassment and even the threat of death](#). Only a few weeks later another journalist, [Joseph Gandye](#), was arrested apparently for a story criticising police brutality. He was subsequently released. The government has also obstructed news or even the [publication of standard national statistics](#) that it dislikes.

It is worth asking where this comes from. Since independence in 1961, Tanzania has been a beacon of the liberation struggle in Africa and of peaceful political stability. The country's moral and political compass was set very firmly by its first president of 24 years, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. His successors have appealed to and pledged to uphold his legacy.

So what is that legacy? Nyerere was unusual among African leaders in leaving a substantial body of writings that set out his political thinking and which enable us to see its evolution. It is important to register that his thinking changed over time, adapted in the light of experience.

But some elements remained a bedrock: a powerful moral tone, an intolerance of corruption, a central role for the state, but with a real accountability to the people. Above all was the value of unity - at the national level, in the union with Zanzibar, and across Africa as a whole.

Kabendera has long been a critic of Tanzania's government, helping expose [an energy scandal](#) in 2015 in which \$18 million was misappropriated. The scandal cost the then Minister of Energy his job. There was suspicion that a more recent article in *The Economist* probably caused the government's ire. It was entitled "John Magufuli is bulldozing Tanzania's freedom".

Mwalimu would probably be angry as well, but also sad to see his successors prefer a closed society to an open one and to look to the past rather than to the future. After all, Nyerere often argued that Tanzanians should not be afraid to challenge authority. He also spoke out strongly for [freedom of speech](#).

Nyerere's legacy

Nyerere started as an unabashed African Socialist. Capitalism and colonialism had gone hand-in-hand, and had [destroyed](#) many of the traditional communal values of African society. These needed to be restored and built upon.

He justified the one-party state as necessary for building national unity and avoiding fissiparous political divisions. He also advocated "[ujamaa](#)", or villagisation, as a path to economic and social modernisation. But over time he came to see the drawbacks of both policies and began to adapt his own approach.

Nyerere was sometimes intolerant of criticism. But he tended to respond with argument rather than force. Although the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi had robust internal competition and accountability, any single party that remains in power continually tends to become politically complacent and financially corrupt.

The target tends to become climbing to the top of the party tree and reaping the benefits along the way, not serving the people. And villagisation and state production proved socially disruptive and financially disastrous. Economically, Nyerere's prescription [just did not work](#).

In response, Nyerere did two things: he put in place succession arrangements that allowed him to step back from running the government, though retaining oversight as chairman of the party, and he allowed his successors [to liberalise both politics and the economy](#).

In the 1990s, multi-party politics was re-introduced, a number of loss-making parastatals that were draining the government's resources were privatised, and the country began to encourage outside investors. Nyerere's personal interventions became increasingly rare, limited largely to upholding the sanctity and importance of the political union with Zanzibar, and working for peace in neighbouring Burundi.

His genuine legacy, therefore, is to value unity but recognise diversity, not to overstay your welcome in power, and to be guided by principles but adapt your policies in the light of experience.

Negation of legacy?

Are the events of recent years the fulfilment or the negation of that legacy? Like his predecessors, President Magufuli puts great emphasis on respecting Nyerere's legacy.

Selected at least in part for his well-known personal probity, he entered office breathing fire and fury against [corruption](#) in

the state machine, and his [dramatic interventions](#) appeared to shake state utilities, including water and power, out of their torpor and corrupt practices to deliver to the public what they were supposed to. Basic infrastructure, including roads and energy, has been developed and delivered. All this was overdue.

But in other respects, the administration seems stuck in the early Nyerere-ite mode of suspicion – even hostility – to [international capitalism and all its works](#), and to open markets even within its region, preaching a narrow view of self-reliance similar to that which led the country into near bankruptcy in the early 1980s.

And in political terms, the president seems to adopt an intolerance of criticism and opposition that Nyerere in his later years had abandoned. The ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi itself seems increasingly frightened of fair competition, [fearful](#) that given a free choice and transparent information the people just might choose someone else.

Sadly, such transparency and freedom is the only thing that keeps democracies honest. To [constrain the opposition](#) and [harass the free press](#) will in the end destroy democracy and even the Chama Cha Mapinduzi itself.

We have seen elsewhere that some political leaders decide they should be the sole arbiter of political decisions, and stay on in charge long after their sell-by date, presiding over ever-more corrupt and incompetent governments and leading their countries to wrack and ruin. But in almost all cases, it does not end well. The same can apply to parties as to leaders.

Tanzania has benefited greatly from a regular political succession in its leadership. But it would be a betrayal, not a fulfilment, of Nyerere's legacy to fail to allow the Tanzanian people a free and informed choice about the party and the policies they want.

**The views expressed in this article are solely my own.*

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