Tanzania's Post-Election Uprising

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3 Main Points

This brief argues that widespread protests which occurred in October 2025 in Tanzania were triggered by years of authoritarian consolidation under president Suluhu, the systematic repression of opposition forces, and the exclusion of young citizens. The aftermath suggests that, without genuine democratic reform and youth inclusion, Tanzania will face continued instability, reflecting a broader pattern of youth-led resistance to authoritarianism across Africa.

About the Author

Greta is a 23-year-old Italian student nearing graduation from Leiden University. After earning her Bachelor's degree in International Relations from the University of Bologna, she relocated to The Hague to pursue a Master's degree in Crisis and Security Management, which she is about to complete. Greta is actively seeking opportunities to deepen her expertise in global security studies and is eager to apply the knowledge she has gained so far.

1. Introduction

To unwary observers, violence erupted quite unexpectedly in the aftermath of Tanzania's presidential elections in October 2025. The magnitude of the clashes was unprecedented: local sources reported over 3,000 killed by security forces in the first 72 hours alone, and The New Humanitarian estimates the number to be between 5,000 and 10,000.

Opposition party CHADEMA declared the ballot to be 'null and void', but Suluhu's government refused to address criticism. A closer look at its deflection and its recent repressive turn suggests that the frustration which led predominantly young protesters onto the streets can be traced back a decade, and that further internal instability is a matter of when, not if.

2. Tanzania pre-elections

Current Tanzanian president Samia Suluhu Hassan, once a little-known minister of former President Magufuli's cabinet, inherited the country's presidency once he passed away in March 2021, becoming the first female head of state in East Africa and the first Muslim president in a predominantly Catholic country at 65 years old. Her party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) – Party of the Revolution, is the longest-ruling party in Africa, and has produced all of the country's presidents since the Tanganyika mainland and the semi-autonomous archipelago of Zanzibar were united in 1964, although Tanzania's constitution has been allowing multiparty political elections since 1992.

Suluhu's four-and-a-half-years long administration is rooted in this authoritarian foundation. However, her regime initially gave hope to many: she soon promised to implement a series of democratic reforms and even delivered some. Prohibitions on opposition rallies and the ban on media houses were lifted, and political prisoners were released; among them, CHADEMA leader Tindu Lissu, who was allowed to return from exile after more than two years.

But while she opened some democratic space in order to win her citizens' and Western donors' temporary favour, she crossed multiple autocratic thresholds, thoroughly consolidating the authoritarian system carefully devised by her predecessor Magofuli.

For its part, in the last decade, opposition party CHADEMA has found increasingly innovative ways to overcome the CCM's advantages, thereby significantly increasing its public support. Its recent rise to popularity exacerbated Suluhu's regime's sharp authoritative turn. During the

months before the elections, everyday repression, police brutality, and covert state violence started to intensify: during a CHADEMA-led demonstration in August of 2024, more than 500 young activists were arrested, and in the following months party representatives and politicians were tortured, imprisoned and abducted, at times with the help of the governments of Uganda and Kenya.

2. Run-up to the vote

Long before the ballot, it became evident that Suluhu would not tolerate any sort of competition to her candidacy. In October 2025, Amnesty International published a report which highlighted the worrying intensification of the systematic resort to harassment, abductions, arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings by Tanzanian authorities, showing how the elections' integrity had been fully eroded far earlier than they began.

Furthermore, a series of repressive laws, such as the Cybercrimes Act and Media Services Act, were enacted to silence and criminalise dissent and target civil society, human rights defenders and political opponents, often by controlling digital spaces. Extensive surveillance and media censorship remained pervasive, as journalists, online content creators and artists who refused to join CCM's agenda risked bans and disappearances.

During the run-up to the vote, the incumbent president made sure her two principal opponents were excluded from the presidential race. In April of 2025, CHADEMA's leader Tundu Lissu was arrested while advocating for electoral reforms at a public rally; he was then charged with treason and has been held in remand ever since. The party was later disqualified from the elections due to its refusal to sign the Electoral Code of Conduct in the aftermath of Lissu's arrest. Similarly, Luhaga Mpina, a recent CCM defector who later became the presidential candidate for ACT-Wazalendo, Tanzania's second-largest opposition party, was disqualified from the presidential race twice at the behest of the attorney general.

3. Protests and security clashes

In the afternoon of 29 October 2025, the day of the contest, thousands of Tanzanians – the majority being young people – took to the streets in key cities such as Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Morogoro and Mwanza to denounce the lack of a real democratic choice after Suluhu's victory was declared by a landslide by the electoral commission. Demonstrations quickly turned into violent clashes, as firearms and tear gas were used by deeply unprepared security forces to disperse protesters, and a curfew was soon established.

Although an accurate death toll is inconceivable, reporters and opposition members claim more than 2,000 people fell victim to an alleged 'shoot-to-kill' policy. Information ran even thinner due to a nationwide, five-day-long internet shutdown imposed by Suluhu's government on election day, during which national police prohibited the population from taking photos and videos of the demonstrations, and which allowed them to unleash a campaign of arbitrary arrests and targeted mass murder.

So far, the international response has been timid. The African Union immediately released a statement claiming the electoral exercise did not comply with democratic standards, and UN Secretary General António Guterres asked for an impartial investigation. The cabinet immediately denied the accusations and accused foreign actors of having taken part in a campaign of 'information warfare' and 'political interference' aimed at damaging Tanzania's economy.

4. Broader context and future outcomes

A globally connected youth movement has sprung up all across the globe in recent months, putting local governments under pressure. News about the youth taking to the streets arrived from the Philippines, Nepal, Peru and Morocco. East Africa itself – the most prominent cases being those of Kenya and Madagascar – has witnessed the seismic effects of its younger population demanding more inclusive governance systems and rejecting the status quo through public upheavals. Despite the root causes and ultimate outcomes of these protests varying widely across the different countries, common underlying structural drivers include increasing mistrust in institutions, a deep frustration due to economic exclusion and unattainable social mobility, and electoral cycles which allow for little to no drive for change or accountability.

Moreover, Generation Z, being the most highly educated generation in human history, has provided its members with high expectations of government accountability and transparency and a deep understanding of democratic rights. In this context, the ability to use technology to communicate and self-organize has provided the youth with unparalleled levels of interconnection and across-border solidarity, paired with a growing confidence in their potential to drive change.

The youth cohort in Tanzania has especially been expressing concern and frustration with the elites' self-dealing and the CCM's supremacy. In spite of their homeland being one of Africa's richest countries in terms of resources, young people have been enduring chronically high unemployment while simultaneously witnessing members of the ruling party divide the spoils of said resources among themselves.

Recent protests were a symptom of a broader, intergenerational divide between the aspirations of young citizens and the self-preserving instincts of those who hold leadership positions. A crossroads lies ahead for the country: the conflict between opposing tendencies reveals deeper governance challenges and reflects a growing pattern in the African continent of bottom-up, youth-led demonstrations against reemerging authoritarianism and illiberal, unresponsive political systems, and will most likely persist through 2026 unless the sentiment is acknowledged by Suluhu's administration.