



# TANZANIA

## Quick Facts

Population: 62,092,761 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 947,300 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Mainland - African 99% (of which 95% are Bantu consisting of more than 130 tribes), other 1% (consisting of Asian, European, and Arab); Zanzibar - Arab, African, mixed Arab and African

Government Type: Presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$60.633 billion (2019 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

The level of Islamist activity in Tanzania is currently low, especially as compared to regional neighbors Egypt, Somalia, Sudan, and Kenya. However, a number of factors—including the country’s ongoing slide toward authoritarianism—have spurred some Muslims in Tanzania to adhere to Islamism as an ideological alternative.<sup>1</sup> The character of Tanzania’s internal politics as a one-party-dominated political system, as well as historic grievances on the part of the country’s Muslim Zanzibari population, further strain inter-religious relations and threaten to politicize what has historically been a localized (and moderate) practice of Islam. So, too, does a tendency by the central government on the use of unnecessary force and brutality in response to suspected incidents in Muslim communities.

Tanzania’s proximity to Somalia, inside of which both al-Qaeda and ISIS currently vie for influence, remains a risk factor, as does the emergence of Islamic militancy in nearby Mozambique. Similarly, the presence of foreign-funded mosques and universities within the country has increased in recent years. Tanzanian Muslims thus today experience competing forms of Islam, and more radical strains are becoming increasingly attractive as avenues for legitimate political expression continue to shrink.

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The bombing of the U.S. embassy in Dar es Salaam in 1998, which killed eleven and injured eighty-five others, was the first indication of militant *jihadi* activity in Tanzania. The bombing, however, was not a plot planned inside the country, or even one organized by Tanzanian Muslims, though two Zanzibari residents were eventually implicated. Rather, several Somalis, al-Qaeda operatives, and sleepers with regional links to cells in Tanzania and Kenya planned the attack.<sup>2</sup> Although no other similarly high-profile attacks occurred for years, Tanzania is still vulnerable to radical Islamists. Since 2012, a spate of unresolved acid and explosive attacks attributed to Islamist extremists, as well as the more recent discovery of suspected terror training camps inside the country, confirm the threat.<sup>3</sup> In 2016 and 2017, residents were rattled by a

series of violent ambushes of the Tanzanian police—not unlike some of the violent attacks on police by al-Shabaab elements in Kenya—and killings of local government officials.<sup>4</sup> To date, however, attribution has focused on criminal, rather than terror, groups as the perpetrators.<sup>5</sup>

*Jihadi* attacks have occurred just across Tanzania's northern border in neighboring Kenya and Uganda, as well as across its southern border in Mozambique. Small arms and other weapons are readily available on the black market across East Africa, as are militant Islamist sermons, often available in Swahili and local dialects on CDs. The Somali terror group al-Shabaab, which remains a threat to Somalia as well as the broader region, is committed to transnational expansion, including operations in, recruitment from, and attacks on Tanzania. However, Al-Shabaab's success in Tanzania thus far has been limited.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, some weaknesses make Tanzania a relatively easy target and suggest that it should be watched closely.<sup>7</sup> With rudimentary or inefficient border controls, a wide-open coastline and troubled neighbors, Tanzania's large coastal trade and extensive, illegal smuggling industry provide excellent logistical cover for extremists.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Tanzanian police are unable, and sometimes unwilling, to provide basic public safety services, and major crimes often go unsolved; though the country's National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) illustrates an inter-agency approach to preventing and countering violent extremists, its capacity remains limited.<sup>9</sup> Corruption is a serious challenge to the effectiveness of Tanzania's security forces, notably its police force.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, there is a serious sense of political and economic marginalization, especially evident among young people, Zanzibaris, and growing among Tanzanian Muslims.<sup>11</sup> This marginalization has not to date led to widespread radicalization or violence, but the situation continues to evolve, particularly given the government's heavy-handed and securitized response.<sup>12</sup>

A series of acid and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks targeting tourists, Christians, and moderate Muslims have occurred in both mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar since 2012, and the May 2013 bombing of St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in an Arusha suburb, which killed three people and wounded more than 60, exacerbated these fears.<sup>13</sup> While no group claimed responsibility for these attacks, some suggested that a radical Zanzibari separatist group might have, at a minimum, inspired them.<sup>14</sup>

At least three times between 2013 and 2016, authorities raided suspected terror training camps in Tanzania, some of which were recruiting and indoctrinating children.<sup>15</sup> There are no public reports of similar raids in the years since. It is unclear which group is responsible for setting them up, though authorities suggested that al-Shabaab was the prime suspect. Unlike its neighbors Kenya and Burundi, Tanzania is not part of the African Union Mission in Somalia. However, the country remains susceptible to the threat of Somali terror group al-Shabaab and its Kenyan affiliate *al-Hijra*. Both groups have an interest in Tanzania, and Tanzanian citizens reportedly made up the largest foreign fighter contingent inside al-Shabaab.<sup>16</sup> However, the al-Shabaab threat to Tanzania, thus far, has not manifested in a large-scale attack inside Tanzania, though Tanzanian citizens have been found guilty of assisting the group, including in its 2013 attack on Westgate Mall in Nairobi and its 2015 Garissa University College attack.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, a cell purportedly aligned with the Islamic State (ISIS) issued a video message from a cave in Tanzania, drawing attention to yet another Islamist actor with its eye on the country.<sup>18</sup> The emergence the same year of an Islamic State-affiliated group, *Jabha East Africa*, also bears watching, as the group claims Tanzanians among its membership.<sup>19</sup> Thus far, however, *Jabha East Africa* is "more of an ideological threat than a physical one" and its sole attack to date was carried out in Somalia.<sup>20</sup> Despite the demise of the ISIS *caliphate* in Iraq and Syria, the group claims to still be active in East Africa, taking credit for attacks in nearby Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique in 2019.<sup>21</sup> While there is little information on the group's continued interest in Tanzania, its nearby attacks suggest the group maintains an enduring interest in the region in spite of its setbacks in the Middle East.

Two other regional groups have their eye on Tanzania and are worth watching. The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan Islamist rebel group that primarily operates in eastern Congo, has broadened its

outreach to include Tanzania (even featuring a Tanzanian recruit in one of its videos), and its founder Jamil Mukulu was arrested in Tanzania in 2015 before being extradited back to Uganda.<sup>22</sup> It is unclear to what degree this outreach has been successful, and the ADF at the moment remains confined to eastern Congo, especially around Beni. Of greater concern is the rising Islamist violence happening across Tanzania's southern border in the northern Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique, wherein a group calling itself Ansar al-Sunna has perpetrated dozens of attacks to date.<sup>23</sup> Experts speculate that the group harkens back to the teachings of radical Kenyan *imam* Aboud Rogo Mohammed, whose followers fled Kenya to Kibiti, Tanzania after he was killed in 2012.<sup>24</sup> The group is thought to have some Tanzanian followers, including links to radical elements in Tanzania and other countries.<sup>25</sup> In 2018, for example, nearly fifty Tanzanians were arrested in a sweep by Mozambican security forces of suspected Ansar al-Sunna militants; the suspects will be tried in Mozambique.<sup>26</sup>

Tanzanian authorities also disclosed that more than sixty people attempting to cross into Mozambique were arrested in January 2018, followed by more than a hundred more in October of the same year. The intent of those arrested is unclear.<sup>27</sup> The Tanzanian government has attempted to link the suspected militants to a series of attacks on local officials and police stations that took place in Tanzania's Pwani region between 2016 and 2017, though at the time the Tanzanian government rejected religion as a motivating factor in those attacks.<sup>28</sup> The government's brutal security response to those attacks, according to activists, concentrated in and around Kibiti and led to dozens of deaths and hundreds of arrests, in some cases leading to imprisonment without charge for extended periods of time.<sup>29</sup>

The potential for volatility and radicalization has traditionally been higher in Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous archipelago situated off the northeastern Tanzanian coast. The islands are majority Muslim, and thus constitute a prime target for radical figures like Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda, who has been in and out of prison for charges ranging from inciting violence to trespassing.<sup>30</sup> Ponda has led a smattering of Islamist organizations, including *Simba wa Mungu* (God's Lion) and the Council of Islamic Organizations, which in the past has forcibly taken over mosques in Dar es Salaam and violently targeted tourists.<sup>31</sup> He preaches *jihadi* Islamism and at one point reportedly enjoyed ties with al-Qaeda officials.<sup>32</sup>

The Zanzibari organization UAMSHO (the Association for Islamic Mobilization and Propagation, and also the Swahili word for "Awakening") first began offering public lectures on Islam in the 1990s and later expanded into the sphere of Muslim rights.<sup>33</sup> Its stated goals are to increase the standard of living for Muslims in Zanzibar and to ultimately achieve Zanzibari independence.<sup>34</sup> UAMSHO's supporters have accused the government of intervening in religious affairs in violation of Article 19 of the Constitution, and they claim that government corruption has led to the moral decline of the country. Lax enforcement of Tanzanian laws regulating dress and alcohol—especially in Zanzibar, where local Muslims complain that foreign tourists flout local laws and Islamic customs—remains a grievance.<sup>35</sup>

In 2012, protests following the arrest of some thirty UAMSHO members resulted in the destruction of two churches in Zanzibar. According to Zanzibari police, UAMSHO "was responsible for inciting these riots"—a charge the group denied.<sup>36</sup> In August 2013, the group was linked to outbreaks of violence, including acid attacks as well as religiously motivated abductions, rioting, and arson.<sup>37</sup> UAMSHO's popularity reportedly rose after the formation of the 2010 government of national unity (a coalition between the ruling CCM and opposition CUF in Zanzibar), which to many Zanzibaris showed the bankrupt nature of their political system, though most of its leaders have been in prison and awaiting trial since 2013.<sup>38</sup>

The Ansar Muslim Youth Center (AMYC), based in Tanzania's Tanga region, is also potentially important. Thought to be led by Sheikh Salim Abdulrahim Barahiyan, the organization began as an al-Qaeda-linked group before aligning itself with al-Shabaab and al-Hijra. Its goal is to "promote moral reform through the propagation of Salafi Islam," and the group exercises considerable influence over a large network of mosques and religious schools in the country.<sup>39</sup> While it has been quiet in recent years, the AMYC's danger lies in its network, through which it has close relations with hardline Islamic clerics,

financiers, and recruiters, and has reportedly offered safe haven to jihadists passing through Tanzania.<sup>40</sup>

In the past, expatriate Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia have been active in Muslim charitable organizations and in schools. They also finance university scholarships for Muslim Tanzanians, who often return from their studies abroad with a Wahhabi interpretation of Islam that clashes with the localized Tanzanian practice.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Wahhabi-style fundamentalists have, on occasion, taken over 30 of the 487 mosques in Dar es Salaam, bombed bars, and beaten women who go out without being fully covered.<sup>42</sup>

Of late, Tanzania has been affected by the rising instability in neighboring Mozambique, which is in the throes of an Islamist insurgency with links to the Islamic State terror group. For instance, on October 14, 2020, approximately 300 militants from Mozambique attacked a village in Tanzania, killing some twenty people.<sup>43</sup> That same month, the Islamic state issued a statement declaring that its fighters had burned three villages inhabited by Christians along the Tanzania-Mozambique border.<sup>44</sup> Residents of northern Mozambique have sought refuge from the violence, but Tanzania has not allowed them to cross over the border into its territory.<sup>45</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As of 2021, Tanzania's population is approximately 62 million. Around two-thirds of the population is Christian, around one-third Muslim, and the remainder is animistic. Zanzibar is almost fully Muslim.<sup>46</sup> The Christian population dominates the southwest and north-central areas of the country. Many Tanzanian Muslims live along the pre-colonial and colonial trade routes. The Zanzibar islands, which once served as the hub of pre-colonial trade, now have a population of roughly 1.3 million, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslim.<sup>47</sup> In the traditional centers of Swahili culture along the coast, Muslims adhere to Sunni Islam, though a sizable minority of Tanzania's Muslims identify as Shi'a.<sup>48</sup>

Tanzania's long-simmering conflict is the political struggle between the Tanzanian mainland and Zanzibar, which are separate former dependencies of Britain. Despite efforts to tie Zanzibar to the mainland, separatist sentiments never died in the islands.<sup>49</sup> Because many Zanzibaris identify culturally with their alleged Arab ancestry from across the Indian Ocean, rather than the African mainland, the potential for Zanzibari sovereignty remains a political issue linked to religious tensions and thus relevant to the question of the spread of radical Islam.

On the Zanzibar islands, Muslim religious scholars are becoming more influential in dictating social behavior, such as enforcing a dress code and attempting to shut down establishments that serve alcohol. High levels of poverty and feelings of marginalization at the hands of the mainland government on the islands continue to contribute to political discontent, especially among young people.<sup>50</sup> Zanzibar, which fared poorly from the economic liberalization of the 1990s, has fallen behind the mainland in economic growth, and its Western-focused tourist industry is small and fragile.<sup>51</sup> Pemba's dissatisfied population is likely even more vulnerable to radicalization than residents of the mainland.

For nearly four decades, wealthy Gulf donors have funded Zanzibar's mosques, *madrassas*, health clinics, and secondary schools, as well as some scholarships to study in Sudan or Saudi Arabia.<sup>52</sup> Two of Zanzibar's universities are Islamic, funded by Saudi Arabians and Kuwaitis. The amount of money provided from abroad is formidable; a 2012 study estimated that Saudi Arabia was spending \$1 million annually on religious institutions—including schools, radio stations, and mosques—in Zanzibar.<sup>53</sup> There is as yet no definitive indication that this pattern has changed.

Tanzania is undergoing an Islamic "revival," one spawned by a set of interrelated factors.<sup>54</sup> First, the country's economic and political opening in the 1990s codified protections of association and assembly, leading new non-governmental organizations to flourish.<sup>55</sup> Second, Islamist organizations took advantage of this opening to agitate for political causes,<sup>56</sup> particularly those needs not being met by the state. The increasing availability of Islamic materials and media in multiple languages enables Tanzanian Muslims to "individualize" their religion.<sup>57</sup> Lastly, these political realities are exacerbated by Tanzania's economic



woes, as high growth rates and government services have failed to keep up with an even higher population growth rate. This translates to a \$3,200 per capita GDP, with a large percentage of the population living below the poverty line.<sup>58</sup>

The country's Islamic revival thus faces competing narratives. On the one hand, Muslim traditions are threatened by a secular state as well as the "onslaught and failure" of Western values,<sup>59</sup> requiring a return to the "basics" to protect Islam.<sup>60</sup> In Zanzibar, this revival has focused primarily on *munafikun* ("Muslims in name only") and Sufis, while on the mainland the revival has targeted Christians. The goal of these groups is to address what is viewed as state failure in governance and the provision of services, which is especially tangible among Muslim communities. At the same time, however, this revival clashes with the highly localized and individual practice of Islam that has flourished in Tanzania for decades.

Yet, in the past decade, a serious political challenge has emerged. In addition to a general increase in political and sectarian tensions (worsened by disagreements like the one over the disputed Zanzibar elections), groups like al-Shabaab and ISIS have increasingly appealed to Tanzania's disaffected Muslims—many of whom are young men. In May 2016, Defense Minister Hussein Mwinyi warned about the radicalization of young Tanzanians and his concern that foreign recruits who fought for al-Shabaab or ISIS could return to Tanzania (al-Shabaab has been recruiting Tanzanians through materials in Kiswahili and Arabic since at least 2010<sup>61</sup>). However, the government's response to date has primarily been through law enforcement or intelligence gathering rather than community-level engagement.<sup>62</sup> Complicating the picture of Islamism in Tanzania is the government's tendency to conflate crime, political violence, and terrorism; the same incident is either not well reported (often due to media self-censorship) or reported in multiple ways, making it difficult to assess the degree to which radical ideologies influenced various events.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The practice of Islam in Tanzania remains highly localized, though a path exists for literal and politicized interpretations of Islam—particularly those supported by foreign Gulf state donors—to capitalize on local grievances and reinterpret them as a source of Muslim-Christian tensions. While anti-Christian sentiment thus far has not instigated a wave of Islamist radicalism throughout the rest of the population, the issues of Zanzibari sovereignty and government repression (in addition to perceptions that Tanzanian Muslims are already disadvantaged) are central to the problem of this potentially violent reframing.

Tanganyika (the predecessor to Tanzania) came into being after achieving independence from Britain in 1962. Zanzibar achieved independence shortly thereafter, in 1963. In the election that followed, the Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP) coalition (generally representing the islands' Arab population) narrowly defeated the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP), which represented the African "labor" class. Subsequently, an uprising of laborers and former soldiers mushroomed into the anti-Arab Zanzibari Revolution of 1964, which overthrew the ZNP government, the Sultan, the Arab elite, and the whole enterprise of constitutional monarchy.<sup>63</sup> Abeid Karume, the leader of the ASP coalition, ruled by decree, warding off any challenges to the new regime. Three months later, Karume and Tanganyikan President Julius Nyerere united Zanzibar and Tanganyika into Tanzania. The rapid pace and questionable constitutionality of these origins provides a backdrop to growing demands for full autonomy in Zanzibar, and is frequently linked to the differing ethnic and religious composition of the islands' population.

During the early years of one-party socialist rule, President Nyerere insisted on creating a nation without racial or religious divisions.<sup>64</sup> The demise of *ujamaa* ("community") socialism in the 1980s, as well as the rise of the multi-party system, permitted region and religion to divide the population, frustrating Nyerere's plans. Today, ethnic differences and overlapping religions have become salient rallying points in the search for the "true" identity of Zanzibar and have faint echoes on the mainland. The idea of full Zanzibari autonomy was first raised in 1994, but Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the ruling party since

1963, has consistently rejected the notion.<sup>65</sup>

In Tanzania, religion has taken a back seat to the unifying nationalist agenda of the CCM. In one notable exception, as a response to transferring control of the nation's education and health administration to the Catholic Church in 1992, the Council for the Propagation of the Quran (commonly known as "Balukta") accused the Tanzanian government's National Muslim Organization (Bakwata) of corruption, briefly seizing its headquarters in protest. Balukta was Tanzania's first militant Islamist group, but it did not last long. President Ali Hassan Mwinyi expelled them from the Bakwata headquarters, and the group was banned in 1993.<sup>66</sup> Since then, most Islamists have tended to be critical of anti-government fundamentalists.

The CCM faces an ongoing challenge from the Zanzibar-based Civic United Front (CUF). A minority party whose various elements have professed their goal to be to "release Tanzanian society from the dictatorship of Christianity,"<sup>67</sup> the CUF's primary constituents are Zanzibaris of Arab descent. Although its supporters have clashed violently and repeatedly with police since 1995, the CUF historically has maintained that it does not support violence as a means of gaining power, favoring instead legitimate, democratic means. However, using violence as a means for establishing itself in Zanzibar, especially if the ongoing issues of political corruption and marginalization are not resolved, is an idea not totally dismissed.<sup>68</sup>

Tanzania held general elections in 2015 and, while the contest was considered well administered, the Zanzibar Electoral Commission annulled results on the island after the opposition was poised to win (the ruling CCM won handily on the mainland). The subsequent electoral standoff resulted in heightened tensions across Zanzibar; a series of subsequent IED attacks were assumed to be politically motivated. The election annulment effectively ended Zanzibar's government of national unity and simultaneously eliminated what many felt was a last legitimate and mainstream avenue for expressing discontent.<sup>69</sup> There is now a chance that frustrated Zanzibaris who feel that they have been ejected from mainstream politics will seek out more radical representation.

To many in Tanzania, political marginalization is a reality. Although the Tanzanian state is officially secular and its constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits religious political parties, smoldering tensions belie the effectiveness of this guarantee. Moderate groups, which offer no structural challenge to the system, are more likely to be candidates for co-optation, while radicals are forced to work outside the system. Thus, the government risks pushing Islamists in more radical directions through sheer clumsiness: its entrenched corruption, election rigging, and detentions and torture of opposition members dramatically exacerbate the perception of marginalization among moderates.

Since the end of socialist rule in the 1990s, Zanzibari Arabs have alleged that the government of Zanzibar (directed by the CCM) purposely discriminates against them, denying them access to government jobs, housing, and business licenses. Coastal Swahili and Arab populations that live on the mainland have often expressed similar concerns.<sup>70</sup> When the Tanzanian government signed "The Prevention of Terrorism Act" into law in December 2002 (in large part due to pressure from the United States), it prompted waves of criticism for specifically targeting Muslims.<sup>71</sup> Opponents of the law noted that it borrowed heavily from the U.S. Patriot Act, the British Prevention of Terrorism Act, and the Suppression of Terrorism Act of apartheid South Africa.<sup>72</sup> While Tanzania engages in counterterrorism coordination and training with bilateral and multilateral partners, the government continues a security-centric approach to terrorism with "little engagement or coordination with civil society."<sup>73</sup>

Finally, although Muslims have always held key governmental positions (and the presidency has unofficially rotated between a Christian and a Muslim), many Muslims perceive the governing elite as Christian, which contributes to feelings of marginalization. Frustrations with the state tend to manifest themselves in attacks upon Christians or Christian places of worship.<sup>74</sup> Additional dissatisfaction is aimed at the police, since in many Muslim areas, the police are often Christians that tend to disregard local customs and further alienate residents.

Tensions between Muslims and Christians, which rose parallel to an increase in political visibility and assertiveness of the Muslim community over the past decade, remained constant in 2019. The potential for divisive internal politics to presage violent and dangerous radicalization remains, and it is worsened by rapidly shrinking domestic space for political opposition and civil society groups. Although there has not been a major terror attack in Tanzania in years, the overall dynamic bears watching. Al-Shabaab's continued threat to Somalia, as well as the phenomenon of *Ansar al-Sunna* in Mozambique, means that Tanzania must also remain vigilant against radical external influences.

## ENDNOTES

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