

Introduction

A progressive rise in violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and religion-related violence came into sharp focus in 2013, when the beheading of a pastor in the north-west of the country was followed by the bombing of Arusha's Catholic cathedral. Later in 2013, the discovery and arrest of alleged al Qaeda sympathisers as they underwent military training in a remote area on the Tanzanian mainland provided a further illustration of this escalation.

While reports of specific attacks by terrorist groups and their sympathisers have reduced on the mainland, there has been a steady deterioration in the general human rights climate since President John Magufuli took office in 2015, with restrictions on freedom of expression and on the press in particular. Several newspapers were shut down, including the Mawaio Newspaper, which was banned for printing an article linking controversial mining contracts with former presidents Benjamin Mkapa and Jakaya Kikwete; over a dozen people were prosecuted for allegedly insulting the president via WhatsApp and other social media platforms. In February 2017, opposition politicians Godfrey Luena and Daniel John were killed, with police opening murder investigations in both cases. In September 2017, Member of Parliament and opposition Chief Whip Tundu Lissu was shot at his home in Dodoma, and transferred to a hospital in Kenya, then on to Brussels, Belgium, for treatment.

Religion related violence – The Mainland

Over the past few years Tanzania has seen several instances of religion related violence targeting both Christians and Muslims. Churches have been targeted with arson attacks, and a Christian teacher was notably killed by unknown assailants at a prayer meeting in October 2014. On 19 May 2016, three people including an imam, were killed in an attack on the Masjid Rahmani mosque in Mwanza. The attack was carried out by 15 individuals using improvised explosives, machetes and axes.

Religion-related violence - Zanzibar

The situation for Christians in Zanzibar remains concerning. Christians face restrictions when establishing places of worship, and in an extra-legal practice, the erection of a church building is dependent on permission from the local community: which is rarely, if ever given.

On 24 February 2020, the Calvary Mission Church in Mwamboni was attacked by extremists armed with machetes, hammers and petrol, who physically assaulted

the wife of the pastor, Philemon Mafilili, before escaping when church members intervened. The assailants returned on 29 February armed with machetes, hammers and knives and attacked the pastor, injuring him so severely he required hospital treatment. Prior to the assaults, Pastor Mafilili had allegedly been warned by a local official to leave the area as quickly as possible because the Muslim community did not want a church in the area.

Sometimes church buildings are demolished without notice, as on 7 January 2018, when a bulldozer destroyed a building belonging to the Zanzibar Pentecostal Church of Jesus in Zanzibar Town, to make way for a state university to use the land.

Attacks on churches continue to occur sporadically, with at least 24 churches destroyed by mobs.

Many churches, including several that have obtained all necessary permissions, are embroiled in endless court cases, with hearings being repeatedly postponed. As a consequence, meagre church resources are depleted through the indefinite retention of lawyers from the mainland, since local practitioners refuse to take on such cases due to partisanship or fear.

Christians are also expected to follow Islamic practices. Christian schoolgirls must wear the hijab, and on 16 June 2017 three Christians were arrested for cooking food in a private home in the middle of the day during the Ramadan fast.

Recent developments

In December 2017, government officials had threatened to de-register religious organizations that “mix religion and politics,” after church leaders from a variety of denominations expressed concern at the official crackdown on the political opposition, press and civil society. While no churches have been closed, the government was alleged to have restricted the involvement of the Church in matters of national import.

During the General Elections in October 2020, and for the first time since the multi-party system was instituted in 1995, the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) was one of several civil society organisations to be denied permits to observe the elections. Other organisations that were denied accreditation included the Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC), Tanzania Constitution Forum (TCF), the Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC) and the Tanzania Election Monitoring Committee (Temco).

More recently, on 15 February 2021, Bishop Emmaus Mwamakula of the Moravian Renewal Church was arrested and held for seven days. The bishop, who was part of opposition politician Tundu Lissu's presidential campaign team in 2020, was detained the day before the commencement of demonstrations he had organised to call for an independent electoral commission and new constitution. He was interrogated over social media posts; his home was searched, and he was eventually released on police bond.

COVID-19 Pandemic

In June 2020, the late president John Magufuli, declared the nation "coronavirus-free" thanks to divine intervention. He had earlier stated that his own son had been infected but had recovered after isolating and treating himself with natural remedies. President Magufuli, who had an PhD in Chemistry, had also scoffed at the wearing of masks and criticised regional neighbours for imposing lockdowns. The government had not reported coronavirus data since May 2020, and despite a plea from the WHO, had refused the use of vaccines until it had time to verify them.

As reports of pneumonia-related deaths increased, church leaders became the first to call openly for the disease to be taken seriously.

In a circular dated 26 January 2021 which was signed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania's (ELCT's) Head Bishop, Dr Fredrick Shoo, and addressed to bishops and members of the denomination, ELCT leaders were instructed to provide congregations with accurate information on COVID-19: "It is our responsibility to take pre-caution. It doesn't contravene our faith, neither is it a sin nor a criminal offense." The Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) president, Bishop Gervas Nyaisonga, released a similar statement on the same day instructing the church leaders to put measures in place to control the spread of the virus. President Magufuli responded on 27 January by acknowledging the presence of COVID-19 in the country.

In February, following a series of high-profile deaths - including of the First Vice President of Zanzibar, the Chief Secretary of State and a former governor of the Bank of Tanzania - the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT) called on the public to take measures to protect themselves against the disease.

On 12 February, the ELCT asked its congregations to hold special prayer services regarding the pandemic, while insisting on the need to take all necessary care to avoid

contracting the virus. Other church leaders also continued to urge people to take precautions against COVID-19, and a legislator belonging to the ruling party lamented the fact that his constituents were dying in unprecedented numbers.

On 23 February, a video was released of the country's finance minister coughing and gasping in hospital during a press conference convened to dispel rumours that he had died of COVID-19.

On 3 March, the Catholic Church revealed that 60 nuns and 25 priests had died between mid-December 2020 and February 2021 after showing symptoms of COVID-19. In response, while acknowledging the existence of COVID-19 cases, a government spokesperson warned against the "arbitrary" releasing of statistics.

On 17 March, President Magufuli, who had disappeared from public view for over two weeks, died allegedly from heart complications. Prior to his disappearance he was filmed coughing while delivering a speech at an outdoor meeting.

Recommendations

To the government of Tanzania:

- Expedite investigations of incidents of religion-related violence and bring perpetrators to justice.
- End practices that restrict the freedoms of expression, association and assembly.
- Respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of journalists, political opponents and religious leaders.

To the government of Zanzibar:

- Investigate all cases of religious-related violence, ensuring perpetrators are prosecuted regardless of creed.
- Align with constitutional and international commitments to freedom of religion or belief by ending the practice of enforcing the Ramadan fast on non-Muslims.
- End informal practices whereby church construction is dependent on permission from local communities.
- Ensure due process is followed in legal cases involving churches and their adherents.