



RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN TANZANIA AHEAD OF THE 2025 GENERAL ELECTION

1.0 Introduction

Human Rights Defenders in Tanzania have a significant role to play in advising the public, the government, and political parties on various matters concerning social welfare, peace, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and the country's overall development. Human rights defenders have been key stakeholders in all electoral processes in the country. They have consistently participated in advocating for reforms, providing civic and voter education, and also monitoring the conduct of democratic processes in the country.

The Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC) comprises over 300 human rights organizations across the country. Members of the coalition have often offered advice to political leaders and the government on the best ways to address various social challenges, including those that tend to arise during election periods. Recently, there have been growing calls from Tanzanians and political parties stressing the need for fundamental reforms ahead of this year's general election.

Opposition parties and citizens alike have employed various strategies to convey their demands to the country's leaders. Some have organized public rallies, while others have used social media, slogans and mainstream media to express their concerns. Civil society organizations in Tanzania have also issued an election manifesto that emphasizes and advises the government and all electoral institutions to ensure that this year's elections are free and fair.

We acknowledge the efforts made by President Samia Suluhu Hassan in implementing a few electoral law reforms. These include eliminating unopposed councillors and Members of Parliament candidates, granting the Independent National Electoral Commission authority to appoint a senior civil servant as election supervisor, and allowing prisoners to vote while in custody. Another commendable reform involves the appointment process of members and leaders of the Electoral Commission, although these reforms will not be applied in this election.

Despite these improvements, many Tanzanians still feel that additional regulatory, legal, and practical reforms are needed to achieve truly free and fair elections. The need for further reform was evident during the 2024 local government elections, which were riddled by several irregularities such as the disqualification of opposition candidates that could have prompted national dialogue to address such flaws and ensure they do not recur in the 2025 general election.

We regret that, despite all these legitimate demands from citizens, civil society organizations, and politicians in the country, we have not yet seen any swift efforts by the responsible authorities to address these issues or to seek a national consensus to resolve them. The culture of dialogue and sitting at the negotiation table to collectively solve national challenges is steadily declining, putting national unity and cohesion at risk. President's 4R philosophy, which emphasizes reconciliation and reforms, does not seem to be effectively applied at this time when it is most needed.

As human rights defenders, we are deeply touched and saddened by the arrest and treason charges brought against CHADEMA Chairperson, Advocate Tundu Lissu, while he was concluding a public rally in Mbinga District, Songea. The circumstances and the manner of his arrest did not take into account his safety, the safety of citizens attending the rally, the police officers themselves, or the peace of the country. Excessive force was used during the arrest, inflicting fear among citizens about participating in election processes.

If the police had concerns about him, they could have summoned him personally or legally apprehended him away from the public rally, especially since the alleged offenses do not appear to have occurred at the venue where he was arrested. Furthermore, the statements he is accused of making do not carry the weight to justify a charge as serious as treason. Treason is a grave, non-bailable offense in our country, punishable by life imprisonment or death. It is a charge that has rarely been used in Tanzania, likely due to its severity.

We must remember that this is an election season, and it is inevitable that various statements will be made by politicians and citizens some of which may not please certain groups or the government. What is required now is high-level tolerance to maintain peace. While freedom of expression is crucial during elections, all citizens, advocates, and politicians must exercise caution in their statements to avoid legal conflicts. At the same time, state organs and those in power must also act with great care and avoid misusing state institutions against opposition politicians.

As we are defenders of rights, peace, and stability in this country, we have a duty to remind and advise all social groups and the government to avoid, in any form, situations that suppress democracy, violate rights, threaten peace, or break the laws of the land.

2.0 Recommendations on a National Consensus Towards the General Election

To help the nation move into the elections with unity and calm, the Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC) recommends the establishment of a “NATIONAL CONSENSUS.” This consensus is critical because it will allow all fears and grievances to be addressed before the elections.

a) Who Should Be Involved in the Consensus

The issue of elections concerns all Tanzanians. Therefore, we propose that the National Consensus should bring together all segments of society, such as religious leaders, civil society organizations, political parties, and government institutions. We recommend that this consensus-building process be led by wise and patriotic elders with no vested interests in the elections. All stakeholders should approach the process in a spirit of reconciliation, ready to give a little to gain a little (a win-win situation).

For too long, Tanzanians have assumed that electoral reforms and elections are the sole domain of politicians. This belief is one reason many important national processes, like the constitutional review, have failed—because they were left to politicians alone. Electoral reform demands are not new nor limited to politicians. These calls began as early as 1992, but progress has been sluggish to date. To succeed, all social groups should participate in this process, with the aim of addressing these long-standing demands before the elections.

b) Timing of the Consensus

The consensus process should begin as soon as possible, to allow political parties and citizens to focus their efforts on preparing for the elections—instead of, as is currently the case, spending most of their time pushing for electoral reforms.

c) Key Issues During the Consensus Process

While stakeholders will bring their own concerns, we propose that the foundation of the consensus be based on recurring issues that have historically affected the integrity of Tanzania's electoral processes. We acknowledge that the roots of many electoral challenges lie in the constitution and other laws. However, given the limited time remaining before the election, we believe that several important matters can still be addressed through a National Consensus. Other longer-term issues, such as the enactment of a new constitution, can be scheduled for post-election resolution.

Some of the required reforms may be legal or regulatory, while others are about attitudes and practice. We fully recognize that many election-related challenges are caused by the behavior and views of officials during the electoral period. These challenges don't require changes in laws or regulations—but rather a collective national commitment to stop these practices. For example, actions like election officials fleeing with forms, harassing political party agents, disqualifying candidates unfairly, and using state institutions to disrupt opposition parties—these can be curbed through a National Consensus toward the elections.

We wish to highlight ten (10) key issues that need to be revised, fixed, or jointly regulated to ensure the 2025 General Election is free and fair.

i) Election officials should not be only government employees

The Independent National Electoral Commission should employ its own staff rather than relying solely on government workers. Government leaders and employees appointed to oversee elections are not independent they often have vested interests and are appointed by the President, who is also a candidate in the same election. This issue is critically important and could be addressed before the next election if there is a National Consensus.

ii) Election officials closing offices, especially when opposition candidates are submitting nomination forms

For a long time, election officials at various centers have developed a habit of closing offices whenever they hear that opposition candidates are coming to submit their nomination forms. This matter does not require a change in the law but should be addressed through a National Consensus, which would prohibit such actions ahead of future elections.

iii) Disqualification of opposition candidates

In the 2019, 2020, and 2024 elections, many opposition candidates were disqualified for baseless and flimsy reasons such as alleged illiteracy or mistakes in their names or party affiliations. We believe that errors in filling out nomination forms should not lead to disqualification; instead, candidates should be given a chance to correct those mistakes. This, too, does not require a legal amendment but should be included in the prohibitions under the National Consensus.

iv) Agents being denied oath-taking or removed from polling stations

In past elections, opposition party agents have been forcibly removed from polling stations. The requirement that agents must be sworn in to oversee elections a public process should not be used as a reason to block their access. Many opposition agents have been barred from entering polling centers on the grounds that they had not been sworn in. In some cases, they were denied letters of introduction or were sworn in only after the voting had already begun. This matter can be discussed and resolved nationally before the next election.

v) Treating electoral offenses as criminal acts

There has been a growing trend of using criminal charges to intimidate politicians and voters. Turning electoral mistakes into criminal offenses should be reviewed. Elections should not involve criminal charges, and this issue can be addressed without amending existing laws.

vi) Media and election observers barred from reporting irregularities during elections

In our elections, the media have been restricted from broadcasting information that highlights election irregularities. Civil society organizations authorized to monitor elections have also been barred from sharing their observations during the electoral process. Instead, they are required to submit their reports to the Electoral Commission for approval before sharing them with the public.

vii) Use of excessive force by security forces during elections

There have been persistent allegations of security forces, especially law enforcement, being misused against the opposition during elections. Opposition politicians have been arrested, their rallies disrupted, and some have even been falsely accused or lost their lives. This undermines the integrity of the election process, instils fear among citizens, and leads to low voter turnout.

For example, during the 2020 general election in Hai constituency, a police officer openly told an opposition candidate that he would not win. That officer has never faced any consequences. Another case is the arrest of CHADEMA national chairperson Tundu Lissu while addressing a rally in Mbinga on April 9, 2025, and his subsequent transfer to Dar es Salaam, where he was charged with treason. Furthermore, public rallies by CHADEMA in Songea were banned by police without valid legal grounds.

viii) Numerous gaps in electoral laws and regulations

For example, the law does not require candidates or their agents to be present at vote-counting locations, and their absence does not invalidate the results. These gaps have been exploited, especially against opposition parties, whose agents have been forcefully removed from polling or counting centers. In polling stations **within prisons, agents, observers, and election monitors are not allowed access**. They should be permitted to enter these polling centers. A national consensus could address this issue and outline which matters can be resolved now and which can wait until after the election, such as the adoption of a new constitution.

ix) Transparency in voter registration and procurement of election materials

This has been a common complaint in past elections, and we believe it should be part of the national consensus ahead of the next general election. Tanzanians should be free to ask questions and demand key information about the electoral process.

x) Ballot security and results announcement

There have been repeated complaints during elections about fake ballots, insecurity of votes, and questionable procedures for transmitting results from polling stations to tally centers. All these issues can be resolved through joint efforts if we are truly committed to achieving free and fair elections.

3. Conclusion

a) We strongly urge all election stakeholders political leaders, citizens, religious leaders, candidates, and election supervisors to recognize the importance of reaching a national consensus to create a peaceful, free, and fair environment ahead of the 2025 general election.

b) It is an undeniable truth that the issues mentioned above have always been a source of concern during elections, and it would be unwise to approach the upcoming election without coming together as a nation to address them.

c) We advise the nation and all its leaders, political parties, religious leaders, and citizens to put aside their differences and work toward achieving a National Consensus before heading into the upcoming elections.

d) To achieve such a National Consensus, we also recommend that the charges against CHADEMA Chairperson Tundu Lissu be dropped in accordance with the law by the Director of Public Prosecutions. This would facilitate the implementation of the proposed national dialogue process. These charges are serious and could significantly undermine the integrity of the upcoming election if he continues to be held on treason charges. We believe there is still room to amend the charge sheet and remove the treason charge, so that he can be granted bail, resume his political activities, and participate in the national consensus process we are proposing.

e) We advise all politicians in the country, as we approach the elections, to be extremely careful with their statements—some of which may unintentionally create risky situations despite good intentions.

f) State security agencies must avoid misusing their powers in any way that interferes with the freedom of political parties to conduct their activities in the country.

g) Since this is an election year, it is essential to recognize that freedom of expression must be fully protected, as it is a crucial during this period. The government, public institutions, citizens, and politicians must exercise patience and tolerance for the many political statements made during this election season.

h) We still strongly believe that key reforms can be made in the remaining time, but this requires the goodwill of all parties. Major reforms, such as the enactment of a new constitution, could be included in the national consensus agreement to be implemented

after the elections. However, everything must be clearly outlined in the consensus we are proposing.

i) Let us build a culture of accepting dialogue and reconciliation at all times as a nation. All opposing groups in society heading toward elections must act wisely, humble themselves, and be willing to come to the negotiation table—not with rigid, predetermined answers, but with the willingness to give and take.

j) We sincerely urge the elders and retired national leaders to break their silence and use their wisdom and experience to advise the nation to embrace a path where every Tanzanian feels treated fairly in their own country.

k) Let us stop assuming that elections are a matter for politicians only. The issue of elections affects every living Tanzanian today and those who will be born tomorrow. We must all be concerned whenever we see conditions that threaten electoral rights, peace, and national stability. Everyone must play their part to ensure that national interests come first, and that the election is fair, free, and peaceful.

l) The time to effectively implement the 4R philosophy (Reconciliation, Reforms, Responsibility, and Resilience) is now to ensure we go into the election with unity, freedom, justice, and solidarity.

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