



# A Problem of Denial: Why Tanzania Could Lose the War Against COVID-19

By Khalifa Said



Authorities in the East African nation of Tanzania have started a process to reopen the country, claiming that the number of people testing positive for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has dropped significantly, with numerous cases of recoveries reported. However, given the state's laxity in containing the pandemic since it was first reported in the country, plus its obsession with excessive secrecy in its approach to dealing with this new virus, makes many Tanzanians suspicious of the state's claims and intentions - and for good reason.

Tanzania's handling of COVID-19 remains a divisive and controversial subject that is passionately debated both within the East African nation and beyond. As nations across the world grapple with the deadly virus, which continues to indiscriminately claim the lives of thousands of people, and wrecks the economies of many countries, opinion here is sharply divided between those who are convinced that this novel coronavirus situation in the country is not so worrying as to warrant interventions seen in other countries, such as lockdowns, and those who accuse the government of underestimating the magnitude of the pandemic, thereby putting the economy above public health, and thus risking the lives of hundreds of citizens. No compromise seems to be on the horizon between these two warring factions.

The ongoing debate, which feeds into [the political polarisation already prevalent in Tanzania](#), has

been made more acute by the government's own approach to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, which to this day remains opaque and unknown to the general public. The government's approach seems to be informed by partial denial, inordinate secrecy, sheer incompetence, and ancient superstitions and prejudices.

So confusing is the government's response to COVID-19 that after almost three months [since the crisis was first reported](#), people's anger and apprehension have subsided to ridicule and mockery as President John Magufuli's administration continues to expose deep and terrible contradictions in its strategy and style to deal with the pandemic. Annoyance, therefore, seems to have subsided into derision. (If one would expect a different reaction then it means that one is not well-versed in Tanzania's political culture. The long-reigning years of the ruling CCM have reduced the population to apathy and conformism, all in exchange for "peace and development" as defined by the party's own ideologues and propagandists.)

### **Corona parties**

The sheer absence of organised protest and pushback on the part of the citizenry, the press, religious institutions, and [civil society organizations \(CSOs\)](#) against the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic means that the minimalists (those who advocate for less restrictive measures lest the economy is hurt and interpret the news that portrays Tanzania in a gloomy picture as fear-mongering and hysterical) secure an ostentatious victory and hence wield a significant influence in the government's latest measures aimed at bringing the country back to normalcy.

The government's approach seems to be informed by partial denial, inordinate secrecy, sheer incompetence, and ancient superstitions and prejudices.

On May 21, for example, while addressing the nation from the capital Dodoma, President Magufuli announced that [schools, colleges, and universities will be reopened](#) on June 1 and called for [the resumption of suspended football activities](#), citing physical exercise as one of the best ways to avoid contracting the virus. A day earlier, the cocky regional commissioner of Tanzania's commercial capital Dar es Salaam, [Paul Makonda](#), urged hoteliers and restaurant owners in the city to [reopen](#) their businesses, and claimed that COVID-19 was now over and that the city should go back to work. He even urged pub owners to [throw a party](#) on Sunday, May 24, to celebrate the end of COVID-19 in the country.

These measures follow the ones taken earlier, including [the opening of the country to tourists](#) and the lifting of a restriction that required tourists to undergo the mandatory 14-day quarantine when they visit the country. In the same vein, churches and mosques that were closed due to the pandemic have been ordered to reopen. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) bishop of Karagwe Diocese, Dr Benson Bagonza, subsequently [announced that church services would resume on May 31](#).

The government's claim is that these and other measures aimed at returning the country back to normal are thanks to the "[tremendous drop](#)" in the number of people contracting COVID-29 in Tanzania and the increasing number of COVID-19 recoveries across the country. For instance, during a church service in his hometown of Chato, a town in Geita region of northwestern Tanzania where President Magufuli has been self-isolating since the pandemic arrived in the country, the head of state told his fellow congregants that, thanks to what he termed as divine intervention, the number of COVID-19 cases in different hospitals across the country have gone down and the number of recoveries have increased. It was in this address that Mr Magufuli [talked about his daughter who](#)

[contracted the virus](#) but who was able to recover, thanks to steam therapy and the consumption of lemons, things that he and [his government](#) have been pushing people to use to “stay safe” against the pandemic for a while now.

President Magufuli’s assurance notwithstanding, not many people seem to buy into his government’s claims that Tanzania is safe now and people can go back to doing their business. People’s doubts have been intensified by many factors, the most important factor being the lack of transparency. The claim about the sharp drop in COVID-19 cases reported in the country are being made at a time when the government does not share COVID-19 updates with the public and other national and regional public health stakeholders. [This follows the temporary closure of the national health laboratory](#) to pave way for an investigation into the allegations made by President Magufuli that the lab officials were “conspiring with imperialists” to portray Tanzania in a negative light by releasing more positive cases, an allegation which eventually led to [the sacking of the lab’s director, Dr Nyambura Moremi](#).

It was in this address that Mr Magufuli talked about his daughter who contracted the virus but who was able to recover, thanks to steam therapy and the consumption of lemons...

These misgivings are made more relevant by reports from neighbouring Kenya where [the increasing number of truck drivers from Tanzania test positive for COVID-19](#) when they cross the border into Kenya, something which led to the Kenyan authorities to not only [close all their borders with Tanzania](#) but also [deport 182 people who tested positive for COVID-19 back to Tanzania](#) in an effort to protect Kenyans from the pandemic. Another reason why people doubt the government’s claims of the “divine defeat” of COVID-19 is the feeling that the government is not there to serve their interests in the first place but that of President Magufuli and his administration.

### **Attacking political opponents, not the virus**

Mr Magufuli’s actions portray him as a person who is more interested in himself than he is in the people. One of these actions includes getting rid of people from his administration who are thought to be realists and replacing them with sycophants who are willing to go the extra mile in their attempts to please the president, even if it is at the expense of people’s lives.

For instance, President Magufuli [swore in](#) Mr Mwigulu Nchemba, a man who just before his appointment as the new constitutional and legal affairs minister to replace Mr Augustine Mahiga, [who died after a short illness](#), had suggested that the government announce only the number of people who recover from COVID-19 and leave out the numbers of those who died of the pandemic.

If that was not enough, President Magufuli [fired](#) Dr Faustine Ndungulile as the deputy health minister – a man who once contradicted the president’s steam therapy as a cure for coronavirus and pointed out its associated health risks – and replaced him with Dr Godwin Mollé, who had once [advised against mass testing](#), a practice emphasised by the World Health Organization (WHO) if the war against the coronavirus is to be won, saying it was too expensive for people to afford. According to this lawmaker, who [defected from the opposition Chadema to the ruling CCM](#), “to support President Magufuli’s efforts to bring development to the people” the government’s complete abandonment of mass testing made more sense to him as a people’s representative than asking the government to make the testing free of charge!

Tanzania seeks to reopen at a time when its laxness in its efforts to contain the pandemic has triggered a diplomatic crisis with neighbouring Kenya following the latter’s decision to close all its

borders with Tanzania, allowing only cargo to pass through, something which so infuriated the Magufuli administration that regional commissioners with the regions that border Kenya ([Arusha](#), [Mara](#), [Kilimanjaro](#) and [Tanga](#)) retaliated against Kenyan truck drivers, banning even cargo trucks to pass through. The border crisis, [now settled](#), led to [the sacking of Tanzania's High Commissioner to Kenya, Pindi Chana](#), presumably because she was not as aggressive as her Kenyan counterpart in Tanzania, Dan Kazungu, in finding a solution to the problem.

The inward-looking approach of Tanzania made it skip two important COVID-19-related consultative meetings organised by the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). While opening the SADC meeting, South African president Mr Cyril Ramaphosa is quoted to have [said](#) that he talked to President Magufuli, the sitting chairperson of the block, of the need to organise the meeting but the Tanzanian leader asked for the member states to just send their opinions to him, a charge that Tanzania [denies](#). These and other steps taken during the pandemic had some analysts [worried](#) that Tanzania risked losing its historical and strategic allies in the region.

It is this same megalomaniacal type of thinking that has made President Magufuli not listen to, and work on, the advice offered by other stakeholders of Tanzania's development, such as opposition parties (see [here](#) and [here](#)) and [CSOs](#), which on more than one occasion have outlined some of the necessary measures to be taken to help the country combat the pandemic and save lives.

### **Election-related measures**

The measures to reopen the country are being taken when Tanzania is just a few months away from a general election in October 2020. The measures are being viewed as preparatory work towards the elections that President Magufuli's party, CCM, is projected to win in a landslide largely due to a disorganised opposition and years of deliberate efforts to shrink Tanzania's political and civic space. The measures come against the backdrop of debates among Tanzania's lawyers and intellectuals on whether or not Tanzania should go ahead with the general elections given the presence of the public health emergency. However, the latest steps that the government has taken to reopen the country seem to have brought this debate to an end.

Efforts to reopen the country go hand in hand with steps to further shrink the available civic space in the country. For example, COVID-19 has not stopped the Magufuli administration [from detaining a comedian who laughed at the president's old photos](#), arresting journalists, [local](#) and [foreign](#), who interviewed people on their experience with the pandemic, as well as restricting NGOs working in the country. On May 22, for example, a coalition of Tanzanian NGOs planned to organise a TV programme with a local television station, ITV, to talk about NGOs' role in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic only to have the network postpone it at the last minute without giving a rational or understandable reason.

It was against this troubling background then that after being tired of government lies and prevarications, and having lost her close relative to COVID-19, gender and human rights activist Mwanahamisi Singano was forced [to write an open letter to President Magufuli](#), reminding him that fear is not fought with threats, torture, or shackles (or lies if I could add), but with "sincere and intentional government actions in the fight against [COVID-19] scourge".

The measures to reopen the country are being taken when Tanzania is just a few months away from a general election in October 2020. The measures are being viewed as preparatory work towards the elections that President Magufuli's party, CCM, is projected to win in a landslide largely due to a disorganised opposition and years of

deliberate efforts to shrink Tanzania's political and civic space.

Sincerity is what is missing in the government's entire strategy in the fight against the pandemic and thus explains to a great extent why most people are suspicious of its assurances that the pandemic has been contained and that people are free to go about their business as they did during the pre-COVID-19 period.

How, for instance, can a sane person trust a government claiming that the number of COVID-19 cases have dropped yet it declines to share those very statistics with anyone, not even its own citizens or at least with the Africa Disease Control and Prevention? How can we trust an administration that tries to lull us to sleep with sweet songs that the pandemic is over when it has treated the pandemic more as a national security issue than as a public health crisis? (The president's [second address on COVID-19](#) was to the heads of Tanzania's security organs, not with public health experts.)

If the government is being genuine that coronavirus has been contained in the country to the extent that studies and sports should resume, why did it find it necessary to ask Kenya in making public the data on the COVID-19 status of truck drivers, [not to mention the nationality of those who test positive](#)?

If we cut through the propaganda barrage, we find that Tanzania is not as safe as the ruling elites and their apologists want people to believe. People who heed the call to go about their business believing that the pandemic is over will be doing so at their own risk.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

THE  
ELEPHANT