



In Magufuli's Shadow: The Stark Choices Facing Tanzania's New President

By Michaela Collord and Thabit Jacob



The sudden [death](#) of Tanzania's President John Pombe Magufuli has thrown the East African nation into a period of political uncertainty.

Vice-president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, has been sworn in as his successor, making her Tanzania's first woman president.

The transition is all the more challenging given the major rupture - both political and economic - caused by Magufuli's presidency. Magufuli, who won a second term in October 2020, dramatically centralised power and pursued an interventionist economic policy agenda. He courted controversy on a number of fronts, most recently, by [claiming](#) that Tanzania - contrary to [mounting evidence](#) - was Covid-free.

Hassan has called for unity and [counselled](#) that now is not the time to look at what has passed but rather to look at what is to come.

Despite the 61-year-old leader's forward-looking stance, questions remain about how Magufuli's legacy will shape her time in office.

The authoritarian turn

Magufuli oversaw the marginalisation of opposition parties and a decline in civil liberties. His first term was defined by [heightened](#) intimidation and violence against opposition leaders, including disappearances and physical attacks.

Thanks to five years of repression, the October 2020 general elections saw the opposition all but [wiped out of](#) elected office. The ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi now controls all local government councils. It also holds 97% of directly elected legislative seats, up from 73% in 2015.

In addition, [media freedom](#) and civil liberties were also restricted. A law [passed](#) in 2018 imposed jail terms for questioning the accuracy of official statistics.

But Magufuli's authoritarian tendencies were not unprecedented in Tanzania. For instance, the rule of his predecessor [Jakaya Kikwete](#) was also [marred](#) by [human rights abuses](#) as well [civil society](#) and [media](#) repression. Kikwete also [cancelled](#) Zanzibar's 2015 election due to a likely opposition victory.

It remains to be seen whether Hassan will adopt a more liberal approach, loosening restrictions on opposition parties, the media and civil society. Even if she does, the damage will take time to repair. Opposition parties, for instance, may well struggle to regain their strength. Among other setbacks, they have lost almost all local elected representatives – a core element of their organisational infrastructure [built up painstakingly](#) over decades.

Centralising power in the party

Another key pillar to Magufuli's legacy is the centralisation of power within the Chama Cha Mapinduzi.

In the early years under founding president Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's ruling party was dominated by the president and a hierarchy of appointed state and party officials. But, following economic liberalisation in the 1980s and Nyerere's retirement from politics, the party became steeped in factional rivalries. These were spurred by new political alliances and an emerging private sector business elite.

This factionalism reached its height under Kikwete amid accusations of widespread [corruption](#). Magufuli's nomination as party presidential candidate only occurred because the rivalry among these factions left him as the [unexpected compromise candidate](#).

Once in office, though, Magufuli quickly signalled he would be nobody's puppet. He used his position as ruling party chairman to [create a "new" Chama Cha Mapinduzi](#). This involved breaking with party heavyweights, including Kikwete, [suppressing factional](#) organising, and consolidating his own support base.

Magufuli's new base was a cohort of freshly appointed [party officials](#) as well as civil servants and cabinet ministers. His loyalists likened these [changes](#) to a revival of Nyerere's Chama Cha Mapinduzi. But, in our view, the comparison is [misleading](#).

Like Magufuli before her, Hassan will be taking office – and party leadership – without her own political base. She will also have to contend with revived factional manoeuvring as sidelined groups try to regain an upper hand.

Hassan could align with a loyal Magufuli faction, which includes influential figures within the party. But, early indications suggest she intends to follow the advice of "party elders", notably Kikwete.

The former president [reportedly](#) attended the party's most recent central committee meeting on Hassan's invitation.

Aligning herself with Kikwete will likely lead to the reemergence of the internal factional rivalries that characterised the former president's tenure.

Implications for economic policy

If president Hassan does continue to take a political steer from Kikwete, one likely outcome is that there will be a change in economic policy. In particular, a return to growth that's led by a more [business-friendly](#) approach to the private sector.

Calls are already being made [for such a course of action](#).

The danger for Hassan, however, is that under Kikwete this model was associated with high levels of [corruption](#) and unproductive [rent-seeking](#).

A careful reassessment of the Magufuli era is needed to guide future policymaking.

Magufuli used his control over the ruling party to pursue an ambitious policy agenda. This was also [linked](#) to his political project of centralising power.

Although this trend actually began under Kikwete, Magufuli [accelerated](#) a move towards more state-led investment. Under his leadership, both state-owned and, increasingly, [military-owned](#) enterprises were offered strategic [contracts](#).

This ambitious programme initially won him [praise](#). But over time, his authoritarian [decision-making](#), mismanagement, and [lack of transparency](#) prompted a more critical response.

Many state enterprises remained cash-starved, relied on government financial support, and registered [losses](#).

When the government's controller and auditor general [called](#) for more scrutiny of public finances, his budget was slashed. And he was ultimately forced to retire and replaced by a [Magufuli loyalist](#).

Alongside state investment, the president also sought to discipline private sector actors. Some [observers suggest](#) that this led to more productive investment, notably by domestic investors. But others [point](#) to renewed crony capitalist ties.

Magufuli's most high profile corporate battle was against Canadian-owned Barrick Gold and its former subsidiary, Acacia Mining. From the two, he demanded [USD\\$190](#) billion in tax arrears and a renegotiation of operating terms.

Many saw this resource-nationalist approach as an inspiration and a model for African countries seeking to take greater control of their mineral wealth. But in the end – partly due to [externally imposed](#) legal and economic constraints – Magufuli walked back on some of his demands. Instead he opted for cooperation rather than confrontation.

He negotiated a [joint venture](#) in which Barrick took a majority stake of 84% and Tanzania the remaining 16%. Key elements of the nationalistic mining legislation passed in 2017 were also reversed.

On the plus side [gold overtook tourism](#) as Tanzania's biggest foreign-exchange earner. In addition,

some small-scale miners saw their livelihoods improve. Results were more mixed elsewhere, especially for Tanzanite miners in the country's north.

Ultimately, Magufuli leaves behind a mixed economic legacy. It combines misdirected [authoritarian decision-making](#) with positive efforts to pursue an active industrial policy. Reining in unproductive domestic investors and renegotiating adverse contracts with foreign investors were part of this agenda.

There is a risk, given this complex mix, that Tanzania's policymakers may learn the [wrong lessons](#) from his presidency, leading back to the flawed model existing before.

Significantly, neither Magufuli nor his predecessors managed to achieve more [inclusive growth](#). For this reason poverty levels have [remained stubbornly high](#).

The pandemic and beyond

One immediate concern is what steps Hassan will take on the pandemic, and whether she will change [direction](#).

Whatever she does, the health emergency and associated economic crisis will likely define her presidency. It could indeed define the [economic](#) trajectory of the African region in years to come.

Both Kikwete and Magufuli ruled through an economic boom period. Commodity prices were [high](#) and access to [international finance](#) was fairly easy. This gave them latitude to choose between various development approaches.

If Tanzania reverts to the status quo of the Kikwete years, the risk is a reemergence of rent-seeking but without the same highly favourable economic growth conditions. Indeed, as [external conditions](#) worsen, Hassan may find her options far more limited.

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