

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

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

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USARF and the myth of opposition to Nyerere and the Stalinist bureaucracy

In his chapter of *Revolutionary Movements in Africa*, Patrick Norberg claims that the Maoist-influenced University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF) was “the chief critic” of Nyerere, a claim flatly contradicted by his own evidence. The author concedes that USARF worked closely with Julius Nyerere’s ruling party, TANU, through its Youth League, to “warn Nyerere [!] of the dangers of building socialism through bureaucratic means.”^[1]

Nyerere actively cultivated a relationship with USARF. In the words of Norberg, he instructed Frene Ginwala, the Stalinist editor of the nationalised *Standard*, to provide sympathetic coverage of USARF as a “home grown Marxist Leninist tendency” and even invited its members to his private residence for discussions in order to “maintain communications with the true socialists.”^[2]

Norberg mentions the article “Why We Should Take Up Rifles,” published in the first issue of USARF’s magazine *Cheche* by Yoweri Museveni, chair of USARF between 1967 and 1969 and today the dictator of Uganda. He fails to examine its content, which was a glorification of Maoist-style “people’s armed struggle” combined with explicit praise for Nyerere, with the young Museveni declaring:

comrades, we must take up rifles to implement our ideals and emancipate our people... One will find that in countries like Tanzania it might be possible to push from within because, at least, the Head of State [Nyerere] is honest and willing to move provided he has got cadres.^[3]

Norberg cannot explain why Nyerere cultivated a relationship with USARF while building a one-party state that outlawed strikes, dismantled independent unions and repressed striking workers.

The reason lies in the political needs of the regime following the 1967 Arusha Declaration that instituted nationalisations and the forced villagisation of peasants. Nyerere sought to cloak his regime in a radical, quasi-socialist image when, in reality, these measures aimed to contain rising class tensions and divert popular discontent away from growing resentment toward the emerging wabenzi elite (the owners of a Mercedes Benz).

In foreign policy, USARF demanded “disengagement ... to see Tanzania align itself with the socialist states against imperial powers”.^[4] It lobbied Nyerere to establish closer relations with the counterrevolutionary Soviet and Chinese bureaucracies that repeatedly betrayed struggles across the colonial world, and to strengthen his regime’s bargaining position with world imperialism.

So long as USARF “critically” helped legitimise the Arusha turn, it was tolerated. Once it ceased to serve that function, it was abruptly shut down in 1970.

USARF capitulated immediately and without resistance, an outcome that Norberg avoids examining. In its final statement, published in *Cheche* on November 1970, USARF recounted the accusations by the University on behalf of Nyerere: that USARF was “redundant” because TANU’s Youth League “should have a monopoly of political activities,” that it had committed the “cardinal sin” of “meddling in Tanzanian politics,” and that *Cheche* (spark in Kiswahili) must be shut down because its name, borrowed from Lenin’s *Iskra*, suggested Tanzania was building “Russian socialism” instead of “true Tanzanian socialism.”

They pathetically responded by stating, “We neither have the ability nor the wish” to dispute these charges, declaring their intention “to bury USARF and its joint child *Cheche*.” They “dare not comment” on whether their ideas had been correct, lamenting only that they had been branded “extremists,” “fanatics,” “arm-chair theoreticians,” and “opportunist” by “honorable and respected people.”^[5]

Nyerere’s relations with leading USARF figures continued long after the organisation’s suppression, above all with Museveni. In 1972, Nyerere backed Museveni’s guerrilla organisation, FRONASA, in a failed attempt to overthrow Idi Amin in Uganda. Six years later, following Amin’s invasion of Tanzania, Nyerere deployed 45,000 Tanzanian troops—armed and backed by British imperialism, which had turned against Amin after initially supporting his 1971 coup—alongside Ugandan exile forces, including Museveni’s, to remove him from power. USARF’s leaders had thus transformed themselves from radical students into direct

agents of imperialism in the region.

Maoism and the bloody legacy of USARF

Norberg offers no serious analysis of one of the most decisive ideological influences on USARF: Maoism. His only reference is a passing remark that the organisation celebrated “Mao Zedong days”.

USARF emerged at a moment when Maoist ideology permeated Tanzanian political and intellectual life, as Chinese aid programmes, cultural diplomacy and the climate fostered by the Arusha Declaration created fertile ground for Beijing’s influence. While USARF never formalised itself as a Maoist organisation, its members absorbed Maoist conceptions through study circles, its journal *Cheche*, and seminars led by academics steeped in the Chinese “mass line.” It worked closely with Beijing-backed FRELIMO, whose fighters were trained and armed by China on Tanzanian soil, and operated in an environment flooded with Maoist political materials, including Kiswahili editions of Mao’s *Little Red Book*.^[6]

By the mid-1960s China had become Tanzania’s principal external backer. Between 1964 and 1975 Beijing supplied teachers, doctors, agricultural specialists and military trainers, built factories, farms and the TAZARA railway, and armed the Tanzanian army and southern African guerrilla movements.

This flowed directly from Chinese foreign policy, which, encircled by hostile imperialist powers and threatened by the escalating American war in Vietnam, sought to cultivate dissident factions of the African bourgeoisie. The export of Maoist “people’s war” across southern Africa was intended to stretch US imperialism as it worked to prop up Portuguese colonial rule in Mozambique and Angola and to sustain the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Maoism, however, was hostile to a socialist perspective. Mao stated this explicitly to African delegates in 1959, insisting that “The task of the whole of Africa is to oppose imperialism and to oppose those who follow imperialism, not to oppose capitalism, not to establish socialism. To call for the establishment of a socialist society in Africa is to make a mistake... At present, the nature of the African revolution is a bourgeois democratic revolution, not a proletarian socialist revolution.”^[7]

This two-stage theory subordinated the working class to “progressive” bourgeois forces and rejected the struggle for socialism. Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution advanced the opposite conclusion. In countries of belated capitalist development, only the working class, leading the rural poor, can resolve the democratic tasks, and only by advancing directly to socialist measures within an international revolutionary strategy.

The Maoist framework shaped USARF and decisively influenced the later trajectories of its leading figures. Yoweri Museveni, who chaired USARF from 1967 to 1969, was deeply influenced by Maoism, a fact still acknowledged on Uganda’s State House website.^[8] He later founded his National Resistance Movement on the basis of a so called “national democratic” programme.

Its founding document, *The Ten Point Programme* (1986), pledged to build a “self-sustaining national economy,” while his earlier pamphlet *Towards a Free and Democratic Uganda* (1971) defined the revolution as “democratic and anti-imperialist,” not socialist. Since seizing power in 1986, Museveni has since ruled Uganda as a corrupt and repressive strongman, enforcing IMF austerity while serving as a key regional enforcer for US and European imperialism. His wars, above all against the peasantry in northern Uganda, left hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced.

John Garang followed a similar trajectory. He founded the Sudan

People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 1983, advancing a programme that combined a call for a “United Socialist Sudan” with Sudanese nationalism and a strategy of peasant-based guerrilla warfare, armed and backed by Museveni’s government in Uganda.

By the 1990s, the SPLM had abandoned any reference to socialism in its “New Sudan” vision, instead calling for united, secular and capitalist Sudan. The movement’s leadership aligned itself with the strategic priorities of US imperialism, a process that culminated in the US-backed partition of the country and the creation of South Sudan in 2011. Independence was followed by a devastating civil war that killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. Despite vast oil reserves, South Sudan remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with ruling factions again threatening renewed civil war.

Among Maoist influenced intellectuals, Issa Shivji was the most prominent, to whom Norberg devotes an entire subsection. His *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (1976) examined how class relations developed under Nyerere. It was shaped by stage-ist Maoist theory and a whole chapter is dedicated to how the Chinese Cultural Revolution contributed to “the socialist transition.”

A few months ago, Shivji acknowledged that “In USARF’s work, books by Marx and Lenin were certainly read, as were Mao’s. Outside of Mao’s writings, we kept an eye on what was happening in China. At that time, for example, there were often discussions about China.”^[9]

Shivji has acknowledged the political bankruptcy of the framework he once defended. In the foreword to the fiftieth anniversary of *Class Struggles*, he concedes: “In our debates of the 60s and 70s we were heavily influenced by Mao Zedong’s stage-ist theory of a national democratic revolution first before a socialist revolution. In the national democratic stage, the proletariat allies with the anti imperialist national bourgeoisie, which implied diluting the revolution’s anti capitalist agenda somewhat. I believe that stage-ist theory no longer applies to Africa. Maybe it did in the phase of liberation movement.”^[10]

Today, Shivji continues to defend Nyerere, claiming that he “was an important figure in the twentieth” century. He insists that “fostering understanding of Nyerere’s legacy has been an important issue for me since I retired.” He launched the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere University Professorial Chair in Pan-African Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam and took up the first chair to promote research on Nyerere.^[11]

Walter Rodney, another product of this milieu, left Tanzania in 1974 to found the Working People’s Alliance (WPA) in Guyana, an alliance of the Maoist Working People’s Vanguard Party and the Pan-Africanist tendency, the African Society for Cultural Relations with Independent Africa. The WPA’s programme centred on a “Government of National Reconstruction and National Unity,” urging workers to collaborate with “patriotic” sections of the bourgeoisie. Rodney was assassinated in 1980.

The experience of USARF and the academics that emerged from the University of Dar es Salaam exposed, in concentrated form, the political dead end of all movements based on nationalism. All the forces that propagated a two-stage theory ended up subordinating workers and youth to supposedly progressive factions of the national bourgeoisie or diverting their struggles into peasant-based guerrilla fighting that ended up consolidating capitalist rule.

USARF’s experience confirms that there are no nativist “African” revolutionary traditions upon which workers and youth can draw, as *Revolutionary Movements in Africa* claims. Political movements in Africa were not shaped in isolation, but emerged within, and were decisively conditioned by, global politics. Pan Africanism, “African Socialism,” Stalinism and Maoism were not indigenous forms or “left” alternatives. Rather, it was precisely the exclusion of Marxism, above all Trotskyism, and the suppression of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, that left workers and youth politically disarmed.

Today, turning consciously to history is indispensable. That is why tools

such as Socialism AI, developed by the International Committee of the Fourth International, are of decisive importance. Workers and youth now have direct access to the accumulated theoretical and historical experience of the international working class, grounded in Trotskyism. It enables a new generation to assimilate the political lessons long suppressed by Stalinism and to carry forward the unfinished fight for world socialist revolution.

Concluded.

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. 233.

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Yoweri Museveni, “Why We Should Take Up Rifles” in *Cheche* (n°1, November 1969), pp. 36-37. Available at: freight.cargo.site/m/K2416236100555349806313906040596/Cheche-01.pdf

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USARF/Cheche, “Our Last Stand” in Karim F Hirji, *Cheche: Reminiscences of a Radical Magazine* (Mkuki Na Nyota, Dar es Salaam, 2010), p. 207.

Priya Lal, “Maoism in Tanzania: Material connections and shared imaginaries” in Cook AC, ed. *Mao’s Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 96-116.

Mao Zedong, “Extract from Mao Zedong’s conversation with representatives of the Cameroon People’s Union and youth delegates from Guinea, Kenya, and Madagascar” (21 February 1959). Reproduced in Marxist Philosophy: <https://marxistphilosophy.org/maozedong/mx8/002.htm>

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Liu Ye, “Issa Shivji: Socialism in Tanzania between Arusha and Mwongozo” in *Review of African Political Economy*. (Vol. 52 (185), 2025), pp. 385-404. Available at <https://www.scienceopen.com/hosted-document?doi=10.62191/ROAPE-2025-0020#fn6>

Issa G. Shivji, “Class Struggles in Tanzania”, 50th Anniversary Edition with New Introduction (Mkuki na Nyota, Dar es Salaam, 2025), p. 65.

Liu Ye., op. cit.

[1] 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. 233.

[2] Op. cit. p. 234.

[3] Yoweri Museveni, “Why We Should Take Up Rifles” in *Cheche* (n°1, November 1969), pp. 36-37. Available at: <https://freight.cargo.site/m/K2416236100555349806313906040596/Cheche-01.pdf>

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[6] Priya Lal, “Maoism in Tanzania: Material connections and shared imaginaries” in Cook AC, ed. *Mao’s Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 96-116.

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[8] State House of Uganda, “The President,” official website of the Office of the President of the Republic of Uganda: <https://statehouse.go.ug/the-state-house/president/>

[9] Liu Ye, “Issa Shivji: Socialism in Tanzania between Arusha and Mwongozo” in *Review of African Political Economy*. (Vol. 52 (185), 2025), pp. 385-404. Available at: <https://www.scienceopen.com/hosted-document?doi=10.62191/ROAPE-2025-0020#fn6>

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[11] Liu Ye., op. cit.



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