



Tanzania: Torture, Human Rights Defenders and Transnational Repression.

Submission to the 4th cycle of Universal Periodic Review of United Republic of Tanzania.

By:

[Change Africa Trust](#) unites civil rights activists across Eastern Africa — regardless of gender, religion, or background — to strengthen human rights and democracy. It focuses on promoting values, supporting democracy, defending human rights, increasing political engagement, advocating good governance, emphasising citizens’ duties and responsibilities, monitoring accountability, and campaigning for economic fairness.

[World Organisation Against Torture \(OMCT\)](#) works with around 200 member organisations which constitute its SOS-Torture network to end torture, fight impunity and protect human rights defenders worldwide.

1. Introduction

This submission examines patterns of torture and ill-treatment, repression of human rights defenders (HRDs), restrictions on civic space, and emerging practices of transnational repression in Tanzania. It draws on civil society documentation and first-hand testimony from a Tanzanian HRD in exile. The evidence indicates a systemic pattern of repression in which restrictive legal frameworks, abusive policing practices, arbitrary detention, and cross-border intimidation reinforce one another.

The 2025 Tanzanian general elections took place on October 29, 2025. Incumbent President Samia Suluhu Hassan of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party was claimed to have been re-elected with approximately 97.66% of the vote in a process widely criticized by observers (including the African Union and SADC missions) as falling short of democratic standards. The main opposition party, Chadema, was barred from fielding candidates after refusing to sign an electoral code of conduct without reforms. Its chairperson, Tundu Lissu, had been detained since April 2025 on treason charges. Protests erupted nationwide on election day and in the immediate aftermath, prompting a severe security force response, a nationwide internet shutdown, curfews, and a documented crackdown.

The violations occurred primarily in the post-election period (late October to early November 2025), but they form part of a broader pattern of repression that intensified ahead of the polls.

As of April 2026, the human rights situation in the United Republic of Tanzania remains critical. What began as a pre-electoral crackdown on dissent escalated into a nationwide crisis characterized by lethal force against civilians, mass arbitrary detentions, and a systematic assault on the judiciary. No independent, transparent investigation has been conducted by the government as of April 2026, and accountability remains absent.

During its third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2021, Tanzania accepted several recommendations relevant to the prevention of torture and ill-treatment, including commitments to improve access to justice, strengthen human rights training for law enforcement officials, and ensure prompt, impartial investigations into violations against journalists, civil society actors, and human rights defenders.¹ However, the Government only noted recommendations to ratify the United Nations Convention against Torture and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, despite broad support from recommending States, indicating that these required further consultation.² As of 2026, Tanzania remains among the few States globally, and one of only two in all of Africa, that have yet to ratify UNCAT, and has not completed ratification of ICPPED.

Despite some reported steps, including implementation of the Judiciary Strategic Plan, expansion of court infrastructure, and adoption of the Legal Aid Act, these measures have not translated into meaningful protection in practice.³ Credible reports continue to document arbitrary arrests and prolonged incommunicado detention, as well as torture and other ill-treatment in police custody, facilitated in part by weak or manipulable detention record systems. Patterns of enforced disappearance and unlawful killings have also been reported, particularly in the lead-up to and aftermath of the October 2025 elections. At the same time, there is no clear evidence of prompt, independent investigations into such violations or of accountability for perpetrators. Instead, available documentation points to a persistent climate of impunity and fear of reprisals, which continues to deter victims and witnesses from seeking redress and undermines the effective implementation of Tanzania's accepted UPR commitments.

2. Legal and Institutional Framework

Tanzania is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. These instruments guarantee the prohibition of torture and protect freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.

However, Tanzania:

- Has still not ratified the Convention against Torture (CAT) being one of the last to do so in Africa
- Has not criminalised torture in line with CAT Article 1;
- Lacks a specific legal framework for the protection of HRDs;

¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: United Republic of Tanzania*, A/HRC/48/12 (2021).

² United Nations Human Rights Council, *Addendum to the Report of the Working Group on the UPR: Tanzania*, A/HRC/48/12/Add.1 (2021).

³ Government of Tanzania, UPR Mid-Term/State Reports and national justice sector reform updates (2021–2025)

- Maintains restrictive laws and administrative practices governing expression, assemblies, and civil society.

Civil society organisations have documented that these frameworks are used to restrict dissent and civic participation, particularly in the context of elections and political mobilisation.

3. Torture and Ill-Treatment in Custody

Evidence indicates persistent risks of torture and ill-treatment in police custody and detention settings. OMCT and its partners reported in December 2025 allegations of beatings, torture, arbitrary detention, and ill-treatment, including against protesters, HRDs, and minors.⁴ These abuses occurred in the context of protest repression and broader civic space restrictions.

First-hand testimony confirms structural deficiencies that facilitate torture:

- Unreliable or manipulable detention registers, allowing authorities to obscure custody;
- Detention in police custody far exceeding legal time limits;
- Use of unofficial detention sites, including by bodies lacking legal mandate;
- Removal of detainees for interrogation or torture and subsequent return to custody.

These practices create conditions conducive to incommunicado detention, enforced disappearance-like situations, and torture, in violation of Articles 2, 11 and 16 CAT and Articles 7 and 9 ICCPR.

4. Excessive Use of Force and Protest Policing

The post-election period in late 2025 illustrates a pattern of excessive and lethal force.

According to OMCT and its partners, security forces used live ammunition, arbitrary arrests, and mass detention against protesters following the October 2025 elections. Reports indicate that hundreds of people were killed between 29 October and 2 November 2025.⁵ Additional allegations include beatings, torture, and enforced disappearances in connection with planned demonstrations in December 2025.

Testimony collected from an HRD indicates that even prior to 2025, authorities used permit requirements and administrative controls to prevent independent election monitoring and suppress civic participation, forcing activists to operate informally and increasing exposure to repression.

These practices violate the principles of necessity, proportionality, and accountability in the use of force, and may amount to torture or ill-treatment when used to punish or deter civic engagement.

⁴ World Organisation Against Torture, Tanzania: No more bloodshed – torture and repression against protesters must stop now, 8 December 2025.

⁵ World Organisation Against Torture, Tanzania: No more bloodshed – torture and repression against protesters must stop now, 8 December 2025

5. Targeting of Human Rights Defenders

HRDs, journalists, and opposition actors face arbitrary arrest, surveillance, intimidation, and judicial harassment.

OMCT and its partners documented a broader pre-election crackdown including:

- Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances;
- Fabricated charges against opposition figures;
- Restrictions on access to information;
- Violent repression of political rallies.

Testimony provides further detail:

- HRDs engaged in election monitoring and online advocacy were targeted after criticising authorities;
- Individuals were forced into exile following sustained threats and surveillance;
- Authorities or intermediaries offered financial incentives or safety guarantees in exchange for abandoning activism.

These practices demonstrate that repression operates not only through formal prosecution, but also through informal coercion, intimidation, and inducement of self-censorship, contrary to the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

6. Transnational Repression

There is increasing evidence that repression extends beyond Tanzania's borders.

OMCT and its partners reported cases involving arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and deportation of foreign activists, as well as the abduction and torture of individuals linked to Tanzania-related activism.

The interview confirms patterns of transnational repression:

- HRDs in exile reported continued surveillance and tracking after relocation;
- Use of informal networks and local informants to identify their whereabouts;
- Pressure exerted on family members to facilitate targeting or cooperation.

These practices violate the right to security of person, undermine the right to seek safety abroad, and may engage the principle of non-refoulement under Article 3 CAT.

The abduction on 12 January 2025 in the streets of Nairobi of Tanzanian human rights defender and media owner Maria Sarungi Tsehai, known for her bold critiques of government corruption and human rights abuses in Tanzania, is the highest illustration of Tanzania transnational repression activities in east Africa. She was seized by unidentified men and driven toward the border for handover. The pick-ups were short and coordinated, usually right after someone became visible publicly and after days of low-grade observation. The impact on other HRDs in

exile was immediate—they pulled back from public events, rotated meeting venues, and changed communications because they feared similar grabs.”⁶

The abduction lasted several hours, after which she was released following coordinated global pressure. The operation is believed to have been carried out by Tanzanian government agents operating on Kenyan soil, with the apparent intention of forcibly returning her to Tanzania.⁷

Tanzania has also collaborated with other east Africa governments to arrest foreign human rights defenders on its territory. On 12 July 2016, while Armel Niyongere, a Burundian Lawyer who was invited to the second round of inter-Burundian dialogue (Arusha II), narrowly escaped an attempted arrest by Tanzanian police outside his hotel in Arusha, Tanzania. He reported that the Burundian government’s delegation objected to his presence, labelling him “persona non grata” and claiming he was subject to an international arrest warrant.⁸

The case of Mshabaha Mshabaha Hamza, associated with Change Africa Trust, illustrates patterns of repression against human rights defenders (HRDs) in Tanzania, including forced exile and transnational repression. According to his testimony, Hamza was involved in citizen-based election monitoring and online reporting of irregularities during the 2020 general elections, which led to increasing pressure from security actors, including intimidation of family members and close associates.⁹ This sustained harassment forced him to flee Tanzania and relocate to Nairobi. He reports that shortly after arrival, individuals began making inquiries about his whereabouts through informal networks, indicating that surveillance and intimidation extended beyond Tanzania’s borders.¹⁰ He further describes attempts by intermediaries to secure his return under conditions requiring him to cease his activism, which he refused.

On 22 February 2026, Hamza was the target of an attempted abduction in Machakos, which was foiled by Kenyan police, leading to the arrest of three suspects.¹¹ The incident highlights the risks faced by exiled HRDs, including those critical of President Samia Suluhu Hassan, and raises concerns regarding possible transnational repression. When read alongside documented patterns of arbitrary detention, weak safeguards against torture, and persistent impunity in Tanzania, this case underscores the continued lack of effective protection for HRDs both in the country and in exile.¹²

7. Accountability and Due Process Failures

⁶ Interview with a Tanzanian HRD in exile in Kenya, Nairobi 11th March 2025

⁷ Amnesty International Kenya, January 2025 Issue of the Amnesty Gazette, 5 February 2025, accessible at: <https://www.amnestykenya.org/january-2025-issue-of-the-amnesty-gazette/>

⁸ Abbas Mbazumutima, “Arusha II : tentative d’arrestation d’un membre du Mouvement Halte au 3ème Mandat,” Iwacu, 12 July 2016, available at: <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/arusha-ii-tentative-darrestation-dun-membre-du-mouvement-halte-au-3eme-mandat/>

⁹ Interview with Mshabaha Mshabaha Hamza, conducted by World Organisation Against Torture (2026).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Chanzo, “Attempted Abduction of Tanzania’s Activist in Kenya Foiled,” 24 February 2026; Tuko, “Mshabaha Mshabaha Hamza Rescued by Kenya Police After Attempted Abduction,” 2026. <https://thechanzo.com/2026/02/24/attempted-abduction-of-tanzanias-activist-in-kenya-foiled/>

¹² Interview with Mshabaha Mshabaha Hamza (OMCT, 2026).

Accountability mechanisms remain ineffective.

OMCT highlighted the need for prompt, independent, and impartial investigations into killings, torture, enforced disappearances, and protest-related abuses.

Interview evidence indicates systemic failures:

- Courts fail to scrutinise prolonged unlawful detention;
- Weak or manipulated custody records undermine evidentiary integrity;
- Lack of traceability prevents effective complaints and investigations.

These deficiencies contribute to structural impunity, contrary to Articles 12, 13 and 14 of the UNCAT.

8. Key Recommendations

The Government of Tanzania should:

1. Criminalise torture in line with CAT and ensure prompt, independent investigations into all allegations.
2. Ratify the UN Convention against Torture as well as the the Optional Protocol to UNCAT.
3. End excessive use of force against protesters and ensure compliance with international standards on law enforcement.
4. Implement travel bans and asset freezes on officials identified as responsible for extrajudicial killings and torture.
5. Refer the situation to the International Criminal Court as domestic remedies do not look promising, and the state continues to obstruct justice.
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7. Guarantee safeguards against arbitrary detention, including accurate and tamper-proof custody registers.
8. Cease harassment, intimidation, and prosecution of HRDs, journalists, and civil society actors.
9. Adopt a specific legal and institutional protection framework for HRDs.
10. Refrain from all forms of transnational repression, including cross-border surveillance, intimidation, and coercion.
11. Ensure accountability for post-election violations, including killings, torture, and enforced disappearances.