

Ujamaa – or African Socialism

Manning Marable

Throughout the 1970s, there was a large expatriate community of idealistic, young African Americans who lived and worked throughout Tanzania, and especially in its capital city, Dar Es Salaam. What attracted most of them to the East African country was a remarkable social experiment called “Ujamaa”, or “African Socialism”. The political architect of Ujamaa was Tanzania’s humble yet charismatic president, Julius K Nyerere, who was universally called “Mwalimu”, which in the Swahili language means “teacher”.

When Nyerere became president of what was then called independent Tanganyika in December, 1961, he was confronted with overwhelming challenges. Great Britain, the country’s ruling colonial power from 1919 until 1961, had devoted virtually no resources to building government-sponsored schools, hospitals, or social welfare programs. In a nation twice the size of California, there were fewer than one thousand miles of paved roads. The country’s major crops—coffee, sisal, tea and cotton—were produced for external markets, but agricultural production largely occurred on technologically-backward, single family farms, without tractors or modern agricultural equipment. Over 80 percent of the population worked in the agricultural sector, living in rural areas without electricity, irrigation, and schools.

Nyerere was determined to transform his nation’s poverty. Nyerere envisioned the construction of villages, “ujamaa vijijini”, where millions of small farmers and peasants would be relocated. Each village would have access to modern agricultural equipment, electricity, running water, and education. Because all of Tanganyika’s banks, large plantations, factories and private companies were owned by the British or Europeans, Nyerere called for their nationalization by the government. Nationalization, Nyerere believed, was the only means through which Africans could control their own economic affairs.

To inaugurate these bold policies, in 1967, the Tanzanian president delivered the “Arusha Declaration”, which committed the young nation to a policy of “Ujamaa”, or “African Socialism”. In Swahili, “Ujamaa” translates as “Familyhood”. Unlike Marxist socialism, Ujamaa was based on the African traditions of sharing, communal values, and self-reliance. Nyerere vigorously opposed class distinctions between the rich and the poor. He preached that all citizens had to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of the entire nation. Nyerere fought against government corruption, and set a personal example by living a frugal and modest life.

Perhaps Nyerere’s greatest contributions to the empowerment of Africans were his commitments to education and to Pan-Africanism. Nyerere, a former schoolteacher, understood that African people could never be truly free so long as they were illiterate. Therefore, Tanzania declared that a primary school-level education must be compulsory for all citizens. The nation invested millions of dollars into building secondary schools and a university. As a result, Tanzania has one of the highest literacy rates in the Third World. As of 2003, 86 percent of all males, and 71 percent of females, were literate in either Swahili or English.

Nyerere was also a committed “Pan-Africanist,” who believed that no African nation could be completely free so long as any part of the continent was dominated by white-minority rule. Under Nyerere, Dar Es Salaam became Africa’s headquarters for the global anti-apartheid movement, the struggle to destroy the oppressive, white dictatorship in South Africa. It was also home to the anti-Portuguese colonial struggles in neighboring Mozambique and Angola. In 1974, Tanzania hosted the “Sixth Pan-African Conference,” where hundreds of African Americans participated in its deliberations. These idealist actions by Nyerere earned him the implacable opposition from the US, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Foreign investment and loans were cut off, and Tanzania’s currency went into a freefall, plummeting in value.

By the early 1980s, other sources of opposition to Nyerere emerged. Tanzania’s small middle class, and more prosperous African farmers rejected both ujamaa and the collective villages. They wanted privatization, individually-owned farms and businesses, where they could enrich themselves. Tanzania also lacked the thousands of technicians, agronomists and educators necessary to run the government’s collective farms and nationalized businesses. Corruption also became a serious problem, as many members of the government’s ruling party, “Chama Cha Mapinduzi” (Party of the Revolution) used their positions for personal gain. By 1985, with Nyerere’s retirement from the presidency, Tanzania shifted away from ujamaa’s policies. State-owned companies were privatized, and the rural collective villages were disbanded.

Three decades ago, Tanzania’s major city, Dar Es Salaam, was still an overgrown small town, lacking the posh hotels and western investment of African metropolitan centers like Nairobi, Kenya or Cairo, Egypt. Today, Dar is a growing city of 2.6 million, with a score of luxury hotels and even casinos. Everywhere one looks, there is new construction for commercial enterprises. Nearly all of these new businesses are privately owned, or involve some kind of government-private corporate partnerships.

A typical example is the public-private partnership at the Kilimanjaro International Airport, near Arusha, Tanzania’s largest northern city. In 1998, the Kilimanjaro Airports Development Company (KADCO) was established, consisting of four partners: Madt MacDonald, a British firm, which owned 41 percent interest in the consortium; Infrastructure Fund of South Africa (30 percent); the Tanzanian government (24 percent); and a local firm, Inter Consult, Limited, at 5 percent. Since its founding, KADCO has invested roughly \$8 million into improving the airport’s facilities and operations. It has attracted international airlines to Kilimanjaro, greatly expanding tourism into Tanzania. Today, 650,000 tourists enter Tanzania annually, many thousands arriving at Kilimanjaro Airport. However, KADCO’s “concession” on Kilimanjaro Airport, which runs until 2023, means that British and South African interests will continue to largely control Tanzania’s second-largest international airport for years to come.

Visiting Tanzania today also provides a unique window into humanity’s past. About 10 miles across the largest calderas in the world the Ngorongora Crater contains over 30,000 elephants, lions, wildbeasts, zebras and other wild animals.

In recent years, the Tanzanian government has done an excellent job stamping out poachers who would slaughter protected wild animals. Tourism now represents approximately 16 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. Government officials project that by 2010 perhaps 25 percent of Tanzania’s GDP will be based on tourism.

Under the pressure of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, Tanzania's leaders after Julius Nyerere have largely capitulated to external demands for privatization. Nyerere's immediate successor as president, AN Hasan Mwinyi, dismantled the government-run agricultural cooperatives, and sought to increase foreign investment. But the United States, and other critics weren't satisfied. They demanded that Tanzania get rid of its one-party government, and establish "free elections." In 1992, Tanzania complied, amending the country's constitution to create a multi-party, electoral system. In October, 1995, the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party's candidate, Benjamin Mkapa, won the presidency, but the CCM party only received 62 percent of the national vote.

In neighboring Zanzibar, which in 1964 merged with then-Tanganyika, to create the independent Tanzania, most election observers believed that the opposition party, the "Civic United Front," defeated the CCM. Through election fraud, CCM was awarded the victory. Protests ensued, and most foreign investment and aid programs to Zanzibar ground to a halt for years. Five years later, in the 2000 elections, the Civic United Front again charged fraud, sparking protests culminating in several dozen deaths.

Under Mkapa's presidency, Tanzania's economy rebounded. Between 2000 and 2006, Tanzania's annual gross domestic produce averaged 5.8 percent, one of Africa's highest growth rates. As of 2005, Tanzania's exports amounted to \$1.6 billion, with most of its trade shipped to China (10.2 percent), Canada (8.6 percent), India (7.3 percent), the Netherlands (5.2 percent), and Japan (5 percent). Unfortunately, like the United States, Tanzania imports far more goods—\$2.4 billion in 2005 —than it exports, creating a serious trade deficit. Most of Tanzania's imports, consisting mainly of consumer goods, transportation equipment and machines, come from South Africa (12.2 percent), China (9.6 percent), and India (7 percent).

Despite recent economic progress, Tanzania has serious social and economic problems. The strong commitment to literacy and universal education embodied by Tanzania's first president, Julius K Nyerere, no longer exists.

Like the rest of Africa, Tanzania's economic development and future are compromised by serious healthcare problems. The median life expectancy at birth in Tanzania is only 45 years for males, and 46.4 years for females. That's because infant mortality rates remain astronomically high—about 106 deaths per one thousand live births for males, and 87 deaths per one thousand live births for females. HIV/AIDS claims over 150,000 deaths annually, in a nation of only 40 million. About 2 million Tanzanians are estimated to be HIV-positive or to have AIDS.

Nyerere's spirit of "ujamaa"— "familyhood"—still exists, in thousands of Tanzanian villages, small towns and urban centers, where African people continue to struggle and sacrifice to enhance their children's lives, and to build a newer, stronger nation. Whether that can be accomplished through economic privatization "partnerships" and "neoliberal" policies recommended by the US and international banks, however, remains to be seen. ❄️❄️❄️