

# Maoism offered as a bogus alternative to ‘African Socialism’ and Pan-Africanism—Part 1

## “Challenging ‘African Socialism’ through Marxism-Leninism: The University Students African Revolutionary Front in Tanzania”

**Kipchumba Ochieng****4 January 2026***This is the first of a two-part series.*

Across the African continent, a wave of Gen-Z-led protests has shaken multiple countries, from Kenya, to Nigeria, Madagascar to Tanzania, expressing mounting anger at mass youth unemployment, poverty wages, corruption and police state rule.

Millions are being thrust into struggle against regimes descending from Pan-Africanist leaders and national liberation movements which promised that the carving up of states on inherited colonial borders and based on capitalism would open a new historical era. Independence, it was claimed, would translate into social equality, universal education, comprehensive healthcare and economic development.

Instead, in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Angola, the CCM, FRELIMO, and the MPLA, once synonymous with the struggle against colonial rule, now preside over brutal and corrupt dictatorships imposing International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity. In South Africa, the African National Congress rules over levels of inequality that surpass those of the white supremacist apartheid era, while in Kenya just 125 individuals control more wealth than the country’s remaining 42 million people combined. Across the continent, civil wars and recurring humanitarian crisis continue, as imperialist powers once again scramble for Africa’s resources, drawing the continent into yet another front of an emerging third world war.

Drawing a balance sheet of post-colonial rule is indispensable. Clarifying which leaderships and programmes failed, why they failed, and whose class interests they ultimately served is the starting point for meeting the challenges of the new period of revolutionary struggle. It is this that *Revolutionary Movements in Africa: An Untold Story* (2024), published by Pluto Press, blocks.

Edited by Ndongo Samba Sylla, Leo Zeilig and Pascal Bianchini, the volume presents an eclectic array of movements from the 1950s to the early 1990s, grouping Stalinists and Maoists aligned with Beijing or Moscow, Third World guerrilla currents, Pan Africanists, feminists, Arab nationalists and various petty bourgeois formations, across Senegal, Mali, Tanzania, South Africa and beyond, into a single, amorphous “left” tradition.

Central to this project is the editors’ sweeping definition of an “orientation to the left” that “implies a position in favour of equality, not only in terms of rights or opportunities for the individual, but also as an organising principle of society, especially at the socio-economic level. It also refers to progressive values opposed to conservative, traditionalist,

jingoist conceptions.” As for revolutionary, it means any “radical change in the social order,” from “the idea of taking up arms as a response to the one party state and dictatorship” to the emergence of “radical democratic movements” that appeared revolutionary only “in the broad sense of the expression”.<sup>[1]</sup>

Such definitions stand in direct opposition to socialism, which is the conscious, revolutionary overthrow of capitalist rule and the transfer of the means of production into the collective, democratic control of the working class. Revolution, as understood by socialists, is inseparable from the abolition of wage labour and the capitalist state, and from the reorganisation of society on the basis of meeting social need rather than private profit interests. This transformation requires the independent mobilisation and seizure of power by the working class, linking its struggle to the international fight against imperialism, and can be realised only through a revolutionary Marxist party.

This perspective finds its continuity today in Trotskyism, embodied in the programme of the Fourth International and carried forward by the International Committee of the Fourth International against all tendencies that subordinate workers to nationalism and capitalism.

By severing socialism from the independent revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity of a Marxist party, the editors of *Revolutionary Movements in Africa* have constructed a framework that scavenges from the dustbin of history various discredited Stalinist, Maoist and petty-bourgeois nationalist currents. These forces were repeatedly used by sections of the African bourgeoisie to consolidate state power, subordinate the working class, and betray the promises of national liberation in the service of capitalism and imperialism.

### Tanzania’s University Students African Revolutionary Front

Patrick Norberg, in his chapter “Challenging ‘African Socialism’ through Marxism-Leninism: The University Students African Revolutionary Front in Tanzania,” presents the Maoist-influenced University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF) as a viable revolutionary alternative to Julius Nyerere’s project of “African Socialism” in 1960s Tanzania.

The chapter opens by distinguishing “two lefts” in post-independence

Tanzania. “The first left,” led by Julius Nyerere’s Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), “was the national liberation movement transfigured into a state led socialist project, espousing progressive ideals, but delivering them in a top-down manner.”<sup>[2]</sup>

TANU, however, did not arise in the 1950s with the aim of abolishing capitalism, but of constructing a capitalist nation-state within the colonial borders inherited from British imperialism. Nyerere’s “African Socialism” served as an ideological cover for this nationalist state-building project under conditions of extreme economic backwardness.

At independence, Tanzania remained a poor, commodity-dependent economy, compelled to balance between Western imperialist aid and limited assistance from Maoist China, while financing development through the intensified extraction of surplus from the peasantry. This took its most coercive form in the Ujamaa villagisation schemes, which forcibly subordinated millions of peasants to the needs of the state without ending capitalist property relations.

Nyerere’s nationalist strategy proved incapable of overcoming economic backwardness or escaping the constraints of the imperialist world economy. By the late 1980s, the regime turned to the IMF, imposing austerity, privatisations and wage freezes that devastated living standards and paved the way for Tanzania’s deeper integration into global finance capital. The trajectory continues today under his party, which has recently killed thousands of protesters opposing the fraudulent election of President Samia Suluhu Hassan.

Norberg then turns to what he calls “the second left,” USARF, a small circle of radicalised students at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) that existed for just three years, from 1967 until its suppression by Nyerere in 1970. Norberg claims:

the group was at the forefront of political developments in Tanzania as the chief critic of Ujamaa. Its embrace of Marxism-Leninism conditioned the form and direction of the group’s activities, functioning as a focal point which drew together all progressive elements inside the UDSM. In this context, USARF had some affinity with the idea of vanguardism, seeing its members as petty bourgeois class traitors who would rise to lead the workers. Throughout its existence, USARF’s actions on the outside of mainstream political structures were facilitated by Marxism-Leninism ... opposed to the utopianism of African socialism. ... Nyerere saw USARF as a great threat precisely because there was no way to mediate the inherent conflict between his idealist socialism and the materialism of Marxism.<sup>[3]</sup>

This portrayal is a fabrication. The students who comprised USARF—drawn not only from Tanzania but from across East and Southern Africa, including Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Ethiopia and Sudan—were radicalised during a period of political ferment among youth across the continent. But the political conceptions which dominated this milieu never prepared them to see through, let alone challenge, Nyerere’s socialist pretensions.

Norberg notes that USARF was influenced by academics such as Walter Rodney, Terence Ranger, Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul, who took up positions at the University of Dar es Salaam that Nyerere had converted into an international magnet for radicalised petty-bourgeois intellectuals. None of these figures represented a break with Stalinism or with petty bourgeois national liberation politics, nor did they seek to build an independent Marxist party of the working class in Tanzania or anywhere else in Africa. Their perspectives remained firmly confined within Nyerere’s nationalist regime and oriented toward the Soviet or Chinese-backed national liberation movements that dominated the continent.

Walter Rodney—Europe      *Europe developed for*

justified the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy and “Socialism in One Country,” absolving Stalin of responsibility for the defeats of the international working class in China (1925-1927), Germany (1932-1933), France (1936) and Spain (1936-1939). In an objectivist and apologetic manner, he declared:

The failure of revolutions to take place in Western Europe was a function of imperialism, which strengthened their bourgeoisie and disarmed the workers. Stalin and the Russian Communist Party and the Comintern had no control over that. If one agrees that Stalin was not to blame for the absence of revolutions elsewhere, then it is entirely logical that he should have proceeded on his own, unless the inference is that Russia should have abandoned its social transformation until the workers revolted in Britain!<sup>[4]</sup>

Terence Ranger, an academic specialising in Zimbabwe’s history, stated unequivocally, “I certainly never have been a Marxist”.<sup>[5]</sup> Arrighi, a former member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Italy, developed his theory of systemic cycles of accumulation in *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994), offering a comparative account of successive hegemonies, Dutch, British and US, and the shifting geography of capital accumulation. He eliminated any decisive role for the working class or a Marxist revolutionary party, substituting conscious political struggle with a schema detailing an objectivist sequence of hegemonic transitions.

Saul was a prominent Canadian scholar of southern Africa who pinned his political hopes on nationalist parties such as FRELIMO in Mozambique and the ANC in South Africa, working closely with these and other liberation movements. His later writings are haunted by the disappointments of regimes in Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa, forged by movements he helped promote.

Their hostility to Trotskyism—above all to the theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrates the impossibility of the national bourgeoisie playing any progressive role against imperialism—became embedded in the “common course” they designed for USARF students, which Norberg celebrates as Marxist.

The course, pointedly excluding Trotsky, offered an eclectic canon of “Marx, Engels and Lenin” alongside Pan-Africanist figures such as Kwame Nkrumah, the first Pan-African leader to take power, in Ghana in 1957, and Frantz Fanon, whose *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) elevated peasant-led national liberation under radical elites as a substitute for socialist revolution.

Another lecturer Norberg lists is Stokely Carmichael, a proponent of black separatism in the US who rejected any united struggle of black and white workers. Norberg notes that “USARF was especially close to” FRELIMO, “which had many adherents of Marxism.”<sup>[6]</sup> But FRELIMO’s political programme from the beginning was not Marxist but bourgeois nationalist.

FRELIMO’s Constitution and Programme (1961) stated that its central aim was the “total liquidation of Portuguese colonial domination” and the “immediate and complete independence of Mozambique,” while calling for the unity of all Mozambicans regardless of class, ethnicity or religion.<sup>[7]</sup> Its first congress in 1962 emphasised liberation from “colonial exploitation, racial discrimination, illiteracy and political oppression,” but contained no reference to class struggle, the working class or socialist revolution.<sup>[8]</sup>

Trotskyists recognised this force for what it was at the time. The *Bulletin*—the publication of the Workers League, the forerunner of today’s Socialist Equality Party (US)—while defending the legitimacy of FRELIMO’s struggle against Portuguese imperialism, insisted on drawing

a clear class line. “FRELIMO was formed after the 1962 massacres but in the beginning it welcomed anyone into the organisation,” its authors explained, stressing that “the programme of FRELIMO is not a socialist one and remains vague.” Directly counterposing itself to the Stalinist and Maoist glorification of such movements, the *Bulletin* insisted that as the working class was “moving into battle … this is a time when Trotskyist parties must be built throughout Africa.”<sup>[9]</sup>

FRELIMO officially rebranded itself as a “Marxist Leninist vanguard party” in 1977, at its Third Congress, seven years after the dissolution of USARF and two years after Mozambique gained independence. This was rebranding to secure Soviet backing and to legitimise its own one-party rule. It was junked in 1989 as Stalinism moved to restore capitalism in the USSR and Mozambique, devastated by civil war and economic collapse, turned to the IMF and imposed austerity.

Whether the students of USARF could have developed into genuine Marxist leaders is, inevitably, a counterfactual question. In principle, such an outcome was not excluded. The political radicalisation of youth in the 1960s, the deepening crisis of post-independence African regimes, imperialism’s continued backing of white supremacist regimes in southern Africa, and the growing popularity of socialism created objectively favourable conditions for Marxism. But history does not unfold in a vacuum.

These students were radicalised under conditions in which Marxism had been systematically assaulted and distorted for decades by counterrevolutionary Stalinism and Maoism, reinforced by Pabloism, which broke from the Fourth International to hail bourgeois nationalist regimes as substitutes for working-class revolution. These tendencies dominated both politically and within academia.

This impasse was registered even by USARF’s own members. Karim F. Hirji later recalled discussions with visiting students from Sweden and the USSR: “We raised the question of revisionism. Why does the USSR so often betray the ideals of internationalism? Why does it have oppressive internal institutions? Needless to say, we were hardly satisfied with the answers we got.”<sup>[10]</sup>

The fact that such questions were raised but left unanswered captures the essential tragedy of the generation radicalised in the late 1960s but deprived of access to Trotskyism and the theory of Permanent Revolution, the only programme that consciously worked for the independent mobilisation of the working class on an international basis. Their strivings for social change were channelled into nationalist, petty-bourgeois dead ends by tendencies orbiting the Soviet and Maoist bureaucracies at a moment when genuine Marxism, embodied in the Fourth International, had been reduced to a small and embattled minority by decades of Stalinist and imperialist persecution.

*To be continued*

Pascal Bianchini, Ndongo Samba Sylla and Leo Zeilig, “Introduction: Remembering a Forgotten History” in *Revolutionary Movements in Africa* (Pluto Press, 2024), pp. 3-4.

Patrick Norberg, “Challenging ‘African Socialism’ through Marxism-Leninism: The University Students African Revolutionary Front in Tanzania,” in *Revolutionary Movements in Africa: An Untold Story*, ed. Pascal Bianchini, Ndongo Samba Sylla, and Leo Zeilig (London: Pluto Press, 2024), p. 226.

Op. cit., p. 239.

Walter Rodney, “The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World” (Verso, London, 2018) p. 200.

See Dianne Jeater, “Terence Ranger: Life as Historiography” (2011, July 16) in *History Workshop*. Available at: <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/empire-decolonisation/terence-ranger-life-as-historiography/>

Op. cit., p. 238.

FRELIMO, “Constitution and Programme” (1961), reproduced in Marxists Internet Archive:

[marxists.org/subject/africa/frelimo/frelimo-61-con-program.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/frelimo/frelimo-61-con-program.pdf)

FRELIMO, “Declarations and Resolutions of the First FRELIMO Congress” (September 1962), reproduced in Marxists Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/frelimo/frelimo-1st-congress.pdf>

Melody Farrow, “Mozambique: Torture and Massacre in Portugal Colony” in *Bulletin* (Vol. 8, No. 51, September 11, 1972), p. 16. Reproduced in Marxists Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspe/bulletin/v08n51-w260-sep-11-1972-bulletin.pdf>

Karim F Hirji, “Tribulations of an Independent Magazine”, in *Cheche: Reminiscences of a Radical Magazine* (Mkuki Na Nyota, Dar es Salaam, 2010), pp. 39-40.

[1] Pascal Bianchini, Ndongo Samba Sylla and Leo Zeilig, “Introduction: Remembering a Forgotten History” in *Revolutionary Movements in Africa* (Pluto Press, 2024), pp. 3-4.

[2] Patrick Norberg, “Challenging ‘African Socialism’ through Marxism-Leninism: The University Students African Revolutionary Front in Tanzania,” in *Revolutionary Movements in Africa: An Untold Story*, ed. Pascal Bianchini, Ndongo Samba Sylla, and Leo Zeilig (London: Pluto Press, 2024), p. 226.

[3] Op. cit., p. 239.

[4] Walter Rodney, “The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World” (Verso, London, 2018) p. 200.

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[6] Op. cit., p. 238.

[7] FRELIMO, “Constitution and Programme” (1961), reproduced in Marxists Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/frelimo/frelimo-61-con-program.pdf>

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[10] Karim F Hirji, “Tribulations of an Independent Magazine”, in *Cheche: Reminiscences of a Radical Magazine* (Mkuki Na Nyota, Dar es Salaam, 2010), pp. 39-40.



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