

UNDERSTANDING 2025 ELECTIONS IN TANZANIA:

A Solid Mark in the Shift from Competitive to Hegemonic Authoritarianism

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the 2025 elections in Tanzania were both qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from all previous elections held since the reintroduction of the multiparty system in 1992. While the six preceding elections –1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020 – were regarded as unfree and unfair, none were characterised by the scale of overt violence observed in 2025. The 2025 elections thus represent a significant escalation in state repression, signalling a clear shift to a new and more entrenched phase of authoritarianism. Tanzania’s electoral regime appears to have transitioned from a competitive authoritarian system to a hegemonic authoritarian one. In this context, the paper argues that the intensified repression of 2025 marks the consolidation of that transformation. To understand the dynamics of the 2025 elections, it is necessary to trace developments back to previous elections, particularly those of 2015, which revealed important underlying trends that have culminated in the unprecedented levels of repression and violence. The analysis divides Tanzania’s multiparty electoral history into two periods, 1995–2015 and 2020–2025. Drawing on theories of elections under authoritarian contexts, the paper analyses these periods to explain the evolution and conduct of the 2025 general elections.

Keywords: Tanzania, election violence, authoritarianism, semi-presidential system

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INTRODUCTION

The 2025 general elections in Tanzania were qualitatively and quantitatively different from all previous elections held since the reintroduction of the multiparty system in 1992. The previous six general elections – in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020 – were neither free nor fair; however, none had been accompanied by widespread and overt violence such as that which occurred in the 2025 elections. The 2025 elections represented a significant escalation of repression, indicating a new level of authoritarianism in the country.

Between 1995 and 2020, general elections in Tanzania exhibited characteristics of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010), with the electoral playing field skewed in favour of the ruling party, while still allowing some space for opposition parties to participate and secure parliamentary representation. Levels of violence were relatively low, and the competitive nature of elections resulted in a gradual improvement in the share of opposition votes. Between 1995 and 2015, the vote share of opposition presidential candidates fluctuated; in 2015, it was 41.54%, with CHADEMA, the main opposition party, securing 39.97% of the presidential vote (Stears Open Data, 2025). In 2020, CHADEMA's vote share declined sharply to 13.04%, whereas Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party secured 84.4% of the vote (Stears Open Data, 2025). In 2025, the CCM presidential candidate won 97.66% of the vote, and all opposition parties collectively received only 2.34% (Stears Open Data, 2025).

This dramatic shift suggests that Tanzania was moving from a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Morse, 2014) to a fully hegemonic authoritarian one. This paper argues that the 2025 elections and the subsequent repression represent a turning point, ushering in a new era of intensified authoritarianism in Tanzania.

To understand the 2025 elections, it is necessary to examine developments since 1995, as the historical dynamics help explain the unprecedented levels of repression and violence in 2025. In light of this, the article assesses Tanzania's general elections since 1995, with particular analytical emphasis on the period from 2015 onwards. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of what occurred and seeks to answer the central question of why these developments took place. The sequence of events leading to 2025 is thus examined closely. To ensure a systematic approach, the paper explores two analytical periods, namely 1995–2015 and 2020–2025. These periods capture the transition from competitive authoritarianism to hegemonic authoritarianism in Tanzania.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND LAWS IN TANZANIA

In theory, Tanzania operates under a semi-presidential system, which is characterised by an elected president, with a prime minister selected from

the members of parliament. However, given the extensive constitutional and institutional powers vested in the president – often described as ‘imperial’ (Liambilah, 2025; Ndamungu, 2020) – in practice, the system functions largely as a presidential one.

Presidential dominance is reinforced by an electoral system that follows the first-past-the-post model, whereby the winner takes all. Partly as a result of this system, the ruling party, CCM, has remained the dominant electoral actor, often maintaining its position through the manipulation and misuse of state resources enabled by unilateral decision-making power. Moreover, there is an entrenched norm that the president should simultaneously serve as the chairperson of CCM. This practice further blurs the boundary between party and state, increasing the potential for the misuse of public resources during electoral processes.

Elections in Tanzania are governed by legal frameworks and administered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The designation ‘Independent’ was introduced in 2024 in response to sustained pressure for electoral reform and a presidential commitment to reform. However, the changes have often been described as cosmetic (Paget & Kwayu, 2025). The president retains the authority to appoint electoral commissioners, a power that has been widely criticised as undermining the objectivity and neutrality of the electoral body (Mwanga, 2022; Marwa, 2022; Makulilo, 2009).

The United Republic of Tanzania comprises two political entities, namely Mainland Tanzania (formerly Tanganyika) and Zanzibar. Zanzibar enjoys a semi-autonomous status, with its own electoral system, through which it elects a president and the House of Representatives. However, Zanzibari voters also participate in Union elections to elect the president of the United Republic and members of parliament. This dual electoral arrangement operates within the same political party structures, and CCM has remained the ruling party in both Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. Political party registration is a Union matter, requiring all parties to maintain their representation in both jurisdictions.

Notably, several electoral laws were enacted in 2024, including the *National Electoral Commission Act (2024)*, which renamed the National Electoral Commission (NEC) as INEC; the *Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Government Elections Act (2024)*; and the *Political Parties Affairs Laws (Amendment) Act (2024)*. These legislative changes generally preserved the status quo rather than introducing substantive reforms (Kwayu, 2024). Indeed, they can be understood as part of broad authoritarian strategies that utilise electoral processes to secure legitimacy and consolidate power.

A growing body of scholarship highlights how authoritarian regimes employ elections to legitimise their rule (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Gandhi, 2008; Wright, 2008; Donno, 2013). In light of the 2025 elections, it is evident that these

so-called reforms served mainly as a façade to mask the move toward greater electoral control. To illustrate how these institutional arrangements and electoral rules constrain democratisation, the following sections analyse Tanzania's general elections across the two periods of interest.

GENERAL ELECTIONS FROM 1995 TO 2025

1995 to 2015

General elections in Tanzania between 1995 and 2015 produced fluctuating outcomes across electoral cycles, but the overall trend indicated gradual improvements in the electoral space for opposition parties. In 1995, the combined opposition presidential vote share stood at approximately 38.18% (African Elections Database, n.d.), but the share declined to 28.26% in 2000 and dropped further in 2005 to 19.72%. The trend then reversed, with the opposition vote share rising to 37.17% in 2010 and reaching 41.54% in 2015 (African Elections Database, n.d.).

A key question regarding this period is why opposition support declined between 1995 and 2005. The decline can be interpreted as an early indication of the ruling party's reluctance to relinquish power. The 1995 election – the first after the reintroduction of multiparty politics – occurred in the context of constitutional reforms that were, to a large extent, externally driven and top-down (Hydén, 1999). Referendum results suggested that approximately 80% of Tanzanians preferred to retain the one-party system, while only 20% supported a transition to multiparty politics. However, the first multiparty election saw considerable support for opposition candidates, presenting a paradox.

Clearly the CCM faced a potential loss of power, which prompted the party to increasingly rely on state apparatus to suppress opposition forces. In his autobiography, the past president Benjamin Mkapa (Mkapa, 2019) recounted how CCM utilised state resources, including funds from the Central Bank that were originally earmarked for servicing external debt, to finance its election campaigns. Such practices contributed to a significantly uneven playing field in favour of the ruling party. Mkapa also acknowledged and expressed regret over the killings of opposition supporters in Zanzibar in 2001 during his presidency (*The Citizen*, 2020).

The systematic suppression of opposition actors across both Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar contributed to the declining opposition vote share during this period. By 2005, under a new CCM candidate, the combined opposition share had fallen to 19.72%. Analysing this period, Hoffman and Robinson (2009, p. 123) argued that the weakness of the opposition in Tanzania was largely attributable to CCM's deliberate efforts to maintain its near-monopoly of power,

including a willingness to employ coercion when necessary. The authors identified three strategies used by CCM to constrain competitors: (i) regulating political competition through control of media and civil society; (ii) blurring the boundaries between party and state; and (iii) the targeted use of overt coercive measures.

Despite these constraints, opposition parties remained relatively viable between 1995 and 2015. This was evidenced by a recovery in the opposition vote share, which increased from 19.72% in 2005 to 37.17% in 2010 and further to 41.54% in 2015 (African Elections Database, n.d.). These gains suggest that, despite structural disadvantages and repression, a degree of electoral competitiveness persisted in Tanzania during this period.

2020 to 2025

The 2015 general elections delivered a huge shock to CCM, as voters demonstrated substantial support for the opposition. Given the strengthening of opposition parties, particularly in terms of their mobilisation and organisation between 2010 and 2015 (Kwayu, 2022), the ruling party became increasingly aware of its vulnerability. In response, CCM undertook rebranding efforts between 2012 and 2015, with its secretariat conducting nationwide campaigns to highlight the party's socialist and developmental agenda. This context explains the nomination of John Pombe Magufuli as the party's presidential candidate in 2015. His selection was influenced by his reputation, developed during various ministerial roles, as a modest and hardworking leader, as well as his perceived neutrality across intraparty factions (Collord, 2022).

This strategic repositioning was particularly important given that CCM's image between 2005 and 2015 had been tarnished by allegations of corruption, embezzlement of public funds, and administrative inefficiency (Kisiangani & Lewela, 2012). Despite these efforts, CCM's presidential vote share declined to below 60% in the 2015 elections. In a further effort to curb opposition growth, the CCM under President Magufuli adopted increasingly repressive measures, particularly targeting CHADEMA, which had emerged as the main opposition party. Since fielding its first presidential candidate in 2005, CHADEMA had engaged in extensive grassroots organising and nationwide mobilisation efforts (Paget, 2019a, 2022; Kwayu, 2022, 2023). These strategies contributed to a significant rise in its presidential vote share, from 5.88% in 2005 to 27.05% in 2010 and further to 39.97% in 2015.

One of President Magufuli's earliest actions was to ban public political rallies, a move that deeply constrained opposition mobilisation. As Paget (2019b) noted, public rallies had constituted the primary mechanism for political organisation in Tanzania, with the country hosting more rallies than most others globally. Beyond

the ban, the government imposed broader restrictions on CHADEMA's political activities, and opposition leaders were subjected to repeated arrests. The ban itself illustrated the expansive – and arguably extraconstitutional – powers of the presidency, as it contravened constitutional provisions. Nonetheless, it remained in force until it was reversed by a later presidential directive.

The 2019 local government elections showed a further escalation in electoral control. CHADEMA candidates were widely disqualified, resulting in CCM securing approximately 99% of positions (Paget, 2025; Babeiya, 2024; Oxford Analytica, 2020). This pattern foreshadowed what would later become a recurring feature of both local and general elections. During the 2020 general elections, opposition candidates – particularly CHADEMA's presidential candidate – faced systematic harassment. The elections were widely documented as involving significant human rights violations, including allegations of violence (Minde et al., 2021). After the elections, the CHADEMA presidential candidate went into exile and several other opposition leaders fled the country due to security concerns. This period, especially the 2020 elections, provided an example of Donno's (2013) observation that 'as the scope of misconduct increases, the prospect that an election will usher in democracy declines.'

After the death of President Magufuli in 2021, Vice-President Samia Suluhu Hassan assumed the presidency. Her administration initially projected a reformist agenda focused on the '4Rs', namely reconciliation, reforms, resilience, and rebuilding. However, as subsequent elections approached, the CCM under President Hassan increasingly reverted to coercive and repressive tactics targeting CHADEMA and its leadership. Many of the proposed reforms proved to be symbolic and performative (Paget & Kwayu, 2025). The 2024 local elections mirrored those of 2019, with CCM again securing approximately 99% of seats amid widespread disqualification of opposition candidates. Notably, the 2024 elections were administered by the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) rather than the INEC. This point raised public concern regarding their legality and impartiality.

During President Hassan's tenure, key CHADEMA leaders were repeatedly targeted. The former chairman, Freeman Mbowe, was arrested and charged with non-bailable terrorism offences. He spent eight months in detention from July 2021 through March 2022. His successor, Tundu Lissu, was similarly arrested on non-bailable treason charges as of April 2025. Given these developments, CHADEMA threatened to boycott the 2025 general elections, and INEC then disqualified the party from participation. Although smaller opposition parties contested, their limited organisational capacity rendered the election effectively a single-party contest. President Hassan officially secured 97.66% of the vote.

The disqualification of CHADEMA can be interpreted as a strategic move to facilitate and legitimise the 2025 general election outcome. In addition, the unprecedented levels of violence and killings during these elections, as well as the overall conduct of the electoral process, call for close scrutiny of what transpired. The section below provides a more detailed account of these elections.

The 2025 Elections

As noted above, the 2025 general elections differed significantly from all previous elections in Tanzania in terms of the level of coercion and killings as well as election outcomes. Although Parliament had enacted new electoral laws in 2024 and presented them as reforms, critical analysis suggests that the measures were merely designed to entrench the status quo (Centre for Strategic Litigation, 2024) and facilitate a shift to full electoral authoritarianism.

The 2024 electoral laws included the *Political Parties Affairs Law (Amendment) Act*, the *National Electoral Commission Act*, and the *Presidential, Members of Parliament and Councillors Election Act*. Prior to their enactment, Parliament had invited public submissions and received over 1,700 responses (Centre for Strategic Litigation, 2024) from individual citizens, civil society groups, political parties, and other groups. The most common submission was the need for a constitutional amendment to reform the management of elections, including provisions for handling post-election disputes, particularly the ability to challenge presidential election results in courts of law. Another widely expressed concern was the need to ensure the independence of electoral commissioners through an autonomous selection process rather than presidential appointment.

The enacted reforms failed to address these demands and remained largely superficial. No constitutional amendments were introduced regarding the management of elections, and there is still no legal avenue to contest presidential election results after they are announced. With regard to the independence of the electoral commission, the changes are mainly symbolic; the body was merely renamed from the NEC to the INEC. Although a nomination committee was established to improve the selection process for commissioners, its role is limited to recommending candidates. The final appointment authority is retained by the president. Furthermore, members of the nomination committee are themselves presidential appointees.

A closer examination of the political trends from the beginning of the election year to election day provides evidence of a planned authoritarian strategy. Starting with the nomination process within CCM, there were clear warning signs. President Hassan secured an early nomination without undergoing any primaries (Minde, 2025). During a party meeting that was not scheduled to

address candidate selection, a party member introduced an unplanned motion to endorse President Hassan as the party's presidential candidate, ostensibly to avoid what were described as unnecessary nomination procedures. In an apparently coordinated move, former president Jakaya Kikwete endorsed the proposal. Only one party member, Rev. Godfrey Malisa, objected publicly. Subsequently, Malisa was expelled from the party and charged with an unbailable treason offence (*The Citizen*, 2026). As a result, no presidential primaries were held within CCM. The entire process suggests a reluctance by President Hassan to face internal competition.

On the opposition side, there was no credible challenger to President Hassan. Tundu Lissu, chairman of CHADEMA – who had previously expressed interest in contesting the presidency before his party's boycott and disqualification from the 2025 elections – was arrested and charged with an unbailable treason offence from April 2025 onward. Similarly, Luhaga Mpina, the presidential candidate for ACT-Wazalendo, the third largest political party in Tanzania, was barred from contesting (Radio France Internationale, 2025) through a politically motivated court ruling that declared his nomination unprocedural. These incidents demonstrate the selective application of procedural rules. Opposition parties were subjected to strict enforcement, while the CCM acted contrary to its own internal procedures in nominating its candidate. In analysing the pre-election environment, Minde (2025, p. 9) cautioned that

Tanzania's 2025 elections pose a significant risk of strengthening authoritarian practices rather than advancing democratic governance. The ruling party's control, exclusion of the opposition, and institutional bias undermine electoral credibility. Limited civic space and low voter engagement further weaken inclusiveness.

Voter registration in the 2025 elections was also unprecedented, with more voters registered than in any previous election. According to INEC data, 37,647,235 voters were registered, representing a 26.66% increase over the 2020 elections (*The Chanzo*, 2025). This presents a paradox given that CHADEMA had actively discouraged participation through its 'No Reform, No Election' campaign. Under such conditions, higher levels of voter apathy would have been expected. Even more strikingly, INEC reported the highest voter turnout in the country's history. Of the 37,647,235 registered voters, 32,803,310 cast their ballots, representing an 87% turnout – significantly higher than the 50.7% turnout of 2020 (*The Chanzo*, 2025). This outcome was particularly paradoxical given the reported violence and burning of polling stations on election day.

President Hassan contested against 16 other presidential candidates from smaller parties with limited national presence and minimal campaign capacity. After the election, all 16 candidates endorsed the official results, which indicated a 97.6% victory for President Hassan. The president justified this outcome by arguing that the opposing candidates lacked national recognition, unlike candidates from CHADEMA or ACT-Wazalendo. However, this justification further reinforces the argument that there was a premeditated electoral strategy.

The parliamentary results closely mirrored the presidential outcome. In mainland Tanzania, CCM secured 383 out of 387 seats, including 270 of the 272 directly elected constituencies and 113 of the 115 special women's seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). These results highlight the risk of the normalisation of authoritarian practices in Tanzania. Parliament has effectively become a de facto one-party institution, functioning as an extension of the CCM caucus. This composition reinforces the close relationship between the ruling party and the state.

As noted earlier, beyond the unprecedented electoral results, the 2025 elections were marked by violence. Reports included visual and video evidence. They indicated that in major urban centres, such as Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, and Arusha, polling processes were either severely compromised or absent. Public protests occurred, to which the state responded with disproportionate force, including the use of lethal violence against both protesters and bystanders. International media outlets such as CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC, and Reuters, alongside eyewitness accounts on social media, documented indiscriminate killings. Reports also indicated the presence of mass casualties and alleged mass graves, some of which were corroborated by satellite imagery.

The levels of overt violence represented a new development in Tanzania's electoral history. Although the president publicly defended the state's actions and established an investigative commission, public trust in the process remains low due to perceived affiliations between the commission members and the ruling establishment. Ultimately, the 2025 elections demonstrated the consolidation of hegemonic authoritarianism in Tanzania.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The trajectory of electoral politics in Tanzania between 1995 and 2025 illustrates a clear shift from competitive authoritarianism to hegemonic authoritarianism. A turning point occurred after the 2015 elections, when CCM appeared to recognise that continued tolerance of even limited political space could enable the opposition to mount a credible challenge. The ruling party thus adopted increasingly restrictive measures to curtail opposition influence.

Several key inferences have emerged from the analysis. First, the relationship between the ruling party and the state has consistently functioned to shield CCM from meaningful electoral competition. After the relatively strong performance of opposition parties in the 1995 elections, the state deployed coercive and repressive measures against opposition actors. This strategy was replicated with even greater intensity after the 2015 elections in response to the growing electoral strength of the opposition.

Second, the transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism became more pronounced after 2015. As Paget (2021, p. 63) argued, the 2020 elections marked Tanzania's shift 'from a partly-authoritarian regime in which electoral competition is permitted, to a fully authoritarian regime... [where] multipartyism has been pulverized and CCM domination has been forcibly restored'. Furthermore, as Donno (2013) suggested, a defining feature of hegemonic authoritarian regimes is the overwhelming electoral dominance of the ruling party. This pattern has been evident in Tanzania. The CCM secured 84.4% of the presidential vote in 2020 and an unprecedented 97.66% in 2025, the highest vote share recorded by any presidential candidate since independence.

Third, the Tanzanian case aligns with broader findings in the literature that competitive authoritarian regimes do not necessarily transition towards democracy (Donno, 2013). The conduct of elections in Tanzania since 1995 reveals little evidence of a genuine commitment to democratisation. Instead, electoral processes have been systematically structured to preserve the status quo. Existing scholarship identifies several conditions that may facilitate democratic transitions from competitive authoritarianism, including regime vulnerability, sustained international pressure, and cohesive opposition coalitions (Donno, 2013). In Tanzania, however, these conditions have largely been absent. The opposition has remained fragmented, with small parties often co-opted or mobilised against the main opposition party, CHADEMA. In the lead-up to the 2025 elections, CHADEMA called for electoral reforms and questioned the legitimacy of the process, yet other opposition parties chose to participate, reinforcing divisions among the opposition forces. This dynamic reflects what Lust-Okar (2005) described as 'divided structures of contestation', whereby regimes strategically fragment opposition forces to weaken the collective resistance.

Finally, elections in Tanzania have also served as mechanisms for elite co-optation, encompassing actors from both ruling and opposition parties as well as broader societal groups. This strategy is widely documented in the literature as a common tool of authoritarian consolidation (Boix & Svoblik, 2008; Magaloni, 2006; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Gandhi, 2008; Wright, 2008). Even after the contested 2020 elections, the ruling party continued to invoke the language of reform as a means of legitimising its rule. However, the 2025 elections represented

a marked deterioration, characterised by unprecedented coercion and the almost total marginalisation of the opposition. Overall, the conduct of the 2025 elections constituted a clear consolidation of hegemonic authoritarianism in Tanzania.

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