As the head of state and government, President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, whose tenure lasted from 2005 till 2015, made diplomacy his core business, and travelled abroad frequently to the extent that his record of foreign trips became a reputational liability. As costs went up, the opposition seized the opportunity to criticise his administration for possible wastage. One of those who came forward to defend the trips was the current president, John Pombe Magufuli, who said, “There are those who say you are always travelling, but without those trips we wouldn’t have seen the progress we have made, so we ask you to keep travelling because we need to see more progress.”

Unlike his predecessor, the current president has distinguished himself for his aversion to travelling and mingling in circles of power at the international level. When it comes to diplomacy, he prefers to lead from behind, and lets his deputies represent him and the state. This arrangement, as he has argued in the past, saves money. While this approach is popular at home, the ensuing arms-length relationship with his peers in the region and across the globe has not been without its downside.

In 2018, the European Union (EU) Parliament issued a resolution on Tanzania, condemning it for what it described as a deterioration of human rights, as well as the continuous closure of civic space. This was the first time ever that a foreign legislative body had issued a statement regarding the situation in the country.
Since then, multiple other nations have expressed concerns, including the most recent June 2020 statement by the United States embassy in Dar es Salaam, which was critical of government actions to “stifle democratic norms”. These actions can possibly be interpreted in multiple ways; one way is to read them as a result of feeble diplomatic engagement by the host country. In terms of vision, it is understandable that the government is keen to prioritise autonomy over domestic and foreign policy, but its handling of political rights undermines this objective because it opens the door to criticism.

In 2001, Tanzania adopted a new foreign policy and made a conscious decision to focus on economic diplomacy after many years of practising liberation diplomacy in East, Central and Southern Africa. The decision to turn to economic diplomacy was informed by the assessment that the country, and the world at large, had seen a significant “economic and socio-political shift”, and that there was a need to focus on securing “core” national interests.

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The focus on economic diplomacy fits well with the ambition to industrialise the country, a stated objective of the current administration. The ability to pull in economic opportunities has thus become a key indicator for assessing the performance of diplomats. For President Magufuli, the economy is a priority, even in the face of COVID-19, and he believes that, if managed well, the country could attain superiority in this area, and even become a donor nation in the near future. As such, economic diplomacy has become a primary basis of interaction between the country and other nations.

Within East Africa, relations with Kenya provide a vivid example of the growing emphasis that Tanzania places on terms of trade. Although competition and concerns about trade imbalance have always influenced how nations interact in the region (to the extent that they even led to the collapse of the former East African Community), trade deficit, especially between Kenya and Tanzania, has received heightened attention in the region’s countries since 2015 and caused occasional tensions. The outbreak of COVID-19 and a variation in response has triggered a friction between Kenya and Tanzania in recent months due to difficulties in agreeing on flow of transit goods and vehicles, but the underlying locus of contestations remains trade opportunities. Commenting on the recent disagreements, Tanzania’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Palamagamba Kabudi, said that it is common for “peers” to have differences but that does not necessarily mean that they aren’t getting along. What is clear from recent developments is that when it comes to defending its economic interests, the “new” Tanzania is aggressive and uncompromising.

There is a valid concern that the overwhelming emphasis on economic diplomacy – symbolised by the decision to advance long-strained relations with Israel and Morocco without any clear public strategy or commitment to how this approach will help with the resolution of the Palestine and Western Sahara questions – is an indication that the country is dishonourably compromising on important values.

However, it is important to note that an examination of Tanzania’s voting records at the United Nations General Assembly over the last five years (2016-2020) suggests that the country has remained consistent by voting repeatedly in favour of motions that reject and condemn occupation of the Syrian Golan and construction of settlements in the West Bank, as well as the intention to annex the area. This trend does not necessarily mean that the country’s commitment to the Palestine and
Western Sahara questions has not wavered. It, at least, shows that Tanzania remains opposed to the plight of the two communities while not actively working to counter the situation, and that the nation has decided to prioritise its economic interests.

**Tanzania Mpya**

John Pombe Magufuli, the fifth president of Tanzania, was elected in October 2015 on the promise to build a new country (“Tanzania Mpya”), a country modelled on his image as a hardworking, incorruptible and uncompromising man. The circumstance preceding his rise was characterised by a fracturing of the dominant coalition within the ruling party, mainly due to a struggle for power, and allegations of large-scale corruption within its ranks.

As the weakened Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party strived to retain power in the context of an emboldened opposition, it acquiesced to its popular and fairly clean cadre. The implication of this backdrop is that the fifth administration was, quite explicitly, handed a mandate for reform, but not necessarily a space or legitimacy to adjust the nation’s vision. The resolution issued by the European Union, multiple statements made by the United States, and other nations, such as the United Kingdom, in recent years have been triggered by the current government’s attempt to adulterate the nation’s vision.

A key contentious issue about the fifth phase government’s conduct is its overt dislike for political freedoms. President Magufuli and his government view political pluralism as an unnecessary obstacle to his desire to move fast and deliver economic outcomes, and have taken draconian measures, such as banning political rallies and prosecuting opponents, to curtail their operations. This new approach clearly deviates from the path outlined in the country’s Vision 2025, which recognises multiplicity of political actors as a key factor in achieving the objective of a middle-income, semi-industrialised country. Most importantly, it is a trajectory that lacks national consensus, and contradicts basic rights that have been guaranteed by the constitution. Although the repression of political opponents is not a new phenomenon in Tanzania, the outright rejection of political pluralism as a shared value is unique to the fifth phase government, and has become a key fault line that characterises the country’s relationship with the international community.

In his first speech to Parliament and the nation in November 2015, President Magufuli said, “The fifth phase government will put strong emphasis on industrialisation. We do not have any other way if we want to establish a foundation for a sustainable economy, and uplift the lives of our people.” The ambition to industrialise the country (“Tanzania ya Viwanda”) became a clarion call during the fifth phase government’s first three years in office (2016-2018).

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However, beginning in 2018, Tanzanians started to hear less about industries and more about major infrastructure projects: revival of the national airline, Air Tanzania; construction of a standard gauge railway; expansion of highways; installation of flyovers, rehabilitation of ships and commissioning of new ones; plans for a Liquefied Natural Gas plant; and a crude oil pipeline from Uganda (EACOP). This shift in the public narrative reflects a recalibration of the government’s focus and investments, and indicates that the authorities realised a few years down the line that the country’s infrastructure gap needed to be addressed first, and that it was, strategically speaking, and even sequentially, a
logical thing to do. And there is a strong case for investing in infrastructure.

**The infrastructure gap**

The African Union’s Vision 2063 notes that “the challenge facing Africa is to transform the economy from a resource-dependent one to a dynamic, diversified industrial economy”. However, a key challenge to achieving this objective is a glaring infrastructure gap that afflicts the continent.

A 2012 study by the World Bank described Tanzania’s infrastructure challenges at the time as including inefficiency at the main port of Dar es Salaam, shortage of energy and over-reliance on hydroelectric power, which remains vulnerable to climate change, the need to improve the road and rail networks, and limited distribution of piped water.

There is no doubt that one of the key elements of President Magufuli’s legacy under his vision of a new Tanzania will be a significant improvement in infrastructure. Nevertheless, the opposition has criticised the overwhelming focus on this area on the grounds that it embodies a conceptual and practical failure to prioritise human development. An independent evaluation of the first ten years of implementation of the country’s Development Vision (2025) highlighted the same observation – that investment in large-scale construction, although strategic, does not necessarily have a direct effect on the lives of the poor. It is, therefore, not surprising that the popular discourse in the country is dominated by concerns over difficult living conditions (“vyuma vimekaza”) mostly among low- and middle-income people.

The implementation of multiple and parallel projects has in recent years raised concerns over potential risks of debt distress due to the growing appetite for borrowing. In 2018, the then Comptroller and Auditor General, Professor Mussa Assad, expressed concerns about the rate at which the national debt had grown – from TZS41 trillion in 2015/2016 to TZS46 trillion in 2016/2017, a 12 per cent increase in less than two years after the new administration took over.

Recent reports show that the public debt currently stands at TZS55.4 trillion, while the debt to GDP ratio is around 27 per cent. These figures suggest that public debt has grown by 25 per cent since President Magufuli was elected. Although the government continues to insist that the public debt is sustainable, and a recent assessment by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has shown that the risk of debt distress remains low, the cost of servicing public debt at its current rate of 11.9 per cent of GDP is quite significant and points to the scale of the sacrifice that the public will have to make for many years after the fifth phase government leaves office.

**Reducing aid dependence**

Reducing dependence on foreign aid has been a key objective of the fifth phase government. It is based on the rationale (and past experience) that this form of assistance is usually associated with undue influence. The 2020/2021 budget’s projections indicate that the government expects foreign aid and concessional loans to amount to about 8.2 per cent of the budget. At some point in President Kikwete’s tenure, aid and concessional loans were contributing to more than 30 per cent of the government’s budget, and donors, knowing their influence, resorted to withholding budgetary support on multiple occasions in order to push for action against allegations of corruption in government.

The current administration’s popular crusade against corruption is top-down and not wholly objective, but the level of determination and persistence is remarkably high. So, unlike President Kikwete’s regime, the main point of contention between the authorities in Dodoma and the international community, especially Western powers, is not corruption but human rights, particularly...
the treatment of the media, the political opposition and activists.

While aid from Western countries is associated with “undue” influence, assistance from other significant countries, such as China, is seen as less intrusive. In 2018, President Magufuli called China a true friend, and hailed the absence of conditionalities in their hand-outs. The Chinese Communist Party remains quite close to the ruling Chama cha Mapinduzi, and Chinese ambassadors are usually keen to show it.

It is logical to assume that China and a few other Asian countries, such as India and Japan, must have benefited from the straining of relations with the West, but there is a clear indication that the fifth phase government has generally avoided creating any impression that Tanzania is a “sphere of influence” of any country. For instance, a contract for implementing a major standard gauge railway went to a Turkey-based company, Yapi Merkezi, in 2017. The fate of a well-publicised port project that was supposed to take place in Bagamoyo, which is sixty kilometres from Dar es Salaam, and which had initially been agreed with the Chinese, remains unknown following a disagreement over the terms of the deal.

About a year ago, a foreign aid worker who was at the time working to promote good governance in the country said to me, “When I arrived here [during Kikwete’s tenure], this country was boringly rational and predictable. You knew exactly what to expect. Now I don’t even know if I will still have my visa tomorrow – everything is so unpredictable. And I am hearing similar complaints from every expat.”

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There is a high possibility that the non-profit sector is more resilient, and even used to uncertainty, but it is a different case for the business sector, a key driving force behind the economy that the fifth phase government values so much. Policy unpredictability raises political risk, and thus the cost of doing business. As good news trickles in that the World Bank has categorised Tanzania as a (lower) middle income country five years ahead of schedule, one hopes that this achievement will serve as a catalyst and accelerate the implementation of the blueprint to improve the business environment. Constructive dialogue with the private sector and the international community would be a good starting point.

President Magufuli rose to prominence from his days as the Minister of Public Works largely because of his ability and reputation as an incorruptible doer. His first term in office has proved his record but also laid bare a schism – even outright collision – between his personal vision and the country’s long-codified vision. Unless his second term is dedicated to some restitution, the fifth phase government will leave behind a contested legacy.

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