

Nyerere's legacy of poverty and repression in Zanzibar

Ann Talbot

15 November 2000

Opposition parties boycotted the rerun election in the East African archipelago of Zanzibar, after the previous attempt to hold elections on October 31 ended in chaos.

The government was forced to re-run the election in 16 of the islands' 50 constituencies after election observers reported that some polling stations did not open, that there were no election materials at others, ballot boxes were tampered with and some people voted more than once.

Foreign television crews filmed police beating supporters of the opposition Civic Union Front who protested. Reporters, including Ali Saleh from the BBC, were arrested. Another BBC reporter, Sulaiman Salim, went into hiding when he learned that the police were searching for him.

The Commonwealth Observers Group said that the election was a shambles and showed "colossal contempt for the Zanzibari people and their aspirations for democracy." US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said, "We are deeply concerned about the failure of the electoral process in Zanzibar." A European Union spokesman said that the government must find "a solution which is acceptable to all parties in Zanzibar."

Under such pressure the government was obliged to organise a re-run, but it rejected a demand from the Civic United Front, the main opposition party, that all 50 constituencies should be re-balloted.

In the week preceding the re-run on November 5, the government reinforced the police presence on the islands and arrested 150 CUF activists. Club wielding police were in evidence at all the road junctions.

Foreign governments, on which Zanzibar relies for aid, remain dissatisfied with the election. They boycotted the swearing in ceremony of Amani Karume, the candidate of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi Party (Party of the Revolution), who was elected president with 67 percent of the vote.

Seif Shariff Hamad, the CUF leader, got the remaining 33 percent. His party won 16 assembly seats on the island of Pemba.

In deference to the demands of foreign aid donors, Karume released 12 CUF members who have been detained without trial on treason charges for the last three years. But he refused to form a coalition government.

Karume has been able to make this minimal concession to the opposition because the situation in Zanzibar is momentarily of far less importance to the West than confirming the election of Benjamin Mkapa as President of Tanzania, of which Zanzibar is a semi-autonomous region.

Mkapa is pledged to press ahead with privatisations and opening up Tanzania's mineral reserves to international exploitation, particularly its gold deposits. Elections took place on the mainland and the islands at the same time. Although there were many irregularities in the polls on the mainland, these have been overlooked in the haste to get Mkapa installed.

The situation in Zanzibar remains fraught. The conflicts that emerged in the elections are of long standing. They are in the first place a legacy of the way in which British imperialism fostered ethnic divisions on the islands in the 19th and early 20th centuries. British rule favoured the

landowners who ran the clove estates and claimed to be of Arab descent, and discriminated against the estate workers and small farmers who were regarded as African.

In reality the population of the islands were ethnically mixed, because while Zanzibar was a centre of the slave trade Arab slavers had intermarried with the indigenous African population. But the British exploited the supposed ethnic divisions to control these strategically important islands that sat astride the eastern sea lanes.

Independence did not put an end to these divisions. They were exacerbated by the policies of the late President Julius Nyerere, the first president of independent Tanganyika, who formed a union with Zanzibar to create Tanzania in 1964.

Nyerere remains an icon of the Pan-Africanist movement and the limited welfare measures that he introduced in Tanzania are still held up by some as an example of the benefits of what was known as African socialism. To many he remains as saintly a figure as Nelson Mandela has since become.

The events surrounding the elections in Zanzibar throw a spotlight on the true nature of Nyerere's regime, which survived by playing off one faction against another using the considerable patronage that foreign aid allowed him as a political tool. With the aid budget cut and Tanzania saddled with the huge debt run up under Nyerere, these factions are locked in a struggle for a diminishing pool of resources. They will not hesitate to whip up ethnic hatred as was done with such terrible consequences in Rwanda.

Nyerere formed the union with Zanzibar when a spontaneous popular uprising had just overthrown the government of large estate owners that Britain had given power to on independence. Neither of the two opposition parties, the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) or the Umma Party, were in control of the uprising. Power fell into their hands because the movement lacked a programme that represented the interests of the dispossessed estate workers or the workers on the docks.

Years of bitterness, fomented by British rule, which had favoured those said to be of Arab descent, led to ethnic massacres. The new government encouraged the massacres which gave them the opportunity to enrich themselves from the property they seized from landowners and businessmen and because communal violence obscured the class questions that lay behind the uprising.

Nyerere recognised that the uprising was a threat to his own position. In the weeks following it he was forced into hiding when, encouraged by the events in Zanzibar, his army mutinied against its British officers. He only succeeded in suppressing this mutiny by calling in crack British troops.

He was politically damaged by this action, since he had always presented himself as an opponent of imperialism. What was more, the ease with which the mutiny had taken place revealed the weakness of his regime to popular opposition. Nyerere realised that if he could not control the political aspirations of the mass of his population, he would be of little use to Britain or any other imperialist power.

The British, already facing the Mau-Mau insurrection in Kenya, had put

Nyerere in power when recession hit the mining industry in neighboring Congo and the million strong working class—the largest concentration of workers outside of South Africa—was thrown into political ferment. They feared that the unrest would spread to East Africa and moved quickly to establish independent black African governments in Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda.

Nyerere had an object lesson close to hand in what happened to an African leader who could not control popular movements. Only four years before President Patrice Lumumba had been assassinated by Western agents because he could not maintain control of the volatile situation in the Congo.

Lumumba had appealed to the Soviet Union for military aid and in doing so had threatened to tip the balance of the Cold War in Africa. Now the new Zanzibar government had established relations with the Soviet bloc, allowed East Germany to open an embassy and accepting their help to train the army.

Nyerere was looking at Lumumba's fate when he initiated the union with Zanzibar. He knew that he would not survive if he allowed the movement in Zanzibar to continue and could demonstrate his usefulness to imperialism by bringing Zanzibar into a union with Tanganyika.

For his part Zanzibar's President Abeid Karume, who led the Afro-Shirazi Party, saw union with Tanganyika as a means of undermining his opponents in government. His particular target was Abdulrahman Mohammed Babu, leader of the Umma Party, who favoured close links with the Soviet bloc and Cuba. Babu, whose power base was on Pemba, as the CUF's is today, was forced to take refuge on the mainland as Karume arrested or killed his opponents. In 1972 Karume was assassinated, probably at Babu's instigation.

What Nyerere's role was in these factional murders has never become clear. His praise-singers are still keen to distance him from such unsavoury actions.

As Tanzania's economic situation worsened in the late 1970s and early 80s, tension increased between Zanzibar and the mainland. The price of Zanzibar's clove exports rose on the world market while the mainland's export crops fell. There were calls in Zanzibar for separation, but Nyerere managed to increase his control over the islands—whose export earnings became ever more vital to the Tanzanian government.

In 1977 the ruling Afro-Shirazi Party in Zanzibar joined with Nyerere's Tanganyikan African Union to form Chama Cha Mapinduzi. But the union of the parties and the two countries reached breaking point when the Zanzibar economy began to fail. The crisis was precipitated by the actions of Karume's successor Jumbe who held back the clove harvest in the hope that the price would rise. Instead the price collapsed and he had to sell the entire harvest at a loss. Zanzibar is heavily dependent on cloves. Half the world supply of this spice comes from the islands.

Nyerere sent 2,000 troops to the islands in 1984, forced Jumbe to resign and put Ali Hassan Mwinyi in power as president, with Seif Shariff Hamad who now leads the CUF, as chief minister. He regarded them both as reliable men who would defend the union between Zanzibar and the mainland. They introduced free market reforms similar to those that were then being put into action on the mainland under an IMF plan.

The uneasy alliance between the old Afro-Shirazi Party and the followers of Seif Shariff Hamad that Nyerere had managed to keep together broke down in the early 90s, when the CUF emerged as a separate party and stood in the first multi-party elections in 1995. Many CUF supporters still consider that had it not been for Chama Cha Mapinduzi corruption, Seif Shariff Hamad would have won the Zanzibar presidency then.

Hamad has become a proponent of greater autonomy not only for Zanzibar but also for the island of Pemba, which is his own power base. The CUF claim that Pemba, where the ASP was never strong, got fewer development projects than the main island, but two thirds of Zanzibar's

foreign exchange comes from Pemba's clove plantations.

Hamad's supporters aim to keep more of Pemba's foreign earnings for themselves, at a time when the market for cloves has become more uncertain with the economic and political turmoil in Indonesia, Zanzibar's main market for cloves.

Neither the ruling CCM nor the opposition CUF have opposed the decline in social conditions for the mass of Tanzania's population on the mainland and the islands. On the contrary both supported the IMF structural adjustment plans that have led to this decline and have played their part in introducing the free market measures that have destroyed the limited provision of health care and primary education.

While primary education was free and available to all children in the 1970s, parents now have to find money for school fees, uniforms and books which can amount to £25 a year for each child. This puts even a basic education out of the reach of many families. According to the United Nations, over half of the population lives below the poverty line and the average income is only \$200 a year—making Tanzania one of the poorest countries in the world.

Illiteracy is increasing at the rate of 2 percent a year. Two million children cannot attend school. School buildings are crumbling and lack adequate sanitation. Classes are large and books in short supply. A mere 15 percent of children go on to secondary school and just one per cent attend any form of further or higher education.

The UN describes the provision of health care, for which Tanzanians now have to pay, as "a nightmare". Infant mortality is among the highest in the world at 92 per thousand births. Almost a third of under fives are malnourished. The number of AIDS cases is 800,000 and growing.

Nyerere's defenders see the early years after independence as a golden age and exempt him from blame for the social catastrophe that has followed, but in reality his policies have led to the present situation. His so-called African socialism was always dependent on the aid that Western governments were prepared to give to prevent a social revolution in Africa.

Nyerere was able to use the Cold War to extract more concessions from the West than they would otherwise have been prepared to grant, but he remained loyal to the Western camp. That was why, despite his socialist rhetoric, he became a favourite of Robert McNamara when he was President of the World Bank—who directed large amounts of aid to Tanzania.

When this policy changed in the 1980s and aid was cut neither Nyerere nor any other elements in the CCM had any alternative policy but to go along with Western demands since their entire political outlook had always been one of accepting Africa's subordination to Western political policies and economic domination.

While Western aid produced some benefits for the mass of the population, Nyerere's limited welfare schemes were always fundamentally a system of patronage, which ensured political and economic benefits for a small elite. Deprived of these benefits, Tanzanian politicians are attempting to preserve their privileged position by carving out for themselves enclaves in which they will control the resources that Western investors want.

For the mass of the population of Tanzania the future is not in a return to Nyerere's African socialism which was always a false prospect. Nor does it lie with any of the self-interested cliques that have emerged from Nyerere's CCM, but in developing an independent socialist perspective which unites workers and the impoverished masses of the Africa for the overthrow of imperialist domination. The resources of this vast continent must be taken out of the hands of the banks and transnational corporations and developed in the interests of the whole population.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact