Post-Election Human Rights Violations in Tanzania

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Introduction

The elections of October 2025 marked a critical moment in Tanzania's human rights trajectory. The country has always been viewed as relatively stable, but the election period was accompanied by an unprecedented escalation of repression. This article asks to what extent the conduct of Tanzanian authorities violates international and regional human rights law. The analysis focuses on violations of the rights to life, liberty, due process, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The topic is of significant practical importance, as it concerns state violence, accountability and the protection of democratic participation in an electoral context. NGOs and UN bodies have documented the events, but there remains little legal analysis linking the abuses to binding international norms. This brief argues that Tanzanian authorities committed serious violations of human rights law before, during, and after the 2025 elections.

Background: Tanzania's political history and democratic development

The United Republic of Tanzania is the result of the unification of Tanganyika (the mainland) and the semi-autonomous islands of Zanzibar after gaining independence from British colonial rule in the early 1960s. Nyerere was the first president of the United Republic who needed to balance mainland and island interests. In the decades following independence, Tanzania was characterized by a highly centralized one-party system led by Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), formed from the merger of Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) and Zanzibar's Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) in 1977. Until the early 1990s, Tanzania remained a de facto single-party state of the CCM, and the first multi-party elections occurred in 1995, which were won by the CCM against CHADEMA, the main opposition party to this day.

Already before the past elections of October 2025, the atmosphere was tense, with national human rights groups documenting a sharp increase in serious human rights violations, which predominantly targeted leaders

of the opposition party. Of particular concern is the disappearance of the former Tanzanian Ambassador to Cuba, Humphrey Polepole, who might have been forcibly disappeared and assaulted, according to Amnesty International. Additionally, the leader of the main opposition party, CHADEMA, has been arrested and in detention since April 2025, charged with treason.

Already in June, the UN human rights experts called on the Tanzanian government to "immediately stop the enforced disappearance of political opponents, human rights defenders and journalists as a tool of repression in the electoral context." This pre-election crackdown deprived citizens of essential rights, including the freedoms of expression, assembly, and political participation, guaranteed under international human rights law.

The elections were marred by irregularities, including the disqualification of major opposition candidates on dubious grounds, obstructing genuine political competition and violating the principles of free and fair elections. During and after the elections, while violence was escalating, authorities caused an internet and communications blackout, preventing Tanzanians from exposing abuses. Furthermore, this blackout also infringed the rights to freedom of expression and access to information under Article 9 of the African Charter on Human's and Peoples' Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The EU expresses concern regarding the events that occurred throughout Election Day and that are still ongoing, including violence against demonstrators, many of whom were youths calling for democratic reforms.

3. Human rights violations: life, liberty and due proces
s

By 31 October 2025, media reports indicated the number of casualties to be about 700, and videos verified by CNN support the reports about the deadly toll, showing morgues overflowing with scores of bodies. CNN has been accused by Tanzania's government spokesperson, Gerson Msigwa, of a "biased report" intended to "mislead and incite". He affirmed that their voice should also be heard, but despite CNN sending detailed questions to Msigwa, the police, and the country's ministry of health, there has been no response.

Most gravely, the right to life was alleged to have been violated through the excessive and unlawful use of force by state security forces, breaching ICCPR Article 6 (inherent right to life) and African Charter Article 4 (inviolability of human life). In some cases, victims appear to have been shot in the back or in the head despite posing no threat to public order or the security of others. This is against the UN Basic Principles on Use of Force (proportionality and non-lethal alternatives). The UN Commissioner for Human Rights described the number of election-related deaths as "very grave" and called for a prompt, independent and impartial investigation. There have been allegations of families desperately searching everywhere for their loved ones, and Commissioner Turk urged Tanzanian authorities to provide information and not remove bodies from streets and hospitals

and take them to undisclosed locations in an apparent attempt to conceal evidence. This behaviour is against Article 1 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

At the same time, there were numerous reports of arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention and enforced disappearances, where youth activists and opposition supporters were detained without access to legal counsel or judicial review. Since the vote, more than 150 people have been arrested without a clear legal basis and charged with treason, including children.

The post-election period was also marked by restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information. There have been nationwide internet and social media shutdowns between late October and early November 2025. Local journalists, activists and observers reported that they could not upload footage or share protest alerts, showing how low-cost, high-impact tactics like platform restrictions can be used to suppress opposition. Restricted expression and information access, breaching ICCPR Article 19 (freedom of opinion) and Article 9 of the African Charter. Closely connected to these measures were violations of the right to peacefully assemble and participate. Authorities banned opposition meetings and deployed police and military forces to prevent demonstrations, including protests planned for public holidays.

Policy Proposals

To prevent further escalations and repeat episodes of gross human rights violations, it is critical that the government of Tanzania and the wider international community assume responsibility for the humanitarian crisis at hand and take concrete action to resolve it.

To de-escalate the tensions and prevent another disaster, the Tanzanian government must take visible actions to rebuild public trust. The first step would be to ensure that the promised inquiry into the events remains impartial and transparent. So far, President Suluhu has been committed to this, though the investigatory committee is fully staffed by individuals with ties to the government. The government should re-evaluate and recompose the committee to ensure the inclusion of government-independent figures to reduce public concerns about a potential cover-up.

In the long term, the Tanzanian government should aim for political reform that empowers core institutions and separates them from executive control. Strengthening the independence of the electoral commission, the judiciary, and oversight bodies is key in preventing the concentration of power that created the grounds for the events of October. Clear constitutional guarantees for institutional autonomy, transparent appointment procedures, and limits on executive power would help restore public trust and reduce the risk of more violence. Such reforms would not only address the immediate causes of the crisis but also align Tanzania's governance system more closely with the values of the African Union.

The crackdown incurred harsh condemnation from the UN and the international community, especially from the EU, which has voted to block a €156 million aid package intended for Tanzania in 2026, and the United States, which has initiated a comprehensive re-evaluation of its relationship with Tanzania. Regionally, the reactions have been more mixed. The African Union and the Southern African Development Community have spoken out against the violence and breaches against fundamental human rights but have yet to follow through with any consequences. The East African Community's reaction was neutral and unprovocative. Nevertheless, the current policy of the Tanzanian government risks alienating key international players by forcing them into a dichotomy of condemnation or continued relations.

While Tanzania has in more recent years improved ties with authoritarian-leaning countries such as China and Russia, the EU and the USA still possess significant diplomatic and economic leverage over Tanzania, which can be leveraged against the government. Consequently, Western countries ought to pressure the Tanzanian government and penalize gross breaches of human rights whilst simultaneously offering incentives for improving governance and transparency.

Conclusion

To conclude, the conduct of Tanzanian authorities surrounding the October 2025 elections amounts to serious violations of international and regional human rights. As demonstrated, the excessive use of force against demonstrators, arbitrary arrests, alleged enforced disappearances, and restrictions on expression and assembly breached Tanzania's obligations under the ICCPR and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. These violations were not isolated responses to unrest but formed part of a broader pattern of authoritarian consolidation and repression, undermining democratic participation and the rule of law. International human rights law requires not only the end of such conduct but also prompt. Without independent investigations, meaningful political reform and, most importantly, sustained engagement from the international community, the risk of recurrence remains significant, particularly during future electoral processes.

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