The December 9 protest in Tanzania, Nyerere's "African Socialism" and the struggle for Permanent Revolution—Part One

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This is part one of a four-part series: [Part Two] [Part Three] [Part Four]

Tanzanian Gen Z activists are calling for a nationwide "mega protest" on December 9, demanding the resignation of President Samia Suluhu Hassan. The move follows the massacre of thousands in the aftermath of the fraudulent election engineered by Hassan and her Chama Cha Mapinduzi (Party of the Revolution—CCM) regime, an atrocity that has sent shockwaves across Africa and internationally.

From Dar es Salaam and Mwanza to Mbeya and Arusha, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of young people flooded the streets to oppose what many saw as Hassan's coronation. They marched through tear gas, endured curfews, faced systematic internet shutdown and social media blackouts, and confronted soldiers and police firing live rounds.

Reports point to one of the bloodiest reprisals by an African post-independence regime. The death toll may exceed 3,000, with bodies taken from hospitals and morgues dumped into mass graves to conceal the scale of the killings. More than 300 protesters now face treason charges punishable by death, while security forces continue raids, disappearances and collective punishment in working-class neighbourhoods.

Terrified of mass opposition, Hassan has now cancelled all independence celebrations across the country: an extraordinary admission of political crisis by a regime that can no longer rule in the old way.

President Hassan is just the latest head of a capitalist state machine designed to defend private wealth, suppress working-class opposition and secure the interests of Tanzania's ruling class and its imperialist backers. Calls for her resignation must be guided by an understanding of which class holds state power and commands the means of life. Even if Hassan were removed or new elections called, the underlying economic and political structure would remain intact. Without a socialist transformation led by the working class, exploitation, violence, and destitution will continue.

The present mass repression flows directly from the historical foundations of CCM's rule and the social interests it was built to protect. Yet across the political spectrum, from Stalinists, Pan-Africanists, and pseudo-left tendencies, a common cry is that the bloodshed represents a tragic betrayal of Tanzania's first post-independence president, Julius Nyerere, and his ideals of African Socialism and Pan-Africanism.

ACT-Wazalendo, the second largest opposition party, presents itself as the heir to Nyerere's political tradition. It calls for a revival of the 1967 Arusha Declaration, a nationalist policy document cloaked in socialist rhetoric, "to restore one national ideology and plug out any sentiments of tribalism and religious differences which have started to take root." The party argues for a return to a "modern socialist economy, which focuses on increasing production and equity in distribution of national wealth so as to reduce classes."

Independent Online editorials that Nyerere's Africa's visi "nation bound together by solidarity, communal prosperity and the philosophy of ujamaa [familyhood] … has faded into memory. In its place stands a government that rules by force."

Kenya's Communist Party Marxist bombastically declared: "Let the spirit of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere rise again in revolutionary form." Another Stalinist and Pan-Africanist party, Kongamano La Mapinduzi, states that the mass protests seek "to restore the values of justice and dignity that … Nyerere stood for."

Internationally, the pseudo-left has paid almost no attention to the unfolding events in Tanzania, and when they do comment it is to recycle the same pro-Nyerere mythology. The Revolutionary Communist International claims that Nyerere's nationalisation of key sectors "broke Tanzania away from imperialist domination," supposedly giving the CCM "enormous popularity… Tanzania under Nyerere was a model and inspiration for revolutionary struggles across Africa."

The narrative that today's violence is a betrayal of Nyerere serves to block workers and youth from drawing the central lessons of the 20th century. The violence deployed today is being imposed by the capitalist political and economic order established at independence by Nyerere and his petty-bourgeois nationalist Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), predecessor of today's CCM regime, which has ruled uninterruptedly for the past 64 years.

TANU/CCM's rise as the dominant party in what is now Tanzania, drawing strength from the wave of anti-colonial struggle sweeping Africa in the 1940s and 1950s, was made possible above all by the betrayals of Stalinism. Stalinist leaderships violently repressed Trotskyism, the only force that insisted on building a revolutionary movement in the working class. Trotskyists rejected the policy of carving out new states along colonial borders and opposed alliances with the emerging national bourgeoisie, instead calling for the international unity of workers. The destruction of this revolutionary leadership left the young African working class politically disarmed and opened the way for a petty-bourgeois nationalist intelligentsia to lead and derail the anti-colonial movement.

The task is not to restore African Socialism. The modest welfare measures associated with Nyerere are rapidly being dismantled, inequality is widening, and millions of young people facing unemployment and precariousness. Tanzania's workers and youth must seize political power, establish their own state, reorganise the economy according to human need rather than private profit, and provide leadership to the rural masses. The success of a socialist revolution, however, depends on its extension to neighbouring African countries and, ultimately, its fulfilment on the world stage.

The creation of Tanzania and the rise of the working class

The territory now called Tanzania, comprising mainland Tanganyika and the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, emerged from imperial conquest during the Scramble for Africa. In the 1880s, as European powers divided the continent, Berlin claimed the region that became German East Africa, enforcing control through violent campaigns and alliances with tribal elites. By 1891, Tanganyika was formalised as a German colony, built on plantation agriculture for sisal used in naval cordage, as well as coffee and cotton. This system relied on forced labour, punitive expeditions, and hut taxes that pushed Africans into the cash economy to sustain the colonial state.

In response, the Ngoni, Matumbi, and Zaramo people launched the Maji Maji Rebellion (1905-1907), which was met with extreme brutality. To starve the population into submission, the German colonial administration launched scorched-earth campaigns, burning villages, destroying crops and seizing grain stores. Between 75,000 to 300,000 people, mostly civilians, died from famine, disease, and violence.

The rebellion was part of a wider continental wave of resistance to imperialism, but fragmented communities with limited resources could not sustain a unified struggle. Spears and old muskets were overwhelmed by Maxim guns and the industrial power of European capitalism. Its defeat, like uprisings across the continent, underscored the absence of a modern working class capable of mounting a coordinated challenge to imperial rule.

Zanzibar followed a distinct but related path. Though ruled by an Omani Arab sultanate, it became a formal British protectorate in 1890 under the Heligoland–Zanzibar Treaty, in which Germany ceded claims to the island in exchange for control over Tanganyika. The islands developed into a plantation economy based on the highly profitable cultivation of cloves. Even after Britain formally abolished slavery in the late 1890s, the plantation system continued to operate through indentured labour controlled by a small landowning Arab elite.

After the defeat of Germany during World War One, Tanganyika was handed over to Britain by the League of Nations. London retained the German plantation and taxation system but expanded the infrastructure needed for large-scale extraction. The Central Railway line from Dar es Salaam to Kigoma, the Tanga-Moshi line, and port complexes at Dar es Salaam, Tanga, and Mtwara were developed to connect the entire British-controlled East African economy and funnel raw materials to the world market. A modern working class began to emerge, including railway and dockworkers, postal and telegraph clerks, plantation labourers, and miners.

The first strikes began in the 1920s and 1930s. In Tanganyika, railway workers staged stoppages and go slows in 1927 and 1928 over conditions, followed by a 1930 dock strike in Dar es Salaam against harsh treatment and delayed pay. Plantation labourers on the sisal estates of Tanga and Morogoro also protested. In Zanzibar, dockworkers struck in 1934 over wage cuts, and municipal workers in Zanzibar Town took action in 1936.[1] These struggles produced the first unions, beginning with the Cooks, Washermen and House Servants Association in 1939, the African Teachers Association in 1944, and the Railway African Association, which by 1945 had become the most militant worker organisation in the territory.[2]

These developments were part of a regional working-class movement, numerically small but increasingly militant, that linked Kenya's coast, the railway system and Uganda's interior via ports, docks and railways. In Kenya, African railway and port workers in Mombasa launched major strikes, notably in 1939, that disrupted the colonial export economy, while transport workers in Uganda also struck during the 1940s over wages, conditions and colonial policy. Along this corridor, the integration of rail, port, and dock systems created both the infrastructure and the potential for collective social struggle.

The African working class began to act for the first time as a unified class, not as fragmented tribal groups. It confronted the same colonial state and capitalists. This was the foundation for a class consciousness that transcended the divisions the imperialists relied upon.

Permanent Revolution and Marxist opposition to imperialism

It was Marxists who first opposed colonial rule. In Britain, Ernest Belfort Bax of the Social-Democratic Federation wrote in 1896 that Africans' "fight against the white man, against missions, traders, and settlers is our fight. We recognise no rights, under any circumstances whatever, for a civilised power to subjugate races living in a lower stage of social development and to force civilisation upon them. The specious humanitarian twaddle talked in press and upon platform to throw dust in our eyes and cover wanton aggression does not impose upon us."

From France, the Parti Ouvrier (Workers' Party) denounced colonialism in 1895 as "one of the worst forms of capitalist exploitation, which tends exclusively to enlarge the field of profits of the proprietary class at the expense of the blood and money of the producing proletariat; considering that its expeditions undertaken under the pretext of civilisation and national honour lead to corruption and destruction of primitive populations and unleash on the colonising nation itself all sorts of scourges."

This internationalist opposition was formalised within the Second International, the world organisation of socialist parties founded in 1889. At its 1907 Congress in Stuttgart, it adopted a resolution declaring that capitalist colonial policy "must lead to enslavement, forced labour, or the extermination of the native population of the colonised regions. The civilising mission that capitalist society claims to serve is no more than a veil for its lust for conquest and exploitation."

The left wing of the Second International, led by Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Rosa Luxemburg, went further, developing the first systematic analysis of imperialism as a global stage of capitalism. As Lenin explained in *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, the rise of finance capital and monopolies necessarily gave rise to a global system in which entire nations were subjugated to serve the accumulation needs of the imperialist bourgeoisie. "Imperialism," Lenin wrote, "is the epoch of finance capital and monopolies, which introduce everywhere the striving for domination, not for freedom." The tensions among imperialist powers would lead to the outbreak of the First World War.

Lenin and Trotsky foresaw that the same contradictions driving the imperialist war would open the path to world socialist revolution. On this basis they led the Bolshevik party to the first victorious socialist revolution, in Russia in October 1917, and then founded the Communist International (Comintern). These developments triggered revolutionary movements across Europe and the colonies and raised the colonial question to the centre of world politics.

The guiding perspective of the Russian Revolution was Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. Trotsky insisted that in countries with a belated capitalist development such as Russia or today's Tanzania, the resolution of the democratic tasks associated in the 19th century with bourgeois revolutions, including national unity and land reform, was now bound up with the taking of power by the working class.

Trotsky showed that in the imperialist epoch, capitalism's global development and the ruling classes' fear of their own workers bind the national bourgeoisie to the imperialist powers that already dominate and divide the world. As a result, it is incapable of overcoming tribal

divisions, resolving the agrarian question, guaranteeing land or jobs, building genuine democratic institutions, or securing real independence. Only a struggle for socialism, based on the international character of the working class and the integrated world economy, can accomplish these historic tasks.

Trotsky cautioned against nurturing illusions in the creation of new nation states. He stressed that "the belated revolutions in Asia and Africa are incapable of opening up a new epoch of renaissance for the national state. The liberation of the colonies will be merely a gigantic episode in the world socialist revolution."

Permanent Revolution became embedded in the very foundations of the Comintern. In 1919, the Manifesto of the Comintern written by Trotsky affirmed:

> The emancipation of the colonies is conceivable only in conjunction with the emancipation of the working class in the metropolises… Even now the struggle in the more developed colonies, while taking place only under the banner of national liberation, immediately assumes a more or less clearly defined social character. If capitalist Europe has violently dragged the most backward sections of the world into the whirlpool of capitalist relations, then socialist Europe will come to the aid of liberated colonies with her technology, her organization, and her ideological influence in order to facilitate their transition to a planned and organised socialist economy.

At its Second Congress in 1920, the Comintern insisted that every national section take upon itself the concrete revolutionary duty of combating its own ruling class's imperialism. The Congress adopted the "Theses on the National and Colonial Question," drafted by Lenin, which required Communist parties to expose "the dodges of its 'own' imperialists in the colonies, of supporting every liberation movement in the colonies not only in words but in deeds, of demanding that their imperialist compatriots should be thrown out of the colonies, of cultivating" within the working class a profound sense of fraternity with the masses of the colonies.

This internationalist perspective shaped the first Marxist organisations on the African continent. In 1917, South African socialists formed the International Socialist League, which became the Communist Party of South Africa in 1921. In North Africa, the Communist Party of Egypt was founded in 1920 and, in the same year, the Algerian and Tunisian Communist Parties were established as sections of the French Communist Party.

Central to this project was the Comintern's insistence that communists maintain political independence from the native bourgeoisie. However anti-imperialist their rhetoric, these classes remained materially bound to capitalism and would betray any independent mobilisation of workers and peasants. Lenin insisted "on a clear distinction between the interests of the oppressed classes, of working and exploited people, and the general concept of national interests as a whole, which implies the interests of the ruling class" and insisted that any alliance with the bourgeois nationalists in the colonial countries should "uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even if it is in its most embryonic form."

The Marxist opposition to imperialism, which had developed through decades of theoretical struggle and been clarified through the experience of the Russian Revolution, established a perspective for the liberation of the colonies and semi-colonies rooted in the conscious and independent mobilisation of the working class for socialism on an international scale.

To be continued.

William H. Friedland, "The Institutionalization of Labor Protest in Tanganyika and Some Resultant Problems" *Sociologus* 11 (2), 1961, pp. 132-147. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43644043

John Iliffe, "A Modern History of Tanganyika", 1979, 40–87. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 134

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[1] William H. Friedland, "The Institutionalization of Labor Protest in Tanganyika and Some Resultant Problems" *Sociologus* 11 (2), 1961, pp. 132-147. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43644043

[2] John Iliffe, "A Modern History of Tanganyika", 1979, 40–87. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 134