In 2015 John Pombe Magufuli became Tanzania’s accidental President. Colourful and charismatic, Magufuli charmed the masses during his five years in office. He demanded results and pulled off successes that were elevated to the status of minor miracles. He channeled his inner Julius Nyerere to revive Tanzania’s distinctive internal self-reliance-based identity.

The state was back, and the state was Magufuli. He used his campaign against the mabepari class to grandstand on a regular basis, and the coronavirus pandemic provided the former chemist with an opportunity to elevate his anti-imperialist credentials. His controversial stance won him approval across the region: several of my colleagues remarked that “Magufuli is the only African President to speak truth to the pandemic”.

Then his government ministers began getting sick. Magufuli disappeared from public view. After two weeks of rumour and speculation, Tanzania’s Vice President announced his passing due to a chronic heart condition. Corona or coronary? Magufuli’s outsized sending off soon overtook conjecture about the cause of his death.
It began with the usual laudatory speeches by his fellow African heads of state. The dead president then set off on a grand tour that took him across the country by land, sea, and air. The *wananchi* paid homage by throwing their clothes on the road in front of the motorcade escorting the casket. People lining the road chanted, “*jeshi, jeshi!*”

The lionisation of the dead president was a fascinating trope, amplified by the mellifluous High Swahili commentary accompanying the televised coverage of the Magufuli *hegira*. My wife had become a Samia Suluhu Hassan fan. She insisted that the TV remain tuned to the Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation channel.

The stature of Tanzania’s domestic *Shujaa* grew over the course of the week. Like the mythical wrestler Anteus, who grew stronger when he touched the ground, *Hayati Rais* appeared to be drawing new power from the landscape as the conquering hero’s body made the long journey from Zanzibar to Chato, his lakeside home.

By day three of the roadshow, Tanzania’s state media was praising the departed leader, as *Jabali ya Africa*, “the rock who stood up to the West”. But Twitter was providing an interesting counter-narrative; for Tanzania’s online opposition, the “*Jabali*” was “*Jiwe*”, the “stone” who terrorised his critics and pummeled the political opposition. Day four brought the claim by a Chama Cha Mapinduzi party sycophant that the Magufuli show was attracting an audience larger than that of the last two World Cups.

I was looking forward to seeing Chato, the village that during Magufuli’s tenure had been transformed along the lines of Houphouët-Boigny’s Yamoussoukro birthplace in Côte d’Ivoire, and Mobutu Sese Seko’s Gbadolite home in the Congo. I was not able to catch the end of the journey because of a close friend’s funeral. But I did witness the dead president’s final apotheosis, which led me to pause on my way out the door: “With due respect to our respective religions”, one of the TBC commentators was remarking, “it should be recognized that President Magufuli was a *Nabii.*”

The roadshow that followed was a skillfully executed event that provided the Bulldozer’s inner circle with the breathing room needed to ring-fence the new President.

*Nabii* is the Swahili term for prophet. The proof of his prophethood (*unabii wake*), the commentators went on to explain, lay in the fact that President Magufuli was the only world leader God sent to warn us that the pandemic is a crisis manufactured by the global elite to extend the hegemony of Big Pharma and other agents of the international capitalist order.

The real news for some of us was Vice President Samia Sulubu Hassan’s swearing in as the Republic’s sixth Head of State. Tanzania’s record of relatively seamless political succession was further enhanced by her status as a female Muslim from a minority community. My wife, who is from Lamu and has never seen anyone of her background in a position of power, declared, “Samia is my president.”

It is hard to envision a similar sequence occurring in Kenya, or for that matter in any other country in the Horn of Africa.

**Dog eat dog versus man eat nothing**

“No contrast, no information”, my field linguistics professor used to tell us. The large number of African states and the interesting dyads they form makes for a lot of information. Nigeria and Ghana, Mozambique and Angola, Egypt and Sudan, Guinea and Sierra Leone, are examples that come to
mind. But the Kenya-Tanzania contrast remains among the most intriguing examples of post-independence Africa’s political comparison.

Tanzania and Kenya represent two of the continent’s more closely matched territories. They are linked by centuries of interaction on the coastal strip and a common history that gave rise to Swahili as the region’s lingua franca. Together they host the world’s most famous concentration of wildlife. Artificially divided into two countries by European powers, the modern nations created by imperial intervention were shaped by the same colonial model. Both gained independence under leaders inspired by the spirit of Pan-Africanism.

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Tanzania’s more uniform geography supported the intricately networked small-scale societal adaptations documented in Kjekjus’s classic study, *Ecology Control and Environmental Management in East Africa*. Kenya’s physical environment conditioned the country’s more complex ethno-economic composition diversity; late precolonial era migrations contributed to Kenya’s more variegated population of Bantu-, Nilotic-, and Cushitic-speaking communities.

Where the harshness of the German occupation in Tanzania inoculated the population with a healthy dose of anti-colonial consciousness, many Kenyan communities welcomed the *Pax Britannica*, in part due to the disruptions of the decade preceding it. Efforts to force peasants to cultivate cotton for export in Tanzania triggered the Maji Maji rebellion in 1905, and the movement rapidly spread across southern and parts of central Tanganyika until its brutal suppression.

The commercial economy introduced by Kenya’s colonial rulers created new opportunities and avenues for accumulation. The first stirrings of anti-colonial opposition only emerged after World War II. The ethnic base of the Mau Mau insurgency contrasted with the nationalist focus of Tanzania’s liberation politics. The new countries nevertheless came into existence driven by a common vision of the future and its possibilities.

It was a time of idealism and political experimentation. Shared orientations propelled Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda to form the East African Community soon after independence. The union represented a practical first step towards Kwame Nkrumah’s vision of a United States of Africa—before political liberation gave way to an era of competing ideologies, superpower patronage, and military coups. Much of the ideological superstructure of that period ended up either dissipating gradually or collapsing for reasons that have been rigorously documented.

Technically, both Kenya and Tanzania subscribed to the third path option championed by the non-aligned movement, but their economies were moving on diverging paths. The East African Community foundered, undermined by economic differentials fueled by Kenya’s colonial economic legacy and Tanzania’s Fabian socialism. The ideological bifurcation saw Kenya and Tanzania become proxies for the struggle between the world’s capitalist and socialist systems.

The clash between Jomo Kenyatta’s conservatism and Julius Nyerere’s idealism highlighted their contrasting political ideologies and the external support they attracted. In 1975 the submerged tensions between the two countries surfaced in an exchange of words between Tanzania’s President Julius Nyerere and Kenya’s Attorney General, Charles Njonjo. Nyerere referred to Kenya as a “dog eat dog” society; Njonjo retorted by describing Tanzania as a “man eat nothing economy”.
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There is a simpler explanation. Where Kenya retained the hierarchical Anglo-colonial template after independence, Tanzania adopted the more integrative Swahili model of nation-building. As Jomo Kenyatta once told his fellow East African presidents after Milton Obote adopted the socialist Common Man’s Charter in Uganda, “I cannot experiment with [the] lives of my people.”

Donor-mandated structural adjustment policies of the 1990s brought the countries’ economies into closer alignment. But the different trajectories pursued by Kenya and Tanzania continued to reflect their contrasting developmental strategies, and the delicate balance of competition and cooperation defining the two countries’ bilateral relations.

**Convergence revisited**

Kenya and Tanzania’s ideological differentials are sufficient but not necessary explanations of the two nations’ post-independence divergence.

Crawford Young’s seminal work published in 1981, *Ideology and Development in Africa*, confirmed as much for the two decades following independence. Young concluded that the strong ideological groundings informing Africa’s capitalist, socialist, mixed, and Afro-Marxist economic models, although important, did not significantly influence their performance. This is consistent with historical studies that show how countries within a geographical region tend to converge over time.

This trajectory appears to hold for the comparison examined here. Tanzania has recorded impressive economic growth under the neoliberal policy regime. Although Kenya is still East Africa’s strongest economy with an annual GDP of US$37 billion versus Tanzania’s US$28 billion, Tanzania’s per capita GDP is now only US$200 less than Kenya’s (US$1,600 vs. US$1,400). Some 50 per cent of Kenya’s population is below the poverty line in contrast to 33 per cent in Tanzania, which also performs better in several categories of social development.

Tanzania was catching up to Kenya in the Transparency International annual corruption rankings until Tanzania’s position improved slightly after Magufuli took office. His anti-corruption campaign saw hundreds of civil servants lose their jobs, but only a few cases of prosecution. The offensive targeting international investors and domestic business interests took up the slack. The state charged international investors and domestic businessmen in court for underpaying taxes and other violations.

Barrick Gold Corporation, the Canadian mining company that has helped make gold the country’s leading export commodity, received a notice claiming it owed US$190 billion in fines and unpaid taxes. Many of these cases resulted in negotiated settlements and revisions in the terms of their contracts. Barrick ended up settling by paying US$300 million and increasing the government’s stake in their operations to 50 per cent.

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Both of these campaigns, and Magufuli’s rejection of China’s debt diplomacy and IMF loans, enhanced the President’s reputation as the “Bulldozer”, but did little to effect the structural changes needed. Tundu Lissu, the head of Tanzania’s main opposition party, reported that many of the
settlements were actually shakedowns initiated by the President’s CCM faction. Such behind the scenes venality accounts for Magufuli’s silencing of Tanzania’s media and the intensified persecution of the opposition during last year’s national elections.

Sources on the ground report a more complicated picture than the pumped-up legacy conveyed by state media. Although Tanzania joined the ranks of lower middle-income societies in 2020, the improved household income generated by the pro-market policies enacted by Magufuli’s predecessors is being eroded by the rising cost of living, while demographic growth is increasing pressure on the country’s land and natural resources.

Presidential activism failed to arrest the downward drift of conditions across Tanzania’s rural areas. Magufuli’s opposition to international capital limited smallholder access to the contract-farming arrangements that have enabled Kenya’s small-scale producers’ participation in global supply chains. While the benefits of contract farming are contested in academic circles, participation in out-grower schemes has led to improvement in producer terms in a number of cases, and improved access to inputs while diversifying livelihood options for many rural households.

The revival of the East African Community in 2010 was boosting both countries’ commodity exports to each other until tit-for-tat border disputes contributed to a drop to pre-2010 levels. Bilateral trade is a sub-set of the policy frame promoting regional integration, which has in turn triggered a scramble to upgrade the infrastructure facilitating trans-national linkages. This brings us to the governments’ penchant for mega-projects like Kenya’s grandiose Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport corridor project (LAPSSET) and Tanzania’s Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor (SAGCOT).

LAPSSET came to be viewed as a cash cow for Kenya’s state-based cartels before it stalled due to the withdrawal of once enthusiastic international investors. Analysis of the SAGCOT corridor indicates it has generated mainly just-for-show benefits while facilitating the entrance of large-scale agribusiness actors at the expense of local smallholder communities. Both countries are beneficiaries of economically dysfunctional Chinese railroads, contrasting monuments to that country’s contribution to regional linkages over the years.

Even in the presence of more comprehensive analyses of the two countries’ development, it is difficult to arrive at definitive conclusions about the efficacy of the Kenya and Tanzania models. They are more connected — Kenya-based companies are the second largest source of foreign investment in Tanzania — than at independence, yet seem even farther apart now with respect to their political sensibilities.

Local folk models provide more succinct perceptions of the differences. Talk to Kenyans and they will characterise Tanzanians as laid back, loquacious, and xenophobic; talk to Tanzanians and they will tell you their neighbors are arrogant, aggressive, and hopelessly tribal. But if you pursue the conversation further, most will show that they understand their neighbours better than formal analyses like the one above convey. Informants on each side of the border will probably concede that their governments have become dog-eat-man regimes.

**Political theatre and executive revisionism**

Is Magufuli’s hyper-nationalism at odds with Kenya’s constitutionally mandated federalism? In reality, each of these shifts from the previous status quo have been manipulated to reinforce the two states’ tradition of top-down governance. Both governments face an ongoing crisis of constitutionalism, and both have resorted to elaborate exercises of political theatre to camouflage their respective political elites’ strategies to remain at the top of the food chain.
Kenya’s Building Bridges Initiative began with the handshake marking the reconciliation between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, then morphed into a comprehensive gambit to revise the nation’s new constitutional order. Two years later the government released an eloquently worded BBI task force report that was long on promises to fix long-festering problems, but short on how they would be implemented.

Informants on each side of the border will probably concede that their governments have become dog-eat-man regimes.

The provisions to double the seats in the senate, create 80 new parliamentary constituencies, and create positions for a prime minister and four deputy presidents are hard to justify for a country that already expends 48 per cent of its budget on state salaries. Unlike his father, Uhuru Kenyatta is not averse to experimentation. But the circus orchestrated by the BBI’s political beneficiaries has worked to redirect attention away from such inconvenient details.

Since the handshake the Kenyan public has been subjected to an unrelenting procession of media publicity, traveling pep rallies, and tactics used to herd reluctant politicians into the BBI corral. The campaign has been an amped up version of the Moi playbook, featuring theatrics reminiscent of the anti-Nyayo charade the former President used to outmaneuver his opponents during his early days in office.

The rapid deterioration of Magufuli’s health clearly caught his CCM faction by surprise. The media coverage of the President’s elevation from politician to prophet contrasted with the opaque treatment of his last two weeks on earth — or was it actually one week, as the intelligence that he actually passed away on the 10th of March claimed?

The Nabii failed to prophesise his departure from the stage. The roadshow that followed was a skillfully executed event that provided the Bulldozer’s inner circle with the breathing room needed to ring-fence the new President, who receded into the background after her eloquent speech at the funeral. In the meantime, critics were pointing out how the new government’s key appointments violated the process mandated in Tanzania’s constitution.

These games, however cynical, are part of a larger contest being waged across the larger Horn of Africa region, pitting executive power at the centre against distributed governance. Museveni’s Uganda presidency has dynastic ambitions, Rwanda is a developmental dictatorship, and Farmajo wants to restore the same kind of centralised state in Somalia that led to its collapse in 1991. Ahmed Abiy’s ugly war in Tigray is linked to his ambition to reverse the devolution established by the 1994 constitution that declared all sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia.

The strategies to bolster control at the centre that we are witnessing in Kenya and Tanzania may be benign by comparison, but the actions taken to muzzle the press and critics of government policies, along with political impunity, and institutionalised corruption, are not. They differ from the efforts to recentralise the state elsewhere by degree, not in kind.

**Reimagining the African state?**

The trend is part of a wider global pattern. Since 2017 opposition to heavy-handed governments and their policies has erupted across the world, occurring mainly in authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning states. These surging protests correlate with the reversal of gains in democratisation, respect for human rights, and increased local autonomy across the world.
Liberalisation catalysed a universal movement towards self-determination and the deconcentration of political power. Twenty years ago, scholars were even predicting the end of the nation-state as we know it. In recent years the state has fought back with a vengeance. Recent African developments, for example, reflect the influence of the surveillance state in China that is now challenging the democratic values guiding the post-1945 world order.

There was near-universal belief in the monolithic state at independence, and in the assumption that Africa’s leaders would use its power for the benefit of their populations. By the end of the 1960s these beliefs and assumptions were in tatters. African nations’ largely trial-and-error efforts to balance the nation-building equation since that time still represent the prerogative to adapt the state to the continent’s unique initial conditions.

The unique combination of scholarship, deep historical inquiry, and political imagination that flourished during the post-independence period, at least in theory, remains a useful resource for navigating Africa’s developmental future. The reforms of the post-1989 period come over as dismal and devoid of spirit in comparison, incapable of generating the creativity and passion inspired by the ideas that preceded them.

Tanzania was one of the continent’s leading exemplars of that era’s critical thinking. To his credit, John Pombe Magufuli fought to establish an equitable relationship with international capital while his counterparts in Kenya were drinking the foreign debt Kool-Aid. Theory is useful but trial and error empiricism is the best teacher. We hope that President Samia Suluhu Hassan will use the information generated by the two countries’ contrasting experience to negotiate an adaptive middle path without too much fanfare.

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