



## THE STATE OF PRESS FREEDOM IN TANZANIA AT THE MARGIN OF THE 2026 WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY, 3rd - May -2026

### 1.0 Introduction

The Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC) joins the global community in commemorating World Press Freedom Day 2026. This important day is not merely a commemoration, but an opportunity to evaluate the state of media freedom and to reaffirm that a free, independent, and safe press is indispensable to human rights, democratic governance, peace, and sustainable development. *The theme for the 2026 World Press Freedom Day 2026 is “Shaping a Future at Peace”*

This year them focuses on the role of free media in maintaining peace, security, and human rights amidst increasing global attacks on journalists. Global statistics from international organization such as Committee to Protect Journalist indicates an average of 150 journalists are killed annually. THRDC stands with the global community, the people of Tanzania, and the media to critically deliberate on the future of press freedom and freedom of expression in the country, particularly in the context of the continued shrinking of civic space.

THRDC believes that, a free, independent and pluralistic media plays a critical role as a public watchdog by informing citizens, promoting accountability, maintaining peace, strengthening democratic governance and respect for human rights. Where press freedom is protected, societies are more transparent, inclusive, and stable; where it is restricted, civic space narrows, accountability is undermined, and public trust deteriorates. Freedom of expression and meaningful public participation cannot be fully realized in a context where media freedom continues to be increasingly constrained.

This statement presents a sad but true reflection of the state of media freedom and freedom of expression over the past year. Despite the existence of numerous media outlets in Tanzania, including online platforms, these numbers do not accurately reflect the actual level of media freedom and freedom of expression in the country rather than the state of media capture. Between 2025 and 2026, THRDC has been monitoring and documenting trends and patterns affecting media freedom nationwide.

The media landscape continues to be constrained by several key factors, including a restrictive legal and policy environment (normative challenges), economic and social pressures, self-censorship, lack of editorial independence, security threats, arbitrary arrests, and an unfavorable political environment. Taken together, THRDC’s documentation indicates that the state of press freedom in Tanzania is rapidly deteriorating. Between 2025 and 2026, more than 100 incidents, including deaths, arbitrary arrests, intimidation, internet shutdown, media outlet suspensions, and informal orders media outlets, were recorded as adversely affecting press freedom in Tanzania. These violations reflect a broader shrinking of civic space and increasing control over information.

## **2.0 THE STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN TANZANIA**

### **a) Reported Deaths**

The violence that erupted at the margin of 2025 general election protest, which claimed thousands of lives and injuries, did not spare journalists. Among those killed as a result of indiscriminate shootings during and after protests were at least three journalists: Kelvin Lameck Mwakangondya, a reporter with Baraka FM, who was shot and killed by security forces on 29 October 2025 while covering protests in Mbeya; Maneno Selanyika, who was killed on election night (29 October 2025) near his home in Dar es Salaam, with his body never recovered, forcing his family to conclude mourning rites in his absence; and Master Tindwa Mtopa, a sports journalist with Clouds Media, who was shot and killed at his residence in Dar es Salaam during post-election security operations. In addition, one journalist from Watetezi TV online media, survived an attempted killing after being shot during the same period of unrest while doing media coverage in Dar es Salaam.

### **b) Arbitrary Arrest**

Arbitrary arrests have become a persistent and troubling indicator of the deteriorating state of media freedom in Tanzania, particularly during the 2025 General Elections and their aftermath. During the election period, THRDC documented the arrest or detention of more than 15 journalists in connection with their professional duties, often without clear charges or respect for due process guarantees. These actions were frequently accompanied by harassment, confiscation of journalistic equipment, and the forced deletion of content, demonstrating a deliberate and systematic pattern aimed at suppressing independent reporting and restricting the free flow of information.

Serious concerns were also raised during earlier incidents linked to politically sensitive cases. On 24 April 2025, several journalists were arrested while attempting to cover court proceedings in the treason case involving opposition leader Tundu Antiphas Lissu. Reports indicate that some of the journalists were subjected to ill-treatment and acts amounting to torture while in custody, highlighting grave violations of their rights and further deterring media coverage of sensitive judicial processes.

Ahead of the 2025 General Elections, additional arrests of journalists were recorded, reinforcing concerns about the use of criminal charges to silence media actors. Journalist Godfrey Ng'omba was arrested and charged with treason, while Alphonse Kusaga was also arrested in the pre-election period. These actions, particularly the use of serious charges such as treason, raise significant concerns regarding proportionality, misuse of the criminal justice system, and the targeting of journalists in a politically sensitive context.

### **c) Self-Censorship and Growing Fear**

Self-censorship has emerged as a defining feature of Tanzania's media environment, particularly during the 2025 General Elections and their aftermath. Widespread arrests, intimidation, and violence against journalists during this period fostered a climate of fear that continues to shape journalistic practice. According to the Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC), more than twenty incidents of threats and intimidation were documented, while numerous journalists reported operating in what they described as a "suffocating climate of fear," especially when covering politically sensitive issues.

This pattern can be understood through the lens of the *chilling effect* theory, whereby legal, political, and physical threats discourage the exercise of freedom of expression without the need for direct censorship. Within this context, journalists and media houses in Tanzania increasingly avoid reporting on critical issues such as electoral irregularities, governance failures, corruption, and human rights violations. Instead, there has been a noticeable shift toward safer, non-sensitive content including entertainment, gossip, and soft news as a strategy for risk avoidance. These dynamics also reflect elements of *media capture theory*, in which political and economic pressures shape editorial decisions and constrain independent journalism.

The persistence of these conditions into 2026 indicates the institutionalization of self-censorship as a survival mechanism within the media sector in Tanzania. However, this adaptation comes at a significant democratic cost. The erosion of investigative and critical reporting undermines the media's watchdog role, restricts citizens' access to diverse and accurate information, threat to peace and weakens accountability mechanisms.

#### **d) Legal and Policy Challenges**

The legal and policy framework governing media and freedom of expression in Tanzania remains a significant constraint on press freedom. Despite constitutional guarantees under Article 18, several laws and regulations continue to impose broad and restrictive provisions that limit the ability of journalists and media houses to operate independently. Key legislation, including the Media Services Act, the Cybercrimes Act, and the Online Content Regulations, grant wide discretionary powers to authorities, often without sufficient safeguards for due process, proportionality, or judicial oversight.

What is evident now in Tanzania is the state of *media capture* supported by the concept of “*rule by law*” as opposed to “*rule of law*.” While laws formally exist to regulate the media sector, their selective and discretionary application enables authorities to use legal instruments as tools of control rather than as neutral frameworks for governance. These developments align with the concept of shrinking civic space, where legal and administrative measures are used to limit the activities of independent media and restrict public discourse, particularly during politically sensitive periods such as elections.

During the 2025 General Elections and the period that followed, these legal instruments were actively used to justify actions against media outlets and journalists. Regulatory authorities increasingly relied on vague grounds such as “publishing misleading information” or “threatening national security” to take action against media actors, creating legal uncertainty and discouraging critical reporting.

Notably, on 6 September 2025, the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) suspended the licence of JamiiForums for 90 days and ordered the blocking of access to the platform nationwide under the Online Content Regulations. This action, taken in the lead-up to the general elections, raised serious concerns regarding due process, proportionality, and the misuse of regulatory powers to limit public discourse. Similarly, in April 2026, TCRA suspended Jambo Online TV for 90 days, further raising concerns regarding fairness and the right to be heard.

In Zanzibar, regulatory pressure has also been evident. During 2025, the Zanzibar Communications Regulatory Authority (ZCRA) issued warnings to eleven (11) online

television platforms for alleged violations of media and online content regulations. These actions, occurring within the broader election context, reinforce concerns about the use of regulatory frameworks to control media content rather than to promote accountability and professionalism.

#### **e) Internet Restriction and Digital Rights**

Internet restrictions and violations of digital rights have become a central feature of the shrinking civic and media space in Tanzania, particularly during the 2025 General Elections and their aftermath. During this period, authorities imposed a nationwide internet shutdown and blocked access to key digital platforms, including X (formerly Twitter), significantly disrupting the flow of information and limiting the ability of journalists and citizens to communicate and report in real time.

The blocking of digital platforms extended to regulatory actions against online spaces that facilitate public discourse. The suspension and nationwide blocking of JamiiForums in September 2025 not only restricted a key platform for information sharing but also set a concerning precedent for the control of digital spaces. Such measures, implemented during a politically sensitive period, undermined transparency, accountability, and the public's right to access information.

These restrictions have continued to shape the digital environment into 2026, where journalists, bloggers, and online content creators operate under constant risk of surveillance, blocking, or regulatory sanctions. The cumulative effect of these actions is the erosion of digital rights, including freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy.

As digital platforms increasingly serve as primary spaces for public engagement and information exchange, continued restrictions not only silence independent voices but also limit citizen participation in democratic processes and weaken the overall information ecosystem.

#### **f) Economic and Social Challenges**

Economic and social factors continue to play a significant role in constraining media freedom in Tanzania. Many media houses operate under severe financial limitations, which affect their ability to invest in quality journalism, particularly investigative reporting. Limited revenue streams, dependence on advertising, and financial vulnerability have made media outlets increasingly susceptible to external influence, including pressure from both state and private actors.

In this context, journalists often face precarious working conditions, including low pay, lack of job security, and limited institutional support. These challenges not only affect their professional independence but also make them more vulnerable to coercion and self-censorship. As a result, critical and investigative journalism has significantly declined, with many media outlets shifting towards less sensitive content to ensure survival and avoid conflict.

#### **f) Restrictive Political Environment**

The political environment in Tanzania during the 2025 General Elections and the period that followed has significantly constrained media freedom. Heightened political tensions, coupled with widespread violence and mass arrests, created an atmosphere in which independent

journalism was increasingly viewed with suspicion. Journalists covering opposition activities, electoral processes, and public protests were particularly exposed to risks, including arrest, intimidation, and restricted access to information.

During this period, authorities imposed both formal and informal restrictions that limited the ability of journalists to report freely. Media practitioners were denied access to key events, including political gatherings and court proceedings, while others were prevented from covering developments of public interest. In some instances, more than 20 journalists were blocked from covering political events, and others were restricted from accessing judicial proceedings, undermining transparency and the principle of open justice.

Notably, restrictions were also imposed on journalists seeking to cover opposition activities. Journalists were prevented from attending and covering a press conference held by CHADEMA Secretary General John Mnyika and Vice Chairman John Heche, further demonstrating the selective limitation of access to politically relevant information and restricting engagement with opposition voices.

Beyond access restrictions, journalists and media institutions have also faced direct intimidation and attacks. In April 2026, the newsroom of Pambazuko Media was subjected to a targeted break-in by unknown individuals, during which critical equipment and sensitive materials linked to ongoing investigations were stolen. The nature of the incident raised serious concerns that it was not an ordinary criminal act but a deliberate attempt to disrupt investigative journalism and intimidate media practitioners. Such incidents highlight the growing risks faced by independent media and further reinforce a climate of fear within the sector.

#### **h) Lack of Editorial Independence**

The lack of editorial independence remains a critical challenge in Tanzania's media landscape. Ownership structures heavily influence editorial decision-making, with many outlets reflecting the political and commercial interests of their proprietors rather than professional journalistic standards. This constrains journalists' ability to report freely, especially on sensitive issues such as governance, elections, corruption, and public accountability. Public media institutions, including the Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation, face similar constraints. Rather than serving as neutral platforms for balanced public discourse, they often reflect official government positions while limiting critical viewpoints. This state-aligned model weakens pluralism, erodes credibility, and undermines the media's democratic function.

### **3.0 BROADER IMPACT OF THE CAPTURED MEDIA IN TANZANIA**

The documented violations against journalists between 2025 and 2026 have far-reaching implications that extend well beyond the media sector, directly affecting democratic governance, rule of law, and social stability in Tanzania. A free, independent, and pluralistic media is essential for ensuring transparency, accountability, and informed public participation. Where media freedom is constrained, these foundational elements of democracy are significantly weakened.

#### **a) Decline in Critical and Investigative Journalism**

The state of media capture in the country presented in this statement has contributed to a progressive decline and marginalization of critical and investigative journalism. Reporting on key public interest issues such as corruption, abuse of power, electoral integrity, and human rights violations has become increasingly limited. This decline is not incidental but reflects a broader environment in which journalists operate under sustained pressure, leading to cautious reporting and the avoidance of sensitive topics. This highlights how political and regulatory pressures can shape media behavior and constrain media and editorial priorities.

#### **b) Content Imbalance**

Currently in Tanzania media landscape has experienced a growing imbalance in content and perspective. In several instances, coverage has become increasingly one-sided, particularly within state-aligned or politically influenced media, where state and official narratives dominate and alternative or dissenting voices receive no/or limited attention. This lack of pluralism restricts the diversity of viewpoints available to the public and undermines informed citizenship and public participation on issues of public interest. Without exposure to diverse viewpoints, citizens are less able to engage critically with public issues, making authorities accountable, ultimately limiting meaningful participation in political and civic processes.

#### **c) Shift Towards Non-sensitive Content- Selective Journalism**

Furthermore, economic pressures and risk avoidance strategies have led some media outlets to shift their focus towards non-sensitive content, including entertainment, lifestyle, and sensational reporting. While such content serves commercial purposes, its increasing dominance has reduced the space for substantive, public interest journalism. As a result, critical societal issues receive inadequate coverage, and the media's watchdog role is significantly diminished.

The cumulative effect of these trends is a public that is insufficiently informed about matters of national importance. Limited access to accurate, timely, and diverse information undermines citizens' ability to make informed decisions, participate meaningfully in governance processes, and hold duty bearers accountable. In the long term, these dynamics risk eroding public trust in both media institutions and state structures, weakening democratic resilience, and undermining prospects for sustainable peace and inclusive development.

#### **d) Weakening of Electoral Integrity**

Media constraints during the 2025 election challenges significantly undermined the credibility of electoral processes and all related challenges. Limited critical coverage of what happened during protest by the local media reduced public access to independent and reliable information. As a result, citizens had fewer opportunities to scrutinize the management of the electoral process or assess competing claims regarding its integrity. This has led the public and the global community to overly on foreign media, online activists and unofficial sources on what happened during 2025 election and related challenges.

#### **e) Shrinking Civic Space and Marginalisation of Civil Society**

Media capture has also contributed to the shrinking of civic space by limiting the visibility and reach of civil society organisations, human rights defenders, and activist voices. Reports by human rights groups documenting arrests of protesters, restrictions on political gatherings, or

violations of civic freedoms have often received minimal or no mainstream media coverage in Tanzania. This approach diminishes public awareness of civic engagement and restricts informed debate on issues of national importance. Consequently, the media's role as a bridge between citizens and institutions is weakened, further constraining civic participation and democratic dialogue.

#### **f) Growth of Misinformation and Informal Information Ecosystems**

As public trust in mainstream media declines because of media capture, many citizens increasingly turn to informal information ecosystems, including WhatsApp groups, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook pages, and unofficial blogs, for political and social news. During sensitive periods such as elections or major political developments the absence of credible, investigative reporting from traditional media has created information vacuums that are quickly filled by unverified claims and rumours. This environment heightens the risk of misinformation and disinformation, particularly in a context where regulatory controls on digital media coexist with a weakened, constrained mainstream press. The result is a fragmented information landscape that undermines informed citizenship, social trust, and democratic resilience.

#### **g) Shift to Community Journalism**

Public trust in mainstream media in Tanzania has continued to decline, largely due to perceptions of bias, self-censorship, and alignment with political or ownership interests. As a result, many citizens particularly in urban centres as well as in peri-urban communities increasingly rely on community journalists, local bloggers, and grassroots reporters using social media platforms to access information on local governance, protests, arrests, and service delivery challenges. While community journalism has helped fill information gaps, this shift reflects reduced confidence in established media to provide independent, public-interest reporting.

#### **e) Economic Impact on Media Institutions**

The loss of public trust and audience engagement has had serious economic consequences for mainstream media in Tanzania. Declining readership, viewership, and advertising revenues have weakened the financial sustainability of many media houses. This has resulted in reduced investment in investigative journalism, staff layoffs, and greater reliance on low-cost, non-sensitive content. Economic vulnerability has also increased dependence on politically connected advertisers or owners, further reinforcing self-censorship and media capture and undermining the viability of independent media.

### **4.0 Our Call**

In light of the above findings, THRDC calls upon the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania and all relevant stakeholders to take immediate and concrete measures to safeguard press freedom and freedom of expression:

#### **a) Protection of Journalists and Accountability for Violations**

The Government should take urgent steps to ensure the safety and security of journalists, including conducting prompt, independent, and transparent investigations into killings, attacks,

and acts of torture against media practitioners. Those responsible must be held accountable in accordance with the law.

**b) End Arbitrary Arrests, Detention, and Harassment**

The Government must immediately end the arbitrary arrest, detention, and intimidation of journalists. All actions against media actors should strictly adhere to due process and comply with the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality, in line with constitutional and international human rights obligations.

**c) Legal and Policy Reforms**

The Government should review and amend restrictive laws and regulations, including the Media Services Act, the Cybercrimes Act, and the Online Content Regulations, to ensure full alignment with constitutional guarantees and international human rights standards on freedom of expression and access to information.

**d) Ensure Digital Rights and Open Internet Access**

Authorities must refrain from imposing internet shutdowns, blocking digital platforms, or arbitrarily restricting online content. The Government should promote and protect digital rights, including access to information, online freedom of expression, and privacy, particularly during critical periods such as elections.

**e) Promote an Enabling Political Environment for Media Freedom**

The Government should guarantee equal and unhindered access for journalists to public events, political processes, and judicial proceedings. All forms of interference, including denial of access and restrictions targeting coverage of opposition activities, must cease to ensure a fair, open, and pluralistic media environment.

**f) Strengthen Media Independence and Pluralism**

Measures should be taken to promote editorial independence and prevent undue influence from both state and private actors. Public media institutions, in particular, should operate in a balanced, impartial, and inclusive manner, providing space for diverse perspectives and viewpoints.

**g) Address Economic and Structural Challenges in the Media Sector**

The Government, in collaboration with stakeholders, should support initiatives aimed at strengthening the sustainability and independence of media houses, including improving working conditions for journalists and promoting an environment conducive to investigative and public interest journalism.

**h) Responsibilities of Media and Civil Society**

THRDC calls upon media stakeholders to continue upholding professionalism, ethics, and responsible journalism, even in challenging circumstances. Civil society organizations and development partners are encouraged to strengthen efforts to protect civic space, support

journalists at risk, and promote media freedom through advocacy, capacity building, and protection mechanisms.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The situation of press freedom in Tanzania during 2025–2026 underscores an urgent need for comprehensive reforms and stronger protections for journalists and media institutions. The continued erosion of media freedom, including the growing influence of media capture by political and economic interests, poses a serious threat to democratic governance, peace accountability, human rights and social cohesion. A free, independent, and pluralistic press is not a threat to society; it is a cornerstone of democracy, peace, and sustainable development.

THRDC reaffirms its commitment to working collaboratively with journalists, media houses, state institutions, civil society, and development partners to resist media capture, protect freedom of expression, and promote editorial independence. Through legal assistance, advocacy, and application of protection mechanisms, THRDC will continue to support journalists at risk and to advance a media environment that genuinely serves the public interest and strengthens freedom of expression, access to information and democratic participation in Tanzania.

### **Issued by**

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