

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

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This is part four in a four-part series: [Part One] [Part Two] [Part Three]

TANU in power and the failure of African Socialism and Pan-Africanism

Nyerere presented the transition to independence in Tanganyika in 1961 as the opening of a new era of "Uhuru na Umoja" (Freedom and Unity). He promised a break with colonial domination and the construction of a society based on self-reliance and equality. Yet the capitalist class foundations of the new state were already clear. TANU embodied the interests of a rising petty-bourgeois elite whose aspiration was the Africanisation of state and commercial positions previously monopolised by British colonial officials and expatriate capitalists.

The working class, which had played a central role in the anti-colonial struggle, continued to mobilise after independence. In its first year, workers organised 152 strikes involving approximately 48,000 participants. However, this renewed labor militancy was quickly repressed. Nyerere's government introduced a battery of laws effectively abolishing the right to strike and extending preventive detention to curb "subversive activities." The Tanganyika Federation of Labour (TFL) was dissolved and replaced by the National Union of Tanganyika Workers (NUTA), a single, government-controlled union structure.

As for Nyerere's claim of seeking self-reliance, it too was rapidly exposed. Between 1961 and 1972 an average of 34 percent of its total development budget came from foreign aid. In the 1975 budget, the government expected 55 percent to be raised by foreign aid.

In early 1964, Nyerere faced a new challenge when the Tanganyika Rifles mutinied against their British officers, demanding Africanisation and better pay. The uprising rapidly spread from Dar es Salaam to other barracks. Nyerere, caught unprepared, fled the capital and appealed to British imperialism for assistance. British troops were flown in from Kenya and Aden to suppress the mutiny and restore his government, exposing Nyerere's anti-imperialist rhetoric.

The wave of strikes and the 1964 army mutiny that followed independence convinced Nyerere of the need to consolidate power. In 1965, Tanganyika became a one-party state under TANU, following the model of Nyerere's mentor Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana. This turn reflected a broader pattern across Africa, as postcolonial elites sought to suppress the social forces that had brought them to power through police-state measures. Having secured the state apparatus, the emerging bourgeois leadership turned against the working class and peasantry.

Nyerere's justification was that the class struggle was alien to Africa. This was codified in his *Ujamaa: The Basis of African Socialism*, where he insisted, "In our traditional African society we were individuals within a community. We took care of the community, and the community took care of us. We neither needed nor wished to exploit our fellow men. We neither had capitalists nor feudalists."

This conception underpinned the Arusha Declaration of 1967, often hailed as the high point of Nyerere's "socialist" project. It declared, "The objective of TANU is to build a socialist state. The people must own the means of production. We reject capitalism, which seeks to build a society of division, and we equally reject feudalism." The Declaration added that: "In a socialist society it is the government which must control the principal means of production."

State ownership under a petty-bourgeois bureaucracy left the underlying relations of exploitation intact. The nationalisations that followed merely transferred control of banks, industries, and major farms to the state. Workers did not manage factories, elect planning committees, or determine investment priorities through organs of workers' power. Instead, a bureaucratic-managerial elite took over the commanding heights of the economy and consolidated its authority through technocratic management, foreign aid, and control of the cooperative and marketing systems that dominated agriculture.

The centrepiece of Nyerere's economic strategy were village cooperatives, or Ujamaa villages. This was influenced by Maoist ideas of rural collectivisation, which the new Tanzanian state looked to for guidance, particularly Mao's "Great Leap Forward" (1958-1960). Between the late 1960s and late 1970s, around nine million rural people, over ninety percent of the population, were forcibly relocated into these villages. Entire communities were uprooted under threat or force, houses were burned, and food stores destroyed.

Officially, these villages were to promote communal cooperation, modern agricultural techniques, and shared social services. The real aim was to tighten state control over agricultural labour and boost the production of export crops needed for foreign exchange. Capitalist accumulation had to come from the heavy sacrifices of workers and peasants. Lacking large-scale industry, the capacity to produce agricultural machinery and inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides, as well as sufficient infrastructure and technical skills, the Ujamaa ultimately failed. Production of cash crops actually fell. Between 1967 and 1975, Tanzania achieved an average rate of growth of just 1.4 percent while its population grew by 2.8 percent.

The 1967 Arusha Declaration emerged as a response to the intensification of the class struggle across the world. Obote's "Move to the Left" in Uganda adopted nationalisations and socialist rhetoric, while in Kenya, the Kenya People's Union was formed, demanding deeper

Africanisation and land expropriation. These shifts mirrored a broader global upsurge, from the US anti-war and civil rights movements to the French general strike of 1968, Italy's 1969 strike wave, and Britain's 1974 miners' strike. The collapse of the Greek and Portuguese dictatorships and Vietnam's 1975 victory over US imperialism further signalled the crisis of global capitalism. This turbulence was fuelled by the mounting crisis of global capitalism, intensified after the 1971 breakdown of Bretton Woods.

The Arusha Declaration was Nyerere's attempt to defuse class tensions—particularly mounting social opposition against the rising wabenzi class (“owners of Mercedes-Benz cars,” who had enriched themselves in the post-independence period)—and channel popular radicalism into state-led development. As British Minister of Overseas Development Reg Prentice told Parliament in 1968: “I have a great deal of personal admiration for President Nyerere and a great deal of sympathy and support for the spirit of the Arusha Declaration.”^[1]

Nyerere faced even sharper contradictions in foreign policy. While he rejected the Marxist analysis of imperialism, events in the region repeatedly confirmed it. The same powers that could tolerate a poor, aid-dependent Tanzania were determined to hold on to the mineral wealth and strategic levers of the continent.

In neighbouring Congo, the CIA and Brussels orchestrated the overthrow and murder of Patrice Lumumba to secure control over copper, cobalt, and uranium. In Southern Africa, Britain and the US armed and diplomatically protected the white-supremacist regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), turning them into regional gendarmes. In Mozambique and Angola, London and Washington backed Portugal, NATO's oldest dictatorship, providing military support that enabled Lisbon to wage protracted colonial wars against the newly formed liberation movements.

Nyerere made Tanzania a rear base for these struggles, hosting exiled movements and training camps and opening the country's limited resources to their support. This further strained an already weak economy and deepened dependence on external financing and military aid. Into this vacuum stepped the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and China. Though both claimed to stand for socialism, neither the Soviet Union nor China based themselves on the internationalist strategy of October 1917. Each pursued its own nationalist course. Their divergent national interests erupted into open conflict in 1961.

Their rivalry spilled across Africa. For the Soviet bureaucracy, whose industrial base was shielded behind Eastern Europe, the priority was “peaceful coexistence” with Washington. Moscow cultivated conservative African governments, military strongmen, and sections of the nationalist elites as bargaining chips in its diplomatic manoeuvres.

China, by contrast, encircled by hostile powers and threatened by the US war in Vietnam, turned to exporting guerrilla warfare as a strategic buffer in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to secure influence with dissident wings of the local bourgeoisie who might soon come to power. The Maoist line openly glorified “progressive” monarchs, tribal chiefs, and nationalist officers. Maoism in Africa, as elsewhere, was not an alternative to Stalinism but a mutation of it.

These global contradictions converged in Zanzibar. British imperialism had long manipulated the islands' stratified social structure, elevating an Arab landlord class over the overwhelmingly African plantation workers who laboured under conditions of extreme exploitation. Independence did not resolve these contradictions. The 1964 revolution, a volcanic uprising of the oppressed, toppled the Arab landowning elite. But while the revolt expressed deep class antagonisms, the absence of a revolutionary proletarian leadership meant that its political direction fell to petty-bourgeois formations, the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) and the radical Umma Party, and paved the way to communal massacres of thousands.

For Nyerere and the Tanzanian elite, the Zanzibar Revolution was an

existential threat. The radicalisation on the islands risked igniting similar upheavals on the mainland, where workers had already carried out mass strikes before and after independence. The hurried union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar was a pre-emptive act designed to contain a potentially revolutionary situation. This was backed by the US and Britain, who opposed the new Zanzibar regime's closeness to the Soviet Union and China. They both welcomed the merger, which confirmed Nyerere's reliability as a bulwark against Moscow and Beijing.

Nyerere's Pan-African ambitions quickly collided with the realities of capitalist statelets in East Africa. His effort to build regional unity through the East African Community and its 1967 common currency with Kenya and Uganda collapsed as each new ruling elite guarded its own inherited state apparatus.

The global recession of the mid-1970s exposed the fragility of Tanzania's economic foundations. Falling prices for coffee, cotton, and sisal; soaring oil costs; and the country's dependence on imported machinery and fuel produced chronic shortages, inflation, and declining living standards. The limited welfare gains associated with Ujamaa could not be sustained. Forced to appeal to the IMF and World Bank, Tanzania entered the tightening grip of global finance capital, which demanded austerity, wage suppression, agricultural commercialisation, and deep cuts to social services.

The crisis intensified in 1978 when Uganda's Idi Amin, facing economic collapse, invaded Tanzania's Kagera region. Amin, who originally came to power with the tacit backing of London, Tel Aviv, and later Washington, was by the late 1970s heavily armed by the Soviet bureaucracy. Tanzania's counter-invasion, carried out with Chinese-supplied weaponry and the support of Ugandan exile militias, culminated in Amin's overthrow in April 1979. The war revealed how rival Stalinist bureaucracies in Moscow and Beijing armed competing nationalist factions, deepening political confusion by presenting their geopolitical competition as socialist struggles.

Although Nyerere was able to secure more aid from the West during the 1970s (US\$2.7 billion between 1971 and 1981), Tanzania was effectively bankrupt when he stepped down as president in 1985.

Successive Tanzanian regimes deepened the neoliberal restructuring imposed under IMF and World Bank supervision. Under President Ali Hassan Mwinyi, the ruling elite abandoned even the limited reforms associated with Ujamaa. Import controls were scrapped, public enterprises sold off, and the country formally entered IMF stabilisation programmes in 1986. Under Benjamin Mkapa from 1995, banking, manufacturing, food processing, oil refining, and telecoms were privatised; mining companies received sweeping concessions; and from 2004 land could be freely bought and sold, unleashing massive corporate land grabs.

The social consequences were devastating. Between 1994 and 1998, 150,000 public sector jobs were slashed, including thousands of teachers and health workers. Hospitals ran out of supplies, patients were forced to pay for basic treatments, and the health budget shrank while disease and mortality rose. Education, sanitation, water access, life expectancy, and literacy all deteriorated. Multi-party elections introduced in 1992 changed nothing fundamental as the CCM retained power, and Tanzania's economy became increasingly dominated by donors, debt, foreign capital and an oligarchic elite, among them Mohammed Dewji, Tanzania's richest man with an estimated net worth of around US \$2.2 billion.

The trajectory of Tanzania under Nyerere stands as a decisive refutation of the petty-bourgeois illusion that national independence, state ownership, or Pan-African sentiment could substitute for proletarian revolution. Confined within the framework of the capitalist state and the world imperialist system, “African Socialism” could only replace colonial administrators with a new African bourgeoisie managing exploitation on behalf of international capital. By suppressing the independent organisation of workers and peasants, the TANU/CCM leadership blocked

the only social force capable of unifying East Africa on socialist foundations: the working class.

The struggle of the Tanzanian masses and the fight for the United Socialist States of Africa

Since independence, Tanzania's working class has grown in size and strategic importance. Hundreds of thousands work in mining, manufacturing, commercial agriculture, transport, logistics and tourism—sectors tied directly to global commodity chains. Gold mining alone employs tens of thousands. Manufacturing employs roughly 700,000 workers, much of it linked to processing export crops. Transport and logistics—rail, trucking and port work—bind these export circuits together. Tourism, hospitality and conservation generate foreign exchange and rely on a large, insecure labour force.

Beneath this sits a vast informal economy, representing more than 90 percent of all employment, including millions of smallholder farmers and around 175,000 artisanal miners. Moreover, the port of Dar es Salaam functions as a regional artery, moving goods for Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi and Uganda.

This immense social and economic power, concentrated in the hands of the working class and the rural poor, must be consciously mobilised into a political force capable of confronting the capitalist state and leading the struggle for socialism.

The opposition parties CHADEMA and ACT Wazalendo cannot provide a way forward. CHADEMA openly promotes free-market reforms, tax incentives for corporations and deregulation to attract foreign investors. Its response to the massacre of protesters has been appeals, inquiries and hotline registration of the dead. These actions aim to contain, not lead, the mass movement. In the words of CHADEMA's international secretary, Deogratias Munishi, on BBC News, "We have no control of the protests... We don't want a situation that could escalate to what has happened in Madagascar." He appealed to William Ruto, the butcher of the Kenyan Gen Z uprising, to intervene.

ACT Wazalendo, presenting itself as the custodian of Nyerere's legacy, calls for a more interventionist state and a revival of the Arusha Declaration. But its programme represents the interests of sections of the elite who lost out under privatisation and neoliberal restructuring. In the face of mass protests, ACT has limited itself to calls for calm and respect for property. Both parties defend the capitalist nation-state, accept IMF-shaped economic policy and represent layers of the middle and upper classes whose wealth depends on the exploitation of workers and the rural poor.

The working class must advance its own revolutionary answer. A movement rooted in miners, port workers, teachers, nurses, students and the rural poor must form democratically elected committees in workplaces, neighbourhoods, schools and universities to coordinate protests, strikes and self-defence against state violence. It must raise the demand for a general strike to bring down the CCM government and reject all appeals to the African Union or imperialist governments, instead calling for solidarity from workers across East Africa and internationally.

A socialist programme in Tanzania would place the mines, banks, ports, logistics networks and major industries under workers' democratic control; abolish repressive laws; cancel foreign debt; and reorganise agriculture on cooperative, mechanised lines under workers' and peasants' committees. It would guarantee employment, housing, healthcare and education by directing resources away from foreign corporations and domestic elites toward human need.

The only viable path forward is the fight for the United Socialist States

of Africa—a voluntary federation of workers' states built through the common struggle of workers, youth and rural poor across the continent. This would abolish the colonial borders, pool the continent's immense resources, plan development rationally and democratically, and finally end the nightmare of poverty, repression, ethnic division and imperialist domination.

This requires constructing a revolutionary party based on Trotsky's Permanent Revolution, a Tanzanian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Only such a leadership can transform the present uprising into a conscious struggle for power and socialism.

Concluded.

House of Commons Debate, (26 July 1968), vol. 764, col. 1234. Available at: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1968-07-26/debates/e4604c73-38f7-4d79-bf33-5efcea68b068/Tanzania\(GovernmentAid\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1968-07-26/debates/e4604c73-38f7-4d79-bf33-5efcea68b068/Tanzania(GovernmentAid)).

[1] House of Commons Debate, (26 July 1968), vol. 764, col. 1234. Available at: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1968-07-26/debates/e4604c73-38f7-4d79-bf33-5efcea68b068/Tanzania\(GovernmentAid\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1968-07-26/debates/e4604c73-38f7-4d79-bf33-5efcea68b068/Tanzania(GovernmentAid)).



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