

# The Role of the Mass Media in the Implementation of Tanzania's Foreign Policy: Reality and Prospects.

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## Abstract

This article surveys the relationship between the mass media and the government in Tanzania with respect to the implementation of the country's foreign policy. It argues that although there is a unanimous acknowledgement of mass media's role in the conduct of foreign affairs worldwide and even among Tanzania's leadership, a lingering suspicion of journalists persists among most government officials which makes them withhold vital information from the country's local mass media. It recommends, among other things, an open dialogue between the officials of the Foreign Ministry and the press in the effort to forge a working relationship that would facilitate wide debate in the conduct of foreign affairs and international issues as it is the case in a socialist democracy.

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## *Rôle des masses médias dans la politique extérieure de la Tanzanie: Réalités et Perspectives d'avenir.*

### **Résumé**

L'article fait un survol des relations entre les masses médias et le gouvernement en tanzanie vis-à-vis de l'exécution de la politique extérieure du pays. L'article soutient que bien qu'il y ait une reconnaissance unanime du rôle des masses médias dans la conduite des affaires de la politique extérieure aussi bien à travers le monde que parmi les autorités tanzaniennes, il ya une suspicion persistante chez la plupart des fonctionnaires du gouvernement qui fait qu'ils retiennent des informations vitales pour les masses médias locaux du pays. Il recommande entre autres choses, un dialogue ouvert entre les fonctionnaires du ministère des affaires étrangères et la presse, en vue de forger une relation qui pourrait faciliter un large débat dans la conduite des affaires étrangères et des problèmes internationaux ainsi que c'est le cas dans une vraie démocratie socialiste.



## Introduction

Almost every government today attaches specific importance to the role of the mass media in the conduct of its foreign policy. The complexities of international politics characterized, in recent decades, by the multiplication of actors in the international system have automatically led to an increasing role of information in international relations.

For instance, in the ideological and political sphere, it is no longer uncommon for governments to engage in overt foreign policy propaganda. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that over 80 countries today have radio stations broadcasting to listeners abroad. This is apart from propaganda disseminated through wire services and the print media.

In the United States, for example, foreign policy propaganda ranks high on the list of the U.S. government's priorities. The annual budget of the United States Information Agency (USIA), which co-ordinates U.S. foreign propaganda is close to one billion dollars. With 200 branches in 129 countries around the world, USIA is the biggest government propaganda organization in the world today.

Generally, the U.S. foreign policy propaganda and that of the other developed capitalist countries) is basically aimed at justifying and promoting their policies abroad economic or military and undermining the socialist system as a whole. One can cite the justification of the U.S. military invasion of Grenada in 1983 by the U.S. media and the active role played by the same media in the toppling of the Chilean government of Salvador Allende in 1973. In the latter case the U.S. media launched a vitriolic and vicious propaganda campaign against the Allende government immediately after it came to power in the early 1970s.

The arsenal of American propaganda, including leading newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Christian Science Monitor*, were mobilized against Chile especially after the government nationalized U.S.—based copper

multinational corporations operating in the country. The U.S. media deliberately portrayed a negative and perverted image of Chile which skewed reader perception on what was actually taking place there. This helped to shape an anti-Allende public opinion in the U.S. which was finally exploited by the U.S. government, through the CIA., to overthrow the popularly elected Allende government. This was in line with the U.S. foreign policy of protecting its so-called economic interests in Latin America.

On the other hand, in the socialist countries, the role of the mass media in foreign policy is organically linked with the promotion of the overall foreign policy principles of these countries which include the maintenance of world peace and security, peaceful co-existence, support for national liberation struggles, and the consolidation of socialist gains. One example of this is the current media support in almost all socialist countries for peace initiatives toward nuclear disarmament, especially the recently signed Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

Theoretically, the role of the mass media in the implementation of foreign policy of any country is mainly connected with the whole question of public opinion and the right of people to know what their government is doing in its foreign relations. This is primarily derived from the fact that the foreign policy of a country is normally formulated and conducted within the limits set by the actual, presumed, or potential demands of the public. In other words, public opinion constitutes one of the factors which a government takes into account when making its foreign policy decisions.

It follows, therefore, that government has the obligation to inform its people about its various commitments and activities in the international system with a view to gaining popular support for the realization of its foreign policy objectives. The people, on the other hand, have the right to monitor the behaviour of their government to ensure that it is in line with national aspirations. The mass media, being the principal channels for the articulation of public opinion, serve as an



important link between the government and the public. Additionally, the mass media have an added task of projecting the country's political image to the outside world. Hence the role of a country's mass media is as important in the successful implementation of foreign policy as it is in the realization of domestic policy.

It is specifically for this reason that nowadays diplomats frequently analyse the contents of the local media, especially the press, to gain additional information about official attitudes and the policies of a host country. This means that the media also serve as a barometer for gauging the behaviour of the host government on various local and international issues.

This paper makes a survey of the relationship between the mass media and the government in Tanzania with regard to foreign policy implementation. What role does the media play in the overall implementation of the country's foreign policy? Does the government's behaviour generally facilitate the work of the media in playing that role? This paper attempts to answer these questions and more.

## Tanzania's Foreign Policy

Conceptually, the role of the mass media in the implementation of Tanzania's foreign policy could only be understood in the context of the country's fundamental foreign policy principles which include equality, search for world peace and justice, non-alignment, African unity and African liberation (Mushi and Mathews 1981). And if we are to define foreign policy *a la* Mahendra (in Kumar 1982) as a thoughtout course of action for achieving objectives in foreign relations as dictated by national interest, then the above principles constitute, so to speak, the pedestal on which Tanzania's foreign policy is based.

These foreign policy principles mainly derive from the political programme of the Party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, of socialism and self-reliance. In other words, Tanzania's foreign policy is both a tool and an extension of the policy of socialism and self-reliance as enunciated in the 1967 Arusha Declaration. This

tallies with the conventional wisdom in international relations discourse that a country's foreign policy is mostly an extension of its domestic policy. In Tanzania this is reinforced by the fact that foreign policy is formulated by the Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) which also makes domestic policy decisions.

## The International System

Under normal circumstances, the behaviour of government in the international system should reflect the objectives of the political system at home. However, it is quite difficult to say for sure whether this normally happens, especially in international economic relations.

The problem arises when one considers the fact that the international environment in which the government operates is generally a hostile one. The relentless efforts to maintain the status quo mounted by the beneficiaries of the present international system dominated, as it were, by capitalist relations, is but one of the basic characteristics of this inherent hostility. Hence any attempt to bring changes in the international system as sought by Tanzania's foreign policy is automatically met with stiff resistance if not outright sabotage of the change inducers. The overthrow of progressive regimes in various parts of the world through imperialist engineered coups d'etat only shows the magnitude of the problem.

At the same time, the proliferation of actors in the global system in recent decades has further complicated the art of conducting foreign policy. Diplomats no longer confine themselves to political and security issues, but have to deal with the contentious multiple problems of international economic relations. In this task they are now joined by another set of actors comprising mainly government bureaucrats and parastatal executives. This means that the implementation of foreign policy has been diversified and is no longer the preserve of the career diplomat alone.

In this complex international milieu, the danger of temptation and detraction from one's national objectives and aspirations cannot, therefore, be ruled out. It is mainly for this reason and



the fact that successful implementation of foreign policy depends, to a larger extent, on popular support at home, that communication between the government and the public should be maintained. Indeed one variable that helps to measure the level of communication between the two sides is the mass media which are the principal channels through which communications from either side are received.

## Media—Government Relations in Tanzania

It is necessary to make a distinction between the media's relationship with the government as regards domestic affairs and their relationship concerning external matters. This distinction is important because, in reality, the government behaves differently towards the mass media on domestic issues as compared to foreign policy matters.

For example, while on matters of a domestic nature the government has been able to fully utilize the services of the national media for the mobilization of the people for various purposes, this is not always the case when it comes to foreign policy issues. In the latter case, the government's behaviour is somehow characterized by a certain measure of secrecy. No one disputes the right of any government to operate in secret, especially in view of the complexities of international politics. Indeed both the media and government in Tanzania share the common belief that some news must be withheld for public good. However, unnecessary or excessive secrecy can easily lead to the alienation of the government from the people and, worse, create an ill-informed public.

The secrecy now characterizing the government's behaviour with regard to foreign policy matters is mainly reinforced by the negative attitude with which some government and parastatal officials view the mass media in the country. These officials view media people with suspicion—a suspicion that seems to be asking the Ruskian question: whose side are you on? The media people are sometimes erroneously seen as being unpatriotic and, therefore, people who cannot be trusted. The result is that it is not uncommon for the media

people to be told by this or that public official that 'we don't run the government through the media'. And this is despite the fact that both the media and the government which is the principal owner of the media in Tanzania have the same goal of serving the people.

While it could be acknowledged that some local journalists in Tanzania are comparatively incompetent, it is erroneous to consider all media people as such. On the contrary, the country has some of the best journalists in terms of both professional excellence and ideological clarity. The unfortunate thing is that some of them are currently underutilized.

Equally important is the fact that even the incompetence of some journalists has something to do with the attitude of some public officials towards the media. The old saying that a reporter is no better than his sources is as valid today as it was two hundred years ago. A reporter can only write a good, balanced story if his source cooperates in providing the necessary information. If those who are occupying positions of authority in government and, therefore, are knowledge-able about certain issues including those on foreign policy objectives refuse to cooperate, the reporter will obviously either write a poor story out of the skeleton information at his disposal, or write no story at all. In both cases, the casualty is the public who will have been denied that information.

This, however, does not mean that the media are all-perfect. On the contrary, they have some imperfections. For instance, most Tanzanian journalists lack adequate professional training. As a result, the majority of them are jacks of all trades and masters of none. This, of course, negatively affects their professional performance. But these imperfections should not be the excuse for denying the public information on matters that directly or indirectly affect their well-being. Instead, efforts should be made to overcome those imperfections.

Furthermore, withholding information has the other effect of inhibiting the media from effectively projecting the country's image abroad for, as Party and government organs, the media are supposed to be the major instruments for projecting the



socialist aims of the country. To be able to perform such a task, the media must have the necessary information to write with authority as well on matters concerning foreign relations. Otherwise the media would be demagogic and parochial in their approach and less effective in projecting the country's socialist aims to the outside world.

## International Political Relations

The Tanzanian government appears to be more open to the media concerning its international political and cultural relations. The government is often more readily available to the media to comment on such issues as African liberation, African Unity, non-alignment and so forth. Furthermore, Mwalimu Nyerere often addressed the public on topical international issues. These have significantly helped to create an enlightened public opinion in the country especially on the question of African liberation on which Tanzania maintains an unequivocal stand.

As a result, there is strong public support for government decisions in this area. An example is the overwhelming mass support for the call by the Party to extend increased assistance to the people of Mozambique who are fighting South African-backed RENAMO bandits. No doubt such support greatly enhances the good political image of the country internationally and also helps to ease the task of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which, until recently, alone dealt with the country's international political affairs.

## International Economic Relations

On the other hand, the behaviour of the government in international economic relations is inadequately covered by the local media. Government activities in this important area are usually shrouded in secrecy making it quite difficult for the media to report them. The fact that several factor ministries and parastatal organizations are involved in the implementation of the country's foreign economic relations further complicates the matter (Mushi and Mathews 1981). In practice, it is very difficult to monitor the behaviour of these actors to see

whether it is in line with national interest or not. The recent revelations by a select Parliamentary probe committee on the activities of Dar Tadine Tanzania company in the country is a clear indication that the problem is real.

From a political perspective, this is not a healthy situation since it has far-reaching repercussions on the country's efforts to build socialism and self-reliance. This is borne by the fact that for a country like Tanzania, which seeks to build socialism, the management of its foreign economic relations is of crucial importance. Without this, the possibility of detraction and sabotage through economic corruption and manipulation by the opponents of socialism becomes almost unavoidable. By the same token, the country's foreign policy can only be effective if the country possesses a strong self-reliant economy (NEC 1987)

One would expect the local media to play a more dynamic watchdog role by pointing out any signs of detraction from the fundamental political philosophy guiding the conduct of the country's international economic relations. Yet, for various reasons, this has not been the case. The media's coverage of Tanzania's foreign economic relations continues to be characterized by a certain measure of timidity. For instance, although the country has increasingly depended on external aid for its development financing contrary to the stated policy of self-reliance, the media have almost been completely mum over the issue and have not questioned the political implications of such a trend vis-a-vis the country's long term objective of building socialism and self-reliance.

Surprisingly, much of their attention is given to official signing of aid agreements between the government and foreign countries or companies. Pictures showing foreign envoys signing agreements at the Treasury are almost a daily feature of the local press. This has unwittingly created a beggar image (for lack of a better nomenclature) of the country in the public mind and, at the same time, makes a mockery of the whole concept of self-reliance.



By doing this, the local press is unconsciously promoting the foreign policies of donor countries. The fact that the presence of a pressman at the signing ceremony at the Treasury has now been turned into a virtual ritual only helps to underline the importance which different nations attach to the role of the media in the promotion of their real or perceived foreign policy objectives.

## **Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs**

It is encouraging that the government seeks to increase the flow of information to the public on foreign policy issues. To that end, a Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs (PCFA) was formed in 1972 with the aim of using members of Parliament to disseminate information about trends in the country's foreign policy.

Although the role of the Committee is mainly advisory, it has the following functions:

- (i) To discuss and analyse strategies for the implementation of foreign policy decisions, and
- (ii) To inform the public about what is happening outside Tanzania's borders.

While it is difficult to tell exactly how effective the Committee has been in carrying out its first function, it is not so in the case of the second function. Evidence indicates that the Committee has been less effective in ensuring that the public is informed about what is happening outside the country's frontiers. This is clearly shown by the low level of foreign policy debates in Parliament (Mushi and Mathews 1981), especially on Tanzania's external economic relations. Implicitly, this reflects the lack of information at the disposal of the MPs on the country's foreign policy. Again the government is partly to blame for this state of affairs.

A recent study conducted on the role of the Committee has, for instance, indicated that the Committee's ineffectiveness in carrying out its functions has something to do with the large measure of secrecy with which decisions on foreign policy are

made and implemented. It concludes that, generally, foreign policy in the country is less open to public debate and scrutiny (Cheka 1985).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Efforts are still needed to enable the local media to play a more effective role in the implementation of Tanzania's foreign policy. Both the Party and government (as the principal owners of the media in the country) should create favourable conditions for the media to facilitates their work of projecting the country's foreign policy objectives to the outside world.

This is extremely important at this crucial historical juncture when the country is going through a transitional period towards socialism. It should be borne in mind that in any society the mass media, as ideological organs, normally function within the limits set by those who own and control them. Their effectiveness is always conditioned, if not determined, by the amount of support they get from their owners.

In the Tanzanian context, this means that the media's effectiveness in the implementation of the country's foreign policy depends, to a large extent, on the support of the Party and government. This is the inescapable truth.

Yet, to be meaningful, such support should transcended mere declared intentions, however good they are. Instead, support should be expressed in concrete terms.

As an ideological weapon in the hands of the Party and government committed to building socialism, the media should do away with formalism and, instead, play a more militant role by giving wide publicity to the construction of socialism. They should more persistently defend the cause of socialism than it is the case now.

Moreover, the current trend whereby the media have to wait for this or that government official to speak about a certain issue before they could editorially comment on it has killed the professional initiative of local journalists and seriously sapped their creativity.



In order to reverse this unhealthy trend and ensure that the national media play a more effective and positive role in the implementation of the Party's policy on foreign relations, the following measures are recommended:

1. The local media should be enabled to freely analyse and initiate debates on international issues which affect, directly or indirectly, the construction of socialism in the country;
2. Communication between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the mass media should be streamlined to ensure regular contact. This could be done by the introduction of monthly press briefings by the ministry to acquaint members of the media with both conceptual and practical trends in the country's foreign policy and position in topical international issues;
3. Public officials should be educated on the role of the mass media in the Tanzanian society, especially in the construction of socialism. This will help to eradicate the current suspicion of the media by some officials. Suspicion inhibits the work of the media and indirectly diminishes the social value of journalism in the country as a whole;
4. The discussion of foreign policy, especially the country's external economic relations in Parliament should be encouraged through the strengthening of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs (PCFA). This is because, Parliament is a vital forum through which the government can enlighten the public on a number of international issues;
5. Journalism training in the country should be upgraded to degree level. The present training offered at the Tanzania School of Journalism (TSJ) is professionally inadequate. It falls short of producing professionally competent journalists who can effectively face the challenge of journalism in a society like Tanzania which aspires to build socialism, since building socialism requires a new type of journalist, a journalist who is ideologically clear and capable of clearly comprehending the dynamics of social

change and wider global issues. This type of journalist has to be deliberately moulded through systematic training.

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