



Whose Ballot?

How Tanzanian Youth Confront Corruption During Election Cycles

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Abstract

Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with its median age being 18-19 years old (Al Jazeera, 2025). Despite these numbers, many African countries are governed by political elites who are significantly older than the populations they lead. State-controlled media across Africa often rely on traditional media channels to reinforce state-informed dominant ideologies. These ideologies portray Africa's youth as rebellious, violent political disruptors rather than legitimate political actors. Such narratives contribute to the continued marginalization of African youth, excluding them from political, social, and economic processes and denying them meaningful opportunities to shape their own futures. It is precisely this exclusion that has pushed Africa's youth to voice their concerns on social media platforms. In this article, I draw on postcolonial theoretical frameworks and Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject* to examine how Tanzanian youth confront corruption, using social media platforms as alternative channels of political expression. Monitoring social media content during election cycles, I argue that Tanzania's youth produce counter-narratives, mobilize political movements, and raise global awareness of election corruption and mismanagement through online platforms.

Keywords

Content Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Africa, Tanzania, Election, Postcolonialism, Activism, African Politics, Social Media, Digital Activism

Introduction

Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with its median age being 18–19 years old (Al Jazeera, 2025). Yet despite these numbers, many African countries are governed by political elites who are significantly older than the populations they lead. State-controlled media across Africa often rely on traditional media channels to reinforce state-informed dominant ideologies. These ideologies portray Africa's youth as rebellious, violent political disruptors rather than legitimate political actors. Such hegemonic discourse is intensified during election cycles, where public dissatisfaction and demands for change are most intense. Such narratives contribute to the continued marginalization of African youth, excluding them from political, social, and economic processes and denying them meaningful opportunities to shape their own futures. It is precisely this exclusion that has pushed Africa's new generation, Gen Z, to voice their concerns on digital platforms. Instead of waiting for corrupt or unresponsive governments to hear them, young Africans are taking to social media to tell their own stories. The case of Tanzania is not any different. Many young people in the country face the same continental patterns of political marginalization and economic hardship, much of it driven by government corruption and mismanagement. Tanzanian youth confront corruption during election cycles by creating alternative channels of political expression on social media platforms. Despite facing state repression, they actively use social media platforms to produce counter-narratives, mobilize political movements, and raise global awareness. As such, Tanzanian youth are diligently changing the country's political climate, asserting their agency, exposing government corruption, and redefining national democratic identity.

The Myth of Democracy in Tanzania

While Tanzania presents itself as a peaceful and progressive democratic state, its reality depicts a different story. Tanzanian state-controlled media deploys colonial-influenced narratives of discipline, respectability, and order to control its citizens. Since 1995, Tanzania has held six presidential elections without descending into large-scale electoral violence (Ersia, 2025). However, since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1992 (Ersia, 2025), the ruling party—Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM)—has increasingly relied on authoritarian measures to suppress and control its citizens. It has systematically weakened opposition parties, targeted journalists, civilians, and activists through arrests and violence, and imposed media censorship, and

surveillance (Ersia, 2025). Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani theorizes that the authoritarian governance of East African countries mimics the power dynamics of colonial Africa (Ersia, 2025). He argues that state governance operates with a paternalistic and top-down approach, treating its people more as subjects to be managed than citizens with inherent rights (Ersia, 2025). This structure thereby reproduces the coercive and controlling style of governance established during colonial rule, resulting in states that are formally democratic but covertly authoritarian (Ersia, 2025). The Tanzanian government's efforts to restrict political participation reflect the enduring colonial legacy of corrupt governance, particularly within media and digital spaces. Media technologies play a central role in shaping social environments—they influence how individuals process information, interpret the world, and construct social structures, norms, attitudes, and beliefs (Hoelscher & Ott, 2023). Given this, it is unsurprising that the Tanzanian government seeks to assert control over media ecologies as digital spaces become a dynamic environment where different actors struggle among competing voices to shape public perception. When faced with resistance, criticism, and dissatisfaction by young people on media platforms, the government has taken brutal and harsh actions against young Tanzanians online. Just days before the 2025 election, the Tanzanian government enacted a nationwide internet blackout, aiming to isolate citizens, suppress potential protests, and limit both resistance and international scrutiny (OkayAfrica, 2025).

Youth Visibility and the Politics of Presence in Digital Spaces

Despite years of repression, strict surveillance, and political exclusion, Tanzanian youth have used social media platforms to produce counter-narratives, mobilize grassroots action, and raise global awareness during election cycles. Young people online have taken it upon themselves to challenge, resist, and assert their agency in political systems through social media, producing counter-narratives that oppose dominant hegemonic discourse.

Satire, Solidarity, and the Radical Possibility of Joy

Rather than staying complicit to their oppressors, youth online use short-form video platforms, like TikTok and Instagram, to create humorous and satirical content, helping them make sense of their realities and find strength and solidarity in their oppression. State-owned and controlled media often suppresses dissenting voices in fear of their regime losing dominant

narrative legitimacy. Humour, however, functions as a powerful counter-strategy because its subjectivity makes it difficult for governments to gatekeep and control. Political messages embedded in satire take complex issues—such as electoral corruption—and make them more accessible for viewers to discuss and engage with. The infamous #nywinywinywchallenge became a satirical response to President Samia Suluhu Hassan's governance. TikTok and Instagram users posted videos of themselves dancing to an audio clip from the president's speech on voter turnout. In the clip, she declares, "*Hakutakuwa na nywinywi wala nywinywinywi...*" (Hamisi, 2025, 00:43), meaning there will be no noise, referring to protesting, resistance, or upset, during the election process. Young people mocked the irony of this statement, especially as distrust, anger, and political tension were at their peak. Influencers such as Jennifer 'Niffer' Jovin, known online as Niffer Cosmetics, joined in on the trend and was subsequently arrested and charged with treason (Magai & Jumanne, 2025). Her arrest only amplified the challenge across the continent, with users from Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and other countries participating in the dance as an act of solidarity and digital resistance (See Figure 1).

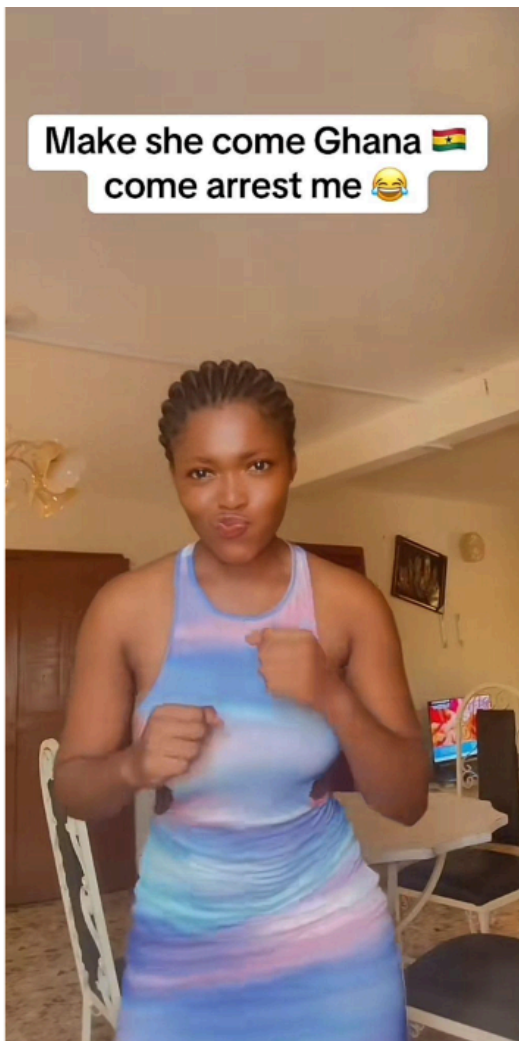


Figure 1. Screenshot from *the #Nywinywinywi Challenge on TikTok*. This screenshot illustrates the intercontinental participation in the Nywi Nywi trend. From *TikTok* [video], by Ekpoilaku Bomo, 2025. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSfw5hbML/>

Similarly, memes and satirical images circulated widely in response to corrupt governance. AI-generated photos, edited pictures, and humorous video clips spread online in Tanzania and the diaspora abroad (See Figure 2). In engaging with satirical content, users online turned humour into an effective tool of resistance against their oppressors.

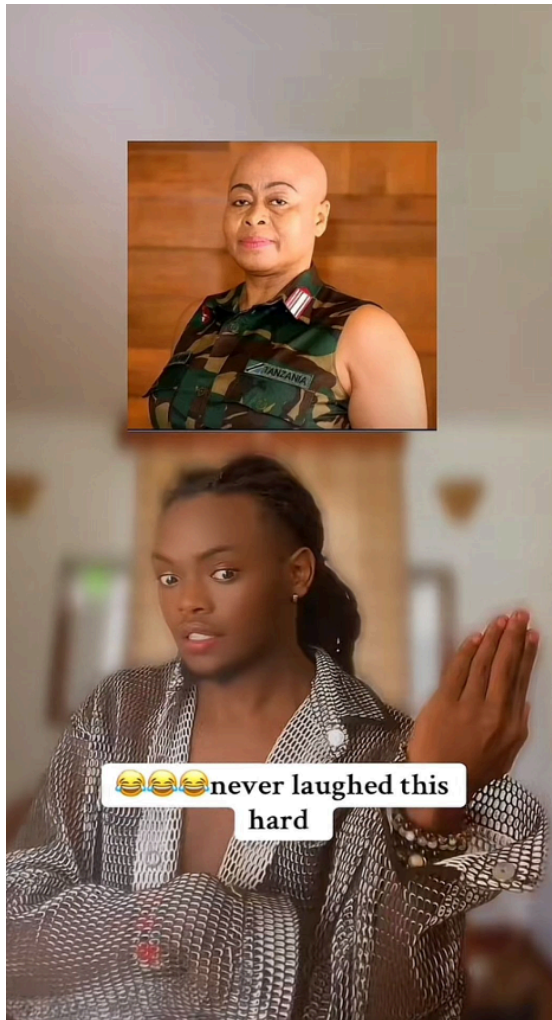


Figure 2. *Screenshot of a TikTok with Satirical Images of President Samia Suluhu.* This screenshot uses satirical imagery as a political critique of Tanzania's Governance. From *TikTok* [Video] by Jabar Shawn, 2025.

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSfw55n6t/>

Hashtag Citizenship and Online Mobilization

During Tanzania's independence, mobilization and grassroots activism relied heavily on cultural spaces for political outreach (Natterman, 2022). However, the emergence of modern media technologies has transformed traditional grassroots methods into powerful tools for organizing, coordinating, and amplifying political messaging. Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram have become primary organizing platforms where young protesters can coordinate

protest locations, share safety information in real-time, and amplify their political demands. The hashtag #Maandamano—originally coined by young Kenyans in response to government corruption—has become a central organizing tool for digital activism in Tanzania. The word *Maandamano* in Swahili means to protest or to demonstrate, and holds significance for many young East Africans. The hashtag has been used to document demonstrations, circulate calls for mobilization and call for political change. Clips on TikTok under the hashtag #Maandamano document young Tanzanians taking to the streets, waving flags, chanting slogans such as *Suluhu must go*, and captioning their posts with messages like *No Reform, No Election* (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Screenshot of a TikTok Video using the hashtag #Maandamano*. This screenshot is from the Namanga One-Stop Border Post, where Kenyans and Tanzanians were protesting election results. From *TikTok* [video] by Signal Lost, 2025. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSfwutuTc/>



The use of #Maandamano demonstrates how Tanzanians bypass traditional media gatekeepers by creating an alternative counter-public space to channel alternative political expression online. The visibility of #Maandamano content makes it difficult for the government to fully suppress dissent, as the digital footprint of protests circulates beyond Tanzania's borders, drawing regional and international attention. Young Tanzanians have effectively used social media as a tool to give voice to the 'subaltern' and have their voices represented and heard. They

have become producers of their own content unhindered by mainstream state-controlled media. They have created, disseminated, and circulated counter-narratives that actively challenge dominant hegemonic ideologies, while simultaneously using these digital counter-public spaces to mobilize and organize collective actions in response to their grievances.

From Chawacracy to Meritocracy

Tanzanian youth-led digital activism is reshaping the country's political landscape. By utilizing media platforms, young Tanzanians assert their political agency, redefine national democratic identity, and challenge the enduring legacies of colonial governance and authoritarian control. Online platforms have provided Tanzanians with a space to articulate their realities and demand new approaches to politics. Activists, scholars, and youth leaders have developed their own political thought—most notably through the term *Chawacracy*. Derived from the Swahili word for lice, *Chawacracy* describes a system in which power is maintained through flattery rather than skill or merit (DW The 77 Percent, 2025). In practice, it privileges certain individuals, groups, and communities while marginalizing others (DW The 77 Percent, 2025). *Chawacracy*, in several ways, replicates the governing methods imposed by colonial authorities during Africa's colonial period. Colonial powers often favoured certain groups, commanded respect from subjects, and demanded control and supremacy over any opposing parties (Ersia, 2025). The demands of young people are actively transforming *chawacracy* into meritocracy, whereby political candidates, citizens, and leadership are elected based on their merit rather than nepotism or proximity to power. In response to these demands, many users on media platforms have challenged *chawacracy* by boycotting artists, influencers, politicians, and social elites. Famous musician Diamond Platnumz faced significant backlash online from young Tanzanians for endorsing President Suluhi's campaign (Ajon, 2025). Becoming the face of Tanzania's public anger, Diamond deleted all posts that endorsed the CCM party and fled to Kenya in fear of protest (Ajon, 2025). As such, online activism did more than just criticize individual social elites; it disrupted the social and political hierarchies that sustain *Chawacracy*. By targeting influential figures like Diamond Platnumz, youth expose the complicity of cultural and social elites in maintaining an unequal political system.

Conclusion

Tanzanian youth-led digital activism demonstrates the power of Gen Z to challenge entrenched political hierarchies, authoritarian governance, and the lingering legacies of colonial rule. Through humour, hashtags, and coordinated online campaigns, young Tanzanians have created alternative public spaces where they can produce counter-narratives, mobilize collective action, and demand accountability from political leaders. By critiquing systems like Chawacracry and holding cultural and political elites accountable, youth not only contest individual acts of corruption but also disrupt the structural inequalities that mirror colonial governance. Tanzanian youth are redefining what it means to participate in democracy, asserting that political legitimacy should derive from merit, transparency, and citizen involvement rather than nepotism, flattery, or inherited power. Their activism illustrates how Africa's youngest generation is reshaping political discourse across the continent, creating a new model of civic engagement that proves that the future of Africa lies in the hands of the youth.

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