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The boundaries of moral communities: Human rights and the politics of international church partnerships in Tanzania

1. Introduction

This paper is based on my doctoral fieldwork in Tanzania in 2014-2015. For most of that time I was based in the offices and parishes of the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, and focusing on theology and theologising as a social practice among pastors, and also the ways in which they form relationships and partnerships, particularly international church partnerships and those visiting the country on short-term mission trips. Recently I've been looking a bit more at the church and politics. This means both "church politics" (i.e. the internal politicking that happens in church contexts), and the mutual involvement of the church and the political institutions of the nation state. In practice, these are not so very different things.

Religion in Tanzania is very public. I cannot overstate this point enough. This includes in the political sphere. Politicians are invited to and give speeches at religious services. For major events such as the installation of a new bishop, senior figures including the president, vice president, or prime minister will attend; other events such as festivals, fundraisers (which happen very frequently), foundation stone layings, parish staff retirements or instalments, and so on will be attended by local, district or regional political figures depending on the scale of the event. Religious leaders are interviewed by news outlets, and they issue press releases regarding political debates.

In fact the news media are crucial to public religion. Tanzania has a relatively robust print media sector, though in the past few years it has come under threat. In the commercial centre of any town you'll see many news carts selling dozens of different titles. Newspapers and tabloids regularly report on the activities of religious leaders, from their recent sermons and public statements to their alleged affairs and other scandals. Additionally the opinion columns are full of essays on church initiatives and activities. For many Tanzanians, public religion and politics are experienced together in news media.

2. Political Context

Here I'll give a quick overview of the political context. CCM, Chama cha Mapinduzi, has been the ruling party since independence (and in fact was the *only* party until 1992). Many Tanzanians pride themselves on the country's political stability, relative to other countries in the area, though since I've finished my PhD this has become more contentious. In October 2015, one month after I finished my doctoral research, John Magufuli was elected president. The election campaign had been somewhat contentious, and in the end the opposition party took nearly 40% of the popular vote. This did cause some division nationally, but Magufuli's election was initially seen as a positive step towards promoting economic growth and reducing corruption. However, at the same time, there has been a widespread perception that politics are now more volatile - that the space for

civil liberties and freedoms is shrinking, and that the nation's democracy and stability is beginning to come under threat. Here I'll highlight a few specific examples.

Numerous newspapers have been suspended; since 2016, Tanzania has moved sharply down in press freedom ratings worldwide as Magufuli has replaced independent media oversight organisations with a government-controlled body. On several occasions journalists critical of the government have been arrested.

Additionally, political opponents have faced violent measures. The opposition leader, Edward Lowassa, has been arrested or detained several times since Magufuli's election, and opposition political rallies were banned in 2016. In 2017, Tundu Lissu, opposition MP and whip, and president of the Tanzania Bar Association, was arrested at least six times and later survived an assassination attempt. He was stripped of his parliamentary seat in 2019 due to his absence from the country while receiving medical treatment.

In 2017, girls who become pregnant were banned from returning to state schools. Prior to this, pregnancies generally resulted in dropping out or being expelled. During the 2015 election campaign, the CCM's manifesto actually did support a re-entry program to provide a pathway back into formal education. However, Magufuli scuttled this in 2017. Some district and regional politicians have even called for the arrest of pregnant students or their parents. Other national political leaders have threatened civil society organisations campaigning against the policy with deregistration.

Finally, there have been increasing crackdowns on LGBT individuals. In Tanzania, "sexual acts against the order of nature" are illegal and punishable by 30 years to life in prison. Additionally, vigilantism is generally tolerated and LGBT people and advocacy groups are subject to harassment, raids, and discriminatory policies. Last year, Dar es Salaam regional commissioner Paul Makonda announced a task force for hunting down gay people, encouraging citizens to report anyone they suspect of being gay. While the national government made a statement distancing themselves from Makonda's position, there was no further condemnation of the crackdown.

3. Church context

Roughly 60% of Tanzanians are Christian. The Catholic Church is the largest denomination, the Lutherans follow with about 7.5 million members. There are also Anglican and various Pentecostal churches.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania has 27 dioceses, each headed by a bishop, one of whom is selected every four years as the presiding bishop. Since 2016 that has been Fredrick Shoo, the bishop of the Northern Diocese where I did my research.

Church leaders regularly issue statements or letters known as *nyaraka* (sing. *waraka*), particularly at Easter and Christmas. In hierarchical churches such as the Lutheran and Catholic churches, these will be read in every parish in the country. They are also widely reported on in newspapers. Typically, they take a tone of encouraging church members and addressing the state of the country, offering both congratulations and criticisms to the government.

International partnerships are an extremely valuable resource in a lot of church work in Tanzania. The Northern Diocese where I did my work has two formal partner dioceses; these are the Nebraska Synod of the ELCA and the Stockholm Diocese of the Church of Sweden. They also have numerous other relationships with Lutheran bodies in Germany, Finland, and elsewhere in the world, and most other Tanzanian dioceses have similar partnerships. Through these partnerships they carry out a lot of humanitarian work, especially in health and education.

4. The Easter Letter

The *waraka* that I'm going to discuss today is the letter from Easter 2018. Signed by all 27 bishops, it is particularly critical of the government, and it caused a good deal of discussion including in the papers. It has three sections, and I'll give a brief outline here.

In the introduction, the letter sets out the church's responsibility is to speak prophetically; that is, to defend those without a voice and bring God's message to the community and especially to its leaders: "We are duty-bound as bishops, since this is a call and a mission which cannot be avoided. To all people of faith, this responsibility has no substitute. We are commanded to encourage building bridges of reconciliation and dialogue in love and peace, and to oppose all systems that promote hatred and separation. In so doing, we are obliged to speak clearly the message of peace, love, respect, dignity, patience, and harmony." The introduction ends with a statement that their conscience before God obliges them to make an effort to maintain freedom and unity.

The second section, "Our Nation and Our Peace", lists three areas of criticism.

The first, "Society and Economy", congratulates the government for its efforts to keep mineral resource wealth within the country, and improving tax collection to finance social services. It also makes a few criticisms, including that the government should not consider private sector or faith based organisations to be competitors in development, but rather partners; and that investment in the industrial economy should be cautious and not outstrip agricultural investment.

The second section, "Political Life", decries the current national state of affairs which it says is contrary to national laws, principles, and values. It lists several things which threaten to undermine the national peace and unity: abductions, attempted assassination, the misuse of law enforcement agents against citizens, shrinking space for the freedom of expression, the independence of the parliament, judiciary, and electoral commission being threatened, voter suppression, electoral violence, and political bias in the implementation of development initiatives. It's this second section that I'll focus on generally in my discussion.

The third section, "Cross-cutting Issues" makes several recommendations, including that any loss of life should result in transparent and independent investigations, and that the process for implementing a new constitution must be revived.

The letter concludes by asking Tanzanians to pray for political leaders "so that God gives them the wisdom to do justice, to listen rather than speak, to lead rather than to order, to unite people rather than to divide, to love people rather than to be loved by people, to serve the people rather than to be served (Mark10.45), and to respect people rather than to demand to be respected." It reiterates a call for freedom and unity, for a new constitution, and for the protection of life.

5. Ramifications of the letter

First, it showcases the close relationship between "church politics" and "church *and* politics". It had quite a response: there are dozens of news reports and opinion pieces in Tanzanian papers about the letter itself, and various government responses to it.

The letter caused some backlash from the government. Merlin Komba, the Registrar of Societies, issued a letter on Ministry of Home Affairs letterhead, in which she alleged that the ELCT had failed to maintain its legal registration; that the "Council of Bishops" was not a registered body; that criticisms of the government should have been brought directly instead of being aired to the public - basically, that they had no legal standing to issue such a letter. The letter concludes by stating that the bishops have 10 days to issue another letter retracting the first, lest severe legal steps be taken

against them. The Minister for Home Affairs, Mwigulu Nchemba, suspended Ms. Komba pending investigation, stating that the government was not aware of Komba's letter or ultimatum. Nchemba was himself sacked by President Magufuli two months later, by which time Komba was apparently back at work.

Other political leaders have been critical of the bishop's letter. At an event inaugurating a new diocese in Tabora, Bishop Shoo reiterated that the Easter letter was a deliberate and carefully thought-out statement. The ceremony was attended by Vice President Samia Suluhu Hassan, who in her speech said that the government welcomes criticism, but that it should be made in the proper way.

The letter was to be read in all parishes in the country, but eventually three bishops were censured for failing to have it read in the parishes in their diocese (despite all being signatories to it). One of them, Alex Malasusa of the Eastern and Coastal diocese, was the presiding bishop before Shoo; and his diocese is centred on Tanzania's largest city and cultural capital, Dar es Salaam. He's therefore a very well-known figure in Tanzanian public life, and is mentioned frequently in articles in both reputable and disreputable newspapers. Rumours abounded; stories that I heard included that Malasusa is close with the Dar es Salaam regional commissioner Paul Makonda (of the "gay crackdowns" I mentioned), because Makonda facilitated Malasusa's mistress getting a student visa in Germany.

The second issue is about the ongoing creation of a moral community. The bishop's letter calls out the deteriorating state of human rights in Tanzania: the government's efforts to suppress political opponents, shrink civic space, muzzle the media, harass and persecute journalists, and the attempted assassinations of opposition figures and the pervasive state of fear. This conforms strongly to the global Lutheran emphasis on speaking out for human rights as an essential and prophetic duty of the church; it draws a boundary line between the church and the state, and it draws a connecting line between the church and the global Lutheran community. However, the letter is silent on policies like the student mother ban—in fact to date no Tanzanian church has made a public statement opposing it—and LGBT crackdowns, and so it also draws a boundary line between itself and other Lutheran churches. Lutheran churches in Europe (and to a slightly lesser degree in America) are almost unanimous in their defence of LGBT rights; and none of them would support the student mother ban. Whereas in Tanzania, human rights discussions very rarely include LGBT issues. There are advocacy organisations but they are on the fringe and not affiliated with any major churches. It doesn't draw a hard line, as has happened with other Lutheran churches; e.g. The Lutheran Church in Ethiopia has terminated its partnerships with American and Swedish Lutheran churches over this issue. It may not even be an explicit line. Nevertheless, in what the letter says and doesn't say, it sets out the boundaries of relationships, where certain relationships can and can't go.