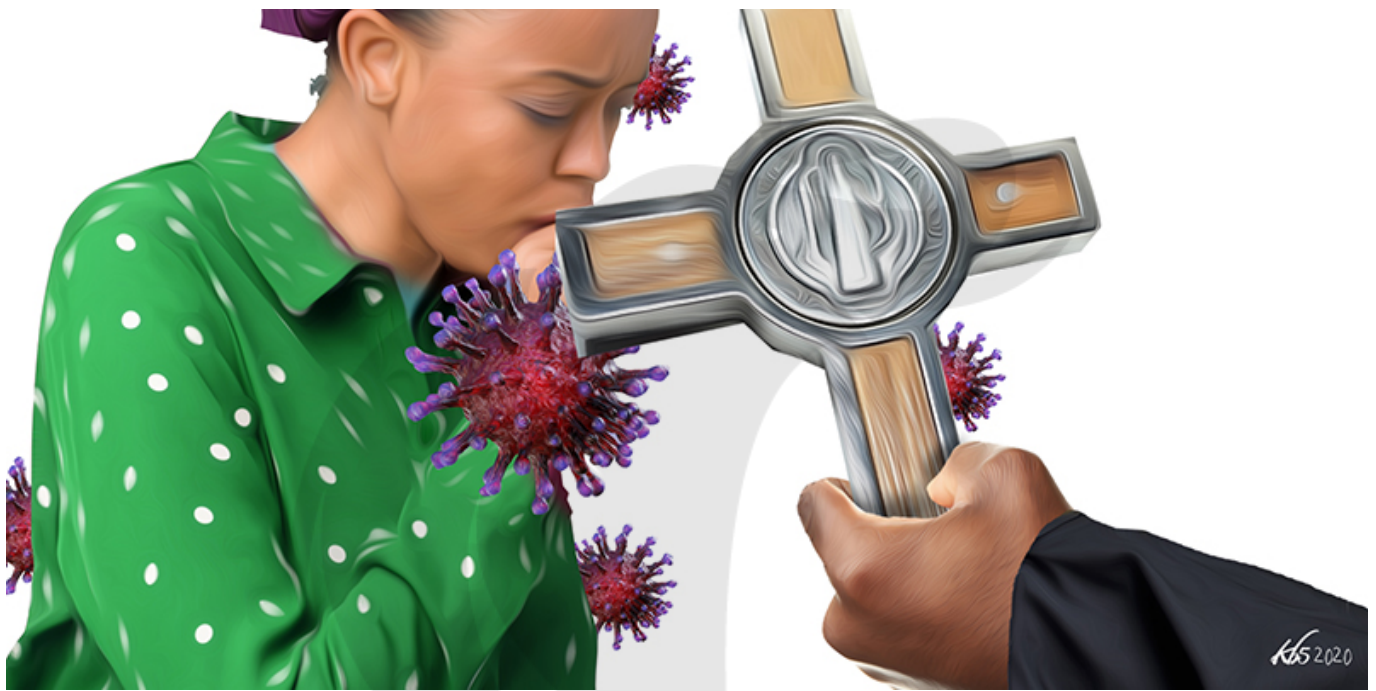




# In the Name of Jesus: How the Church Forced Tanzania to Change its Stance on COVID-19

By Khalifa Said



By the time President John Magufuli went to the St. Peter's Church on that sunny Sunday on 21 February 2021 he already knew that he had lost the debate on the coronavirus situation in Tanzania. The reality, as many anticipated, had proved him utterly wrong. The decision to attend the mass took place against the background of widespread calls from various religious leaders who, after witnessing the unprecedented number of deaths in their respective parishes, decided to defy the government's rhetoric that Tanzania was coronavirus-free.

Church leaders felt obliged to tell their followers the truth authorities kept denying; that COVID-19 was in fact present in the country and that they needed to protect themselves against the disease. President Magufuli's attendance at the mass followed hard on the heels of pushbacks against his COVID-19 approach, including from his own Catholic Church, something that made skeptics wonder if the devout Catholic would show up at the service. That he did led some observers see the decision as a tactical one, aimed at preventing a further shrinking of his authority - and even relevance - when it comes to the issue of COVID-19.

While at the church, President Magufuli, who had until then acted as he wished as far as COVID-19 was concerned, [pointed out](#) that he had nothing against people wearing facemasks, while also warning that not all facemasks are appropriate and that Tanzanians face the risk of being supplied

with faulty facemasks if they are not careful. Magufuli claimed that there was “an economic war” going on and urged his people to wear only those facemasks that are approved by his ministry of health or made locally by Tanzanians themselves.

Of course, these claims are questionable. How, for example, did the government allow the importation of virus-infected facemasks? If those masks are already in the market, why haven't the authorities launched a manhunt to confiscate the merchandise for destruction and bring those responsible to justice? Still, the president's positive remarks about a disease he has spent a lot of his time downplaying were welcome. This is especially so considering the fact that his statement came barely a month after the Head of State [admitted](#) the presence of a new coronavirus variant in Tanzania, in a speech during which he also [claimed that COVID-19 vaccines were inappropriate](#).

But while many are breathing a sigh of relief, it is important to point out that the government's current position on COVID-19 in Tanzania did not just come out of thin air. It is solely thanks to church leaders who fearlessly decided to break the silence by saying enough is enough. After spending months dilly-dallying, peddling falsehoods and outright denials in the face of numerous documented and undocumented deaths of innocent citizens, the clergy decided to intervene to fill the vacuum left by the press, professional associations and civil society organisations which, out of the fear of reprisals or mere opportunism, had given the government carte blanche to play with the lives of its citizens.

The clergy's intervention motivated by the troubling events that started occurring in Tanzania at the beginning of 2021. On 20 January, for instance, UWC East Africa, a school in the Moshi District of Kilimanjaro Region, [announced](#) that it was suspending all presential teaching after one of its students tested positive for COVID-19 and another displayed symptoms of the killer disease. Kilimanjaro regional commissioner Anna Mghwira, however, promptly [denied](#) the reports and [demanded that the school apologise](#). Whether the school's claims were true or false doesn't matter. What does matter at this moment is that it was soon after this that reports of pneumonia-related deaths started coming in in astonishing succession.

Some of the [deaths](#) reported in the month of January 2021 include that of a popular hip-hop artist, Ilunga Khalifa alias Cpwaa, who died at the Muhimbili National Hospital (MNH) of pneumonia-related complications. Others are former legislator Gregory Teu who died following a short illness, Deputy Commissioner of Prisons Julius Sang'uti who died at Benjamin Mkapa Hospital in the capital Dodoma, and Special Seat MP Martha Umbula who died in India where she had been hospitalised. Others include a seasoned political analyst Prudence Karugendo, Ankunda Muro, mother of Arumeru District Commissioner Jerry Muro, who died while receiving treatment at MNH, former Permanent Secretary Richard Mariki and former Kigoma Regional Commissioner Emanuel Maganga who died in Tabora shortly after arriving at Mirambo Hospital for treatment. On the list is also Bukoba Catholic Bishop Ireneus Mbahulira who died at Mugana Hospital in Misenyi District, with the area's auxiliary bishop Methodius Kilaini saying that Bishop Mbahulira had been on a ventilator while in hospital.

While many more people were reported to have died, the government seemed reluctant to admit the existence of COVID-19 in the country and take the measures that any responsible government would deem necessary to take to control of the situation. This was despite reports indicating that the South African coronavirus variant had been [found in travellers from Tanzania](#), which led the UK to [ban Tanzanians from entering the country](#), while some countries such as [Turkey](#) airlifted their ailing citizens out of Tanzania.

It is against this background that the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) was the first to issue a [statement](#) on 26 January pointing out that COVID-19 poses a dangerous threat to the safety of many Tanzanians and urging its congregation and the general public to take all necessary precautions to

protect themselves against the pandemic. In an [interview](#) with the German broadcaster, the TEC Secretary General Dr Charles Kitima told DW that the TEC was forced to issue the statement after noticing an unprecedented number of deaths in their parishes. “For example,” explained Dr Kitima, “in our parishes located in big cities, we used to have one or two requiem masses per week. But nowadays it is everyday, there’s something wrong.” A day later, on 27 January, Magufuli [admitted](#) that COVID-19 was present in Tanzania.

On 3 March 2021 Dr Kitima revealed that, between mid-December and February, more than 25 priests, 60 nuns and two members of the laity had died of various causes including respiratory issues, a revelation that invited a reprimand from the government’s chief propagandist, Hassan Abbasi, who [warned](#) against what he described as the “arbitrary” release of statistics on diseases such as COVID-19.

His acknowledgement of the presence of COVID-19 in Tanzania notwithstanding, Magufuli did not take any measures to combat the spread of the virus. Even now the government will not admit that there are people dying of COVID-19, the cause of death given being respiratory complications. So people keep on dying with many people announcing the deaths of their relatives and loved ones through various social media platforms.

It would be misleading to claim that all these deaths are COVID-19-related since authorities continue to refuse to test people for the disease. But the rapid succession of deaths was enough to freak the hell out of people who now knew that something was wrong. Some of high-profile people who were reported dead in the month of February include the First Vice President of Zanzibar, Seif Sharif Hamad, who died at the Muhimbili National Hospital after he [tested positive for COVID-19](#), former Bank of Tanzania governor Prof Benno Ndulu, and Chief Secretary John Kijazi. In Mbeya, so many deaths were reported that a regional commissioner, Albert Chalamila, [banned](#) the use of the word “sudden” in death announcements.

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Against this background of indifference and carelessness, church leaders intervened again, with the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT) this time warning Tanzanians that they are not safe against COVID-19 and calling on them to protect themselves against the disease. On February 12, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) also asked its congregation to hold a special prayer against COVID-19 while insisting on the need to take all necessary care to avoid contracting the virus.

Other church leaders [continued](#) to use their positions and pulpits to urge Tanzanians to take precautions against COVID-19. At the same time, others were coming out to urge people to take precautions with a ruling Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) legislator for Mbulu constituency, Zacharia Isaay, [asking](#) the government to stop beating about the bush on COVID-19, saying that people in his constituency were dying at an unprecedented rate and that he was tired of burying them.

The church may have forced the government to admit to the presence of COVID-19 in Tanzania but not to mount effective intervention mechanisms to combat the negative effects of the pandemic. Apart from urging people to resort to [traditional herbs](#) and steam inhalation therapy to keep themselves safe, the government hasn’t made public its COVID-19 response plan. Government officials themselves are far from observing the safety guidelines recommended to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In many state functions, government officials can be seen not wearing facemasks or

maintaining social distance. But getting the government to bow to pressure and confess publicly that Tanzanians are at risk of dying of COVID-19 is no small matter and for this the church deserves some praise. By speaking out, the church acted upon its long and glorious history of intervening in matters of national importance, especially at a time when it is the only institution in the country that can take the bull by the horns in the interests of the people.

With the exception of its history of neutrality during the struggle against German and British colonialism in Tanganyika, and its relative indifference during Tanzania's single party rule, the church has played a notable role in the country's political life, particularly since the introduction of fundamental political reforms during the 1990s which included the re-introduction of multi-party politics, a process which took place under the leadership of the late Benjamin Mkapa.

In [\*Justice, Rights and Worship: Religion and Politics in Tanzania\*](#), Prof Rwekaza S. Mukandala explains that religion became one of the forums where pertinent issues such as corruption, embezzlement of public funds and other vices that the political system had failed to deal with were addressed. It was during this time that the Catholic bishops, in February 1993, issued one of their strongest statements ever when they blamed the government for the deteriorating economic, social and political situation in the country. Around the same time, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania (ELCT) issued its famous *Bagamoyo Statement* where it spoke of the worsening political, economic and social conditions in the country and the need for the government to take appropriate actions.

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Since then, church leaders have been acting as mediators between the government and opposition parties, especially following highly contested elections where claims of vote-rigging threaten the peace of the country and during other heightened political moments, by taking part in the provision of civic education to their congregations which includes, but is not limited to, providing voter education to their followers so that they can make informed decisions at the voting booth.

When President Magufuli came into office in late 2015, the relationship between the church and the state was rather bitter and strained thanks to the government's crackdown on the press and civil society, and its attacks on fundamental rights and freedoms like the freedom of expression and the right to assembly. The churches' attempts to warn against these tendencies pitted church leaders against reactionary government officials who went as far as threatening to shut down churches it accused of "mixing politics and religion".

So far no church has been shut down in Tanzania but the government has tried to minimise the role that the clergy can play in the country's politics. During the 2020 general elections, for example, the government denied the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC), [alongside other experienced Civil Society Organisations](#), permits to observe the elections, a task that the TEC has been undertaking since Tanzania's multi-party election of 1995.

Another tactic which has been employed by the state to force the clergy into silence is to harrass church leaders who engage in matters of national interest by arresting and detaining them on trumped-up charges of "threatening the national security". Bishop Emmaus Mwamakula of the Uamsho Morovian Church who was [arrested and detained](#) for seven days ahead of planned demos to demand a new constitution, is the latest case of such harrassment.

As far as the relationship between religious leaders and the Magufuli administration is

concerned—with the notable exception of Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda of the Council of Imams who has been [a thorn in the flesh of the authorities](#) for many years and who has been able to maintain such a reputation at huge personal cost—Christian leaders have been more open and forthcoming when it comes to standing with the people against state repression than their Muslim counterparts.

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The clergy intervened in the COVID-19 situation in Tanzania at the most critical moment when absolutely nobody had the guts to tell the king to his face that he was naked. Church leaders came out to confront the dangerous rhetoric by government officials who kept on fooling people by telling them to go about their business and [leave COVID-19 to God](#) who would miraculously take care of it. At his press conference on 3 March 2020, TEC's Dr Kitima urged Tanzanians to take all the necessary precautions against the pandemic, urging them to ignore the baseless claims that their God would intervene on their behalf. "Prayers alone are not enough," Dr Kitima correctly pointed out. "We need to also consider scientific findings." That it took religious leaders to insist on the usefulness of science in combating a pandemic while the leaders of a secular state were busy endangering the lives of their people by promoting superstition will be the biggest irony in Tanzania's history of secularism.

The clergy may have forced the "denialist government" of Tanzania to abandon its false claims that the country was coronavirus-free. While such a development is a step in the right direction against the COVID-19 pandemic, merely acknowledging the presence of COVID-19 will not save Tanzanians from dying of the disease. A lot is still at stake. With President Magufuli remaining skeptical of the COVID-19 vaccines, and the Director General of the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR), Prof Yunus Mgaya, [saying](#) that there is no need for Tanzania to rush for the vaccines, calling them a product of "neo-colonialism", Tanzanians risk being locked out of the world, as the recent [announcement](#) by Saudi authorities that COVID-19 vaccines would be a mandatory requirement for anyone preparing for the 2021 *Hajj* vividly shows.

Church leaders have successfully shown that pressure works and now is the time for others - the press, the CSOs, the WHO, trade unions, etc. - to join forces and pressure the government into prioritising the fight against COVID-19 for the safety of Tanzanians. We are at a critical moment in our history where our actions or inaction will determine our future relevance and how we will be judged by future generations. We have the opportunity to make the best out of this moment and we must seize it for silence in the face of extinction is no virtue and a fair and responsible society cannot be built upon servitude, opportunism and such a frigid and killing indifference.

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