



Magufuli's Legacy: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

By Dauti Kahura



In a short audiovisual promo on John Pombe Magufuli, the narrator lists eight reasons “why he is Africa’s most beloved president”. He describes the Magufuli as an “outlier”, a “hard worker”, a “no-nonsense politician” and a “schoolteacher”, who is the “son of a peasant”. Throughout the narration, which is accompanied by pictures of Magufuli collecting garbage, visiting a hospital, stopping to talk to wananchi and driving a rapid transit bus, the underlying message is that the Tanzanian president is a down-to-earth leader who was elected to be in the service of the people.

It does not take a lot of imagination to know that the video, which was released early this year, is about the October 2020 elections. The president has been described as a self-assured politician and portrays himself as a man who is least bothered by what others say about him. He, nonetheless, cares about what kind of message, he would like to relay to the people before the presidential election. And the message is that of a popular, people-connecting president that the Tanzanians would have no problems re-electing.

For a president who believes in Pan-Africanism and is considered a nationalist, as we will presently see, it comes off as odd that this particular political message on Magufuli has been crafted and narrated by an American. Besides the obvious overriding American accent of the narrator, the text also appears to be written by a foreigner. President Magufuli’s sourcing of a Western public

relations firm to tell his presidential story of the last four years belies a man who is insecure about his image. Even though he gives the impression that the West – or indeed any powerful country – will not dictate to him, he still cares about what the outside world thinks of him, insofar as his re-election bid is concerned.

Yet, because he is an eccentric man, he has publicly questioned the science of pandemics, and claimed that in his Tanzania, coronavirus is not such a big deal because Tanzanians are God-fearing people and that God, in his infinite ways, has stopped the spread of the virus in the country. On June 7, 2020, at a Catholic chapel in Dodoma, the president told the congregation that neither observed social distancing nor wore face masks that “coronavirus in our country has been eradicated by the mighty powers of our Lord”.

At another meeting addressing teachers in Dodoma in the same month, he confidently declared there wasn't any trace of coronavirus in Tanzania. At the meeting, he made fun of Tanzanians who wore face masks: “The other day, I was shocked to see the National Assembly speaker all alone in Parliament wearing a face mask...my dear Tanzanians, let us believe in God. If someone brings you a face mask, you don't even know where he got it from, refuse it, please tell him to wear it himself and his family in their house.”

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In early June, writing from the northern town of Arusha, a Tanzanian lawyer, who cannot be named for fear of retribution, wrote:

The truth of COVID-19 in Tanzania has been masked by the government officials and the reality of the infected persons and fatalities in Tanzania is skyrocketing daily. We can't express this due to fear of intimidation and repressive laws that the government is increasingly imposing on Tanzania. The disease has gotten out of control and the hospitals have been overwhelmed. The recent claims by the government that Tanzania has fully contained the disease is a pernicious lie. Magufuli and his authoritarian government are making attempts to decongest the hospitals by releasing patients to take care of themselves at home.

Home care management is a challenge to Tanzanians and the true reckoning of the fatalities would not emerge to the entire world until the pandemic is over. An instance is the Aga Khan Hospital in Dar es Salaam that had the best and well-equipped ward for coronavirus patients, but several people were dying each night. There have been night burials in cemeteries in Njiru and Kisutu, where a number of corpses have been buried since April 13.

The punitive restrictions on public sharing and accessing of COVID-19 information, have kept mouths quiet. Magufuli has also planted a seed of discontent where lawyers, activists and journalists are arrested when sharing independently verified data of the disease. Three media organisations have been suspended. The president failed to treat the disease with utmost seriousness at the onset and he's yet to regret. Other African countries may think we're at a comfort, but deep inside the city, it is burning down and the neighbouring countries will soon feel the impact. Magufuli has been hiding in his home village in Chato for a couple of months, yet he has left everything to Tanzanians.

Magufuli is a man who very much believes in himself; his attitude borders on arrogance, said a keen

observer of the president from his days as Minister of Roads, but who asked for anonymity for fear of backlash from either the president or his henchmen. “He is extremely stubborn, sceptical of foreign ideologies of the West and China. He questions such concepts as the universality of human rights, but likes to wear his Christianity on his sleeve.”

President Magufuli, just like Julius Nyerere and William Benjamin Mkapa before him, is a Catholic, but unlike the two, he likes to flaunt his Catholicism. “Nyerere was a much more devout Catholic than even Magufuli and Mkapa, but you’d never hear Mwalimu talk about religion. His faith was an absolutely private affair”.

The observer said that Magufuli’s coronavirus antics are a well-calibrated move to win the favour of religious leaders. “He has been on a campaign trail and the coronavirus, which has hit people hard, has not been a welcome release to a people who already were experiencing a money crunch time. The repeated mantra about trusting in the Lord in the wake of the pandemic is a clever tactic by President Magufuli to play on the Tanzanians’ religious creed and beliefs. A dangerous game, but one that he hopes will deliver winning votes come the October elections.”

Party politics

On June 17, 2020, President Magufuli announced that he would be vying for his re-election bid, and dissolved Parliament in readiness for the general elections. By the time he was picking his nomination papers on the same day, the electoral commission had also finished cleaning up the voters’ register – a voters’ register that many opposition figures claim is in complete control of the government and the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party.

That notwithstanding, the opposition is still in disarray: Any major opposition figure to President Magufuli’s CCM is either in exile or, if in the country, is facing politically-motivated prosecution or has re-joined CCM.

Tundu Lissu, who is the former MP for Singida East and a member of the opposition party Chama Cha Democrasia na Maendeleo (Chadema), is in exile in Brussels, Belgium. In September, 2017, while going home in the evening in Dodoma, he was shot at several times and was lucky to have escaped with his life. Lissu is a harsh critic of President Magufuli, and many Chadema supporters believe that this was an assassination attempt. He was first taken to a local hospital, then was airlifted to Nairobi Hospital in Kenya for specialised treatment. After his stay at Nairobi Hospital, he travelled to Europe to recuperate as he plotted his next move.

A week before the president dissolved Parliament, Lissu announced that he would be running for the presidency. On June 30, President Magufuli was declared the sole CCM candidate for the October 2020 general elections. The exact date of the polls has not been released, but many Tanzanians believe it will be at the end of October. In his short acceptance speech, the president said he had seen it proper to vie again because the people and God were behind his candidature.

Freeman Mbowe, the chairman of Chadema, the main opposition party, and the MP for Hai in the Kilimanjaro region, was detained in March this year for failing to appear before a court. On June 6, he was waylaid by some unknown people on his way home in Dodoma. Mbowe has criticised President Magufuli on his handling of the coronavirus crisis, and has accused the president of being lackadaisical on a deadly disease that might just wipe scores of Tanzanians if not properly handled. Soon after these criticisms, a newspaper associated with Mbowe, *Tanzania Daima*, was shut down by the government on the pretext that it was flouting national laws, as well as journalistic ethics.

Zitto Kabwe of the Alliance of Change and Transparency ACT Wazalendo and the MP for Kigoma

Urban was arrested in 2018 and sentenced to one year in prison in May this year. On June 24, he was released on bail after being accused of holding an illegal meeting in the town of Kilwa. The 44-year-old opposition figure, who excites the Tanzanian youth, has been a thorn in the flesh of President Magufuli. Kabwe's ACT Wazalendo party is considered by Tanzanians as the fastest growing political party in the country. CCM stalwarts have been wary of the fledgling opposition outfit.

Edward Lowassa defected back to CCM in March 2019 after his dalliance with the opposition party Chadema, which he had joined in a huff after being denied the CCM party presidential nomination ticket in July 2015. In a deft manoeuvre, Magufuli wooed back Lowassa, saying he welcomed him back to his original home. With Lowassa safely back in CCM, President Magufuli can breathe easy as he plots to deal with Lissu and Kabwe.

The Civic United Front (CUF), the dominant party in the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar, was left weakened when veteran politician Maalim Seif Shariff Hamad left the party in March 2019 and joined Kabwe's ACT Wazalendo party. This was after long-running party wrangles involving Hamad and Prof Ibrahim Lipumba, who left the party in 2015, returned the next year, only to be stripped of his party membership. The wrangles, which the party's *wafurukutwa* (party adherents) blamed on President Magufuli, were split into two factions: one led by Hamad and another led by Prof Lipumba. When Hamad left, Lipumba assumed his position as the chairman of CUF.

In 2015, John Magufuli was nowhere near being the ruling party's favourite candidate; the main contenders were, among others, Edward Lowassa and Bernard Membe, the former foreign affairs minister. Magufuli was an underdog in the CCM presidential race, but he still went ahead and picked the nomination papers. He had only been in politics for 15 years, having been elected as an MP in 1995, the year Benjamin Mkapa was elected the president. In a strange twist of fate, Magufuli bagged the nomination ticket.

Lowassa, who was a frontrunner, was ostensibly considered to be too mired in state capture. Even CCM *wakereketwa* (party diehards) felt threatened by his immense powers. Mbembe, the other influential candidate, was thought to be too close to the outgoing president, Jakaya Kikwete. CCM mandarins were not sure whether if he was picked as the party flag bearer and was elected the president, Kikwete would still not be calling the shots. In a party compromise gesture, the mandarins settled for the innocuous Magufuli. By doing so, they hoped to appease both the Lowassa and Mbembe groups. "Had the party favoured one of the two groups' candidates, it probably would have broken," said a Tanzanian analyst.

Magufuli's triumph as the eventual CCM party candidate in 2015 was against a backdrop of intense infighting and lobbying. When Mkapa threw his weight behind the neophyte Magufuli, a fellow Catholic and Nyerereist, he won the day. His selection nonetheless saw Lowassa flee to the opposition to face him at the ballot box, but with the CCM's juggernaut and government machinery behind him, Magufuli's victory was a foregone conclusion.

Putting his house in order

When he became president, Magufuli's first call of duty was to put the CCM house in order and quell factional battles, bitterness and fallout within Nyerere's party. By the following year, in 2016, the Tanzanian president had set out to reorganise the party's national leadership by purging the people he considered to be "renegades" without necessarily splitting the party. He placed his loyalists in key positions, but deftly retained his opponents for the party unity's sake. It was also the year he becomes the party's chairman. Between 2016 and 2018, the non-nonsense Magufuli was the darling of the people in the country and even outside of Tanzania.

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It is from 2018 that President Magufuli's policies became clearer: he cracked down on institutional corruption in the government, unnerving well-entrenched CCM's honchos and tenderpreneurs used to doing business with government. He moved to cut down powerful networks that had turned some well-heeled Tanzanians into billionaires overnight. He even threatened them with jail sentences if they persisted or if they were caught doing business with the government.

"During Kikwete's tenure, colleagues I was with in college several years back, and who were your usual civil servants working for government parastatals, had become overnight millionaires, supplying the government with all manner of goods at inflated prices," said my Tanzanian friend, adding that Kikwete's tenure will be remembered by Tanzanians as one that was rife with state corruption.

As President Magufuli progressed into 2019, he oversaw the passage of new amendments and laws curtailing the operations of civil society and the media. Magufuli has been suspicious of civil society and the media, and has been accused of being intolerant of both institutions. He will brook no dissent or even the mildest of criticism of him, his party CCM and his government. On his orders, some Tanzanian journalists have been hauled to court, oftentimes to answer trumped up charges. Civil society activists are unduly harassed. He has shut down media outlets that he has accused of pushing the opposition agenda.

His populist policies and roadside declarations were accompanied by a crackdown on the powerful CCM *wakereketwa*, who had become unhappy with his sudden move to cut down on their supply chains. Imbued with a charming candour, President Magufuli quickly developed a rapport with the populace, who he dazzled with his anti-corruption crusade. It has not been unusual for the president to take time off from State House and go for an inspection tour of government projects countrywide when he finds they have not lived up to the expectations of the people and the government. He has promptly excoriated the public officials concerned, to the applause of the assembled people. At one time, he even sacked a public official on the spot for what the president said was dereliction of duty.

Steeped in Pan-Africanism, economic nationalism and nationalist interests, President Magufuli's foreign policy is located in the left of CCM's foreign policy manual: he is opposed to the interpretation of capitalism and civil liberties. Therefore, President Magufuli was bound to question Western business and civil liberties' arrangements. He is suspicious of the concept of the universality of human rights as defined by the West; his firm belief is that these should be subservient to the national interest.

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During his first term as president, Magufuli's economic nationalism has come to bear on the foreign companies doing business in Tanzania. He has cancelled or reviewed contracts of companies that he has deemed inimical to the country's interests. For example, he cancelled the Chinese contract to build the Bagamoyo port. The Tanzanian government first broached the idea of the port in 2013

when Kikwete was the president. The idea was built a harbour and a special economic zone, which was to cost \$10 billion. Magufuli is reported to have said that only a drunkard would agree to such terms.

The port, which is 75 kilometres from the port city of Dar es Salaam, was to have been built by China Merchants Holding International (CMHI). But according to The ChinaAfrica Project website post of April 27, 2020, "Negotiations between the two-sides hit an impasse last year when the talks broke done over the terms of the contract that President Magufuli believes his predecessor poorly negotiated. But since last October, when the President informed CMHI that he would not accept the terms, we haven't (heard) regarding the status of the project."

Magufuli reviewed the standard gauge railway (SGR) contract that was also supposedly to be undertaken by the Chinese and gave the job to a Turkish consortium. The 420-kilometre railway track, which is being built at a cost of \$1.92 billion, is to run from the central Tanzania town of Morogoro to Makutupora. The entire SGR project is projected to ultimately run from Dar es Salaam to Kigoma, passing through the lakeshore city of Mwanza and connecting to Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda.

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In a brazen move and to cement his nationalistic credentials, Magufuli took control of the purchase of cashewnuts and told farmers that the government would buy all of their produce.

The president reviewed the mining sector's operations and stopped the mining of mineral ore. He also reviewed the government's contract with the Canadian mining company, Barrick Gold. He told the company that only if it shared its proceeds 50-50 would it be allowed to mine Tanzania's gold. But after the company's lengthy discussions with government officials, the president agreed to a 16 per cent share.

After signing the new contract, the president profusely thanked the Almighty Lord for a fruitful discussion with the Canadian conglomerate.

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