

Legal framework

Both the Tanzanian and Zanzibari constitutions stipulate equality regardless of religion and prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, and specify freedom of conscience and choice in matters of religion, including the freedom to change one's faith. The country is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and has ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

Shari'a law applies to all Muslims in Tanzania, and courts can apply it to matters of succession in communities that generally follow shari'a law. Zanzibar is subject to the Tanzanian constitution but has a judicial system that may apply shari'a law in certain cases. Muslims in Zanzibar have the option of bringing cases before an Islamic court. All cases tried in Zanzibar's courts, apart from those involving shari'a law and constitutional matters, may be appealed at the Union Court of Appeals on the mainland. Zanzibar also has its own president, court system, legislature and penal code. Both penal codes effectively contain blasphemy provisions in all but name.

Article 125 of the Tanzanian Penal Code prohibits the intentional destruction, damage or defilement of any place or object of worship. Article 127 forbids the intentional wounding of religious sentiments or insulting of any person's religion, trespassing in any place of worship 'or in any place of sepulchre or in any place set apart for the performance of funeral rites or as a depository for the remains of the dead, or offers any indignity to any human corpse.' It also prohibits causing a disturbance to people assembled for funerals. These crimes are also articulated in Zanzibar's Penal Decree Act of 2004, which stipulates a punishment of up to two years imprisonment and/or a fine (Articles 27 and 117-119).

Article 129 of the Tanzanian Penal Code punishes uttering words, writing words, making gestures or placing objects in front of others with the intention of wounding a person's religious sentiments with one year in prison. Zanzibar's code echoes both the stated crimes and the stipulated punishment.

On the mainland all religious organisations are required to register with the Office of the Registrar of Societies, while those in Zanzibar must register with the Office of the Registrar General. Registration must be renewed every five years, and any organisation judged to have violated registration procedures can be fined or even closed down. For example, in July 2024 the Registrar of Societies de-registered the Christian Life Church in Dar es Salaam for allegedly charging members TZS 500,000 (around US\$ 183.00) for spiritual services, and for sermons that were deemed contrary to the values, traditions, customs and culture of Tanzania. The church's Congolese leader left the country soon thereafter.

Terrorism-related violations

In 2013 a progressive rise in violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and religion-related violence came into sharp focus when the beheading of a pastor in the north-west of the country was followed by the bombing of Arusha's Catholic cathedral. Later that year alleged al Qaeda sympathisers were arrested while undergoing military training in a remote area on the Tanzanian mainland.

On 15 October 2020 Islamic State (IS) affiliated insurgents based in Mozambique attacked Kitaya and Michenjele villages near the port of Mtwara, killing 25 people, looting, and destroying property. In a video released by IS, the attackers were heard speaking in Swahili, Makua - a dialect spoken in Mozambique and southern border areas of Tanzania - and in Mwani, a Swahili dialect spoken in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique.

On 20 August 2021 Hamza Mohamed, a 33-year-old Dar es Salaam resident, killed three police officers and a security guard in a shootout in which he was also killed. Tanzania's Director of Criminal Investigations later described the incident as a terrorist attack, adding that the assailant was influenced by online material about al Shabaab (a term which is now also used to refer to the Islamic State insurgency in Mozambique) and IS.

In September 2021 around 15 IS-Mozambique fighters attacked Mahurunga village in the Mtwara Region, where they looted and burned shops and homes.

In May 2022 Tanzanian authorities arrested 30 terrorists who were attempting to cross the border.

A September 2022 investigation by the Chanzo Initiative exposed clandestine efforts to radicalise young Zanzibari men, several of whom subsequently 'disappeared', leaving behind anxious families.¹ One left a letter for his mother stating he had become a jihadi. Others, who had not left, spoke of recruiters frequenting areas where youth gathered to pass the time, attempting to persuade them to join terrorist factions.

On 16 December 2022 six men accused of being members of a group linked to al Shabaab, were each sentenced to 50 years' imprisonment for terrorism. Three were from the same family.

Religion-related violations on the mainland

In the past Tanzania witnessed several instances of religion-related violence targeting both Christians and Muslims. Churches experienced arson attacks, and a Christian teacher was killed by unknown assailants during 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 carried out by 15 individuals using improvised explosives, machetes, and axes.

1 Chanzo Initiative, 'Youths Mysteriously Go Missing in Zanzibar. Families, Police Offer Contradictory Explanations', 2 September 2022 <https://thechanzo.com/2022/09/02/youths-mysteriously-go-missing-in-zanzibar-families-police-offer-contradictory-explanations/>

Religion-related violations in Zanzibar

In Zanzibar members of the Christian community are expected to follow Islamic practices, including Christian schoolgirls, who are obliged to wear the hijab.

On 16 June 2017 three Christians were arrested for cooking food in a private home in the middle of the day during Ramadan. In March 2024 the Zanzibar Tourism Commission fined the company Organisateur Francophone around US\$ 500 for allowing tourists to eat in public during Ramadan.

Christians face restrictions when establishing places of worship, and in an extra-legal practice, the erection of a church building can be dependent on permission from the local community, which is rarely granted. Several churches, including some that had obtained all necessary permissions, faced court cases, with hearings repeatedly postponed. Consequently, meagre church resources were depleted through the continual retention of lawyers from the mainland, since local practitioners refused to take on such cases due to partisanship or fear.

In some instances, church buildings were demolished without notice, as occurred 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. Churches have also been attacked by mobs, with at least 24 destroyed.

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 reportedly been warned by a local official to leave the area as quickly as possible because the Muslim community did not want a church there.

Deteriorating human rights climate

President Samia Suluhu Hassan took power in March 2021 following the death of President John Magufuli, and initially appeared more progressive than her predecessor. However, her tenure will ultimately be defined by unprecedented repression.

In July 2021 senior members of the main opposition Chama Cha Demokrasia Na Maendeleo (Chadema) party, including party chairperson, Freeman Mbowe, were arrested in night raids ahead of a public rally for constitutional reforms. The leaders were remanded in custody on terrorism charges. Mr Mbowe and three co-defendants were detained until March 2022, when charges were dropped without explanation.

In June 2022 83-year-old Baraka Mohamed Shamte, a veteran party cadre from the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party, was abducted and tortured by masked men referred to locally as ‘zombies’ or ‘Janjaweed’, days after criticising the president of Zanzibar and being charged with sedition.

In 2023 President Hassan lifted a ban on opposition party rallies imposed by her late predecessor; however, she proceeded to stall on initiating the broader reforms that would underpin democracy, including a new constitution and amendments to the electoral law and media regulations.

In 2024 over 500 Chadema leaders and supporters were arrested and briefly detained ahead of a 12 August demonstration, inspired by events in neighbouring Kenya in June and July, calling for independent oversight of the country’s local government and general elections. The event was subsequently banned by the police, who claimed it was intended to ‘breach the peace.’

The months leading up to the October 2025 elections saw increasing repression. On 9 April Tundu Lissu, the Chadema presidential candidate, was arrested after calling for electoral reform, charged with incitement and treason - which carries a death sentence - and held on remand. Days after his arrest, on 12 April, the Elections Director at the Independent National Elections Commission, Ramadhani Kailima, announced that the Chadema Party was barred from participating in elections after failing to sign up to a code of conduct. Later, the second largest opposition party was also barred, ensuring there was no credible opposition.

Reports increased of enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists, activists, opposition leaders, and their supporters. Foreign human rights defenders were not exempt: Kenyan activist Boniface Mwangi and Ugandan journalist Agather Atuhaire travelled to Tanzania to observe Mr Lissu’s court hearing on 19 May, and were abducted from their hotel rooms on 18 May, subjected to physical and psychological torture and sexual assault, and deposited at the borders of their respective countries on 22 May with transportation money.²

The activists were among several abductees to be released with severe injuries. Many remain missing, with some presumed dead. Ally Kibao, 69, a member of the Chadema Party Secretariat who was seized from a bus travelling from Dar es Salaam to Tanga in the north-east by two armed men, was found dead on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam a day later with acid poured on his face to obscure his identity, and signs of a severe assault on the rest of his body. The Tanganyika Law Society confirmed 83 abductions since President Hassan came to power in 2021. Fifty-two occurred in October alone, including the enforced disappearance of former ambassador to Cuba Humphrey Polepole on 6 October, who had resigned from the ruling party and

² The East African, ‘Boniface Mwangi, Agather Atuhaire: We were sexually assaulted by Tanzanian captors’, 2 June 2025 <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/boniface-mwangi-agather-atuhaire-tanzanian-captors-assault-5066674>

criticised it. The doors of his house had been broken, and a large pool of blood was found on the floor.

Elections marred by extreme violence

Election day saw the largest protests since independence led primarily by Gen Z, to which the government responded with a six-day internet shutdown – which was later condemned by the African Commission as a violation of Article 9 of the ACHPR³ – and extraordinary brutality. Credible reports indicate that upwards of 1,000 protestors were killed by police and masked agents on the streets, in house to house raids on homes, and even in bars, as videos and pictures emerged of bodies on the streets of towns and cities amid reports of bodies being dumped in secret mass graves to obscure the death toll.

On 3 November the president was sworn in at an army base amid tight security, having been declared to have received 97.66% of the vote. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) observation team concluded in its preliminary report that Tanzanians had not been able to ‘express their democratic will’ and that the elections ‘fell short’ of the organisation’s ‘Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections.’ Similar sentiments were eventually expressed by the African Union, whose observers concluded that the polls ‘did not comply with AU principles, normative frameworks, and international obligations and standards for democratic elections.’⁴

The crackdown continued, with at least 641 individuals charged with treason and hundreds more held on charges of armed robbery, arson, and destruction of property.⁵ Many reportedly showed signs of having been tortured at their respective arraignments. According to local reports, a small cabal surrounding the president is overseeing this repression,⁶ including her son, Abdul Halim Hafidh Ameir, who is implicated in enforced disappearances and torture;⁷ her private secretary Waziri Salum; Suleiman Abubakar Mombo, head of the intelligence service; and Angela Kizigha, a Member of the East African Legislative Assembly.

Penalising church involvement in national affairs

Christian religious leaders were targeted specifically in the lead up to the elections, as the government attempted to prevent clergy from speaking on significant national concerns.

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 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.

Father Charles Kitima, the Secretary General of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC), was brutally attacked on 30 April and hospitalised with serious head injuries. The authorities falsely claimed he had been drunk. Nevertheless, he continues to be a vocal critic of Tanzania’s deteriorating human rights climate.

On 2 June the Registrar of Societies revoked the registration of the Glory of Christ Tanzania Church less than 24 hours after its founder and leader, Bishop Josephat Gwajima, Member of Parliament for Kawe who belongs to the ruling party, announced a seven-day prayer campaign for justice and peace, repeating earlier condemnations of the abductions and enforced disappearances plaguing the country that had elicited a warning from the president about the ‘Gwajimanisation’ of the party.

Pastor Elias Samweli Domisiani of the Highway of Holiness Church in Morogoro was reportedly abducted on 4 October, after being lured to a meeting by a person posing as a solar panel supplier.

Father Camillus Aroni Nikata of the Archdiocese of Songea, a lecturer in the Department of Public Communication at St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT) in Mwanza and founder of Radio Maria Tanzania, went missing during a retreat on 7 October. Ten days later, police announced that he had been found alive but extremely weak and needing a wheelchair. Earlier, Fr Nikata had described the electoral process as unfair and condemned abductions and enforced disappearances. However, the police claimed his disappearance was due to financial strain and a relationship breakdown – a narrative that was disputed, given his poor physical condition.

Pastor Eleth Mtaita of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) in Babati District was arrested on 24 October, allegedly for telling church members not to take part in the elections, which was deemed ‘incitement’. Eyewitnesses said that armed men had stormed his house and taken him away in a vehicle without licence plates.

Violations of indigenous rights

On 6 June 2022, and without consultation, the government announced it was designating 1,500 sq. kms of land in

3 African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, ‘Press release on the Nationwide Internet Outage on Election Day in the United Republic of Tanzania’, 1 November 2025 <https://achpr.au.int/en/news/press-releases/2025-11-01/nationwide-internet-outage-election-day-tanzania>

4 The Eastleigh Voice, ‘AU mission declares Tanzania’s 2025 elections fell short of democratic standards’, 6 November 2025 <https://eastleighvoice.co.ke/tanzania/236770/au-mission-declares-tanzania-s-2025-elections-fell-short-of-democratic-standards>

5 Ujasusi Blog, ‘641 Tanzanians Charged with Treason Following October 2025 Post-Election Violence: Intelligence Brief on Mass Prosecutions After Africa’s Deadliest Election’, 12 November 2025 <https://www.ujasusi.com/p/tanzania-641-treason-charges-october-2025-election-violence-intelligence-brief>

6 France 24, ‘Tanzania politicians in shock as cabal takes over after massacre’, 12 November 2025 <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20251112-tanzania-politicians-in-shock-as-cabal-takes-over-after-massacre>

7 X, Cyprian, Is Nyakundi @C_NyakundiH, 7 November 2025 https://x.com/C_NyakundiH/status/1986737532734722155

Liliondo, Ngorongoro District as a game reserve. The authorities subsequently set about preventing the primarily pastoral Maasai residents from living on, grazing cattle on, or seeking water in the demarcated area, comprehensively violating their rights using such tactics as sexual and physical assault, extrajudicial killing, forcible eviction, and cattle theft.

Over the next three years the government also suspended all social services in Ngorongoro, including healthcare and education, to pressure the Maasai to leave their land. As local and general elections loomed, the authorities effectively disenfranchised the community by removing the Maasai area from the list of polling centres used in voter registration updates. The government eventually conceded following five days of protest by the Maasai in August 2024, restoring their water, education, healthcare services, freedom of movement and their ability to vote in upcoming elections.

Recommendations

To the government of Tanzania:

- End the practice of enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary arrest and detention, releasing all currently held on excessive charges in connection with the marred presidential elections, and ensuring those responsible for extrajudicial killing, torture and mistreatment are brought to justice.
- To restore legitimacy, consider rerunning the presidential elections once reforms have been enacted to ensure subsequent elections are free and fair, and that no citizen is deprived of their constitutionally stipulated right to participate in public affairs.
- Respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of journalists, political opponents, and religious leaders, including freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and a fair trial
- Review and revise vague and broadly worded legislation that could infringe unduly on the right to freedom of expression, including Articles 127 and 129 of the Penal Code, ensuring laws, policies and practices conform with international standards.
- Expedite investigations of any incidents of religion-related violence, ensuring perpetrators are brought to justice.
- Ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and address all cases of abduction, holding perpetrators accountable.
- In collaboration with UN entities and other stakeholders, formulate programs and projects targeting youth to promote peaceful coexistence and interreligious dialogue, while addressing social, economic, and political grievances that render them vulnerable to radicalisation.
- Respect the property rights of the indigenous Ngorongoro Maasai community, and ensure members

are compensated and receive justice for violations suffered during the campaign of forced evictions.

- Issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures, allowing unhindered access to all areas of the country.

To the government of Zanzibar:

- Align laws, policies and practices with constitutional and international obligations regarding freedom of religion or belief, and prohibit the enforcement of shari'a stipulations on non-Muslims.
- Ensure the full enjoyment of the right to FoRB for religious minorities, and end informal practices whereby church construction is dependent on permission from local communities.
- Investigate without bias any cases of religion-related violence, ensuring perpetrators are prosecuted regardless of creed.
- In collaboration with UN entities and other stakeholders, formulate programs and projects targeting youth to promote peaceful coexistence and interreligious dialogue, while addressing social, economic, and political grievances that render them vulnerable to radicalisation.
- Guarantee due process in legal cases involving churches and their adherents.

To the government of the United States:

- Given the undue targeting of clergy, the State Department and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Tanzania, including in Zanzibar, and include the country on the Special Watch List.
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and USCIRF should request an invitation to visit Tanzania, with unhindered access to all parts of the country.
- Urge the government of Tanzania, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Tanzania'.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge the government of Tanzania to end the practice of enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary arrest and detention, releasing all currently held on excessive charges in connection with the marred presidential elections, and ensuring those responsible for extrajudicial killing, torture and mistreatment are brought to justice.
- Support the mandating of an international or regional independent investigation into the extrajudicial killing and alleged mass burials of protestors, to ensure accountability for perpetrators, justice for victims, and the return of those buried in mass graves to their families.

- Encourage the government of Tanzania to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, and to address all cases of abduction, holding perpetrators accountable.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their monitoring and reporting on Tanzania.
- Call on the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people to request an invitation to visit Tanzania to assess the situation of the Ngorongoro Maasai.
- Encourage member states to engage the government of Tanzania on the situations of religious minorities, indigenous peoples, and political opponents, including through public statements and private channels, and during high-level visits, and other bilateral exchanges.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process, Human Rights Council sessions and other key international human rights instruments to hold the government of Tanzania accountable for freedom of religion or belief violations and to offer recommendations to advance freedom of religion or belief.
- Call on the government of Tanzania to ensure impartial and timely investigations of any alleged violation targeting religious and belief communities, ensuring that perpetrators are held to account.
- Urge the government of Tanzania, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted above 'To the government of Tanzania'.

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