

Research Article

Police Interference in Opposition Activities in Tanzania

Gasper Mpehongwa^{1,*} , Brightius Titus² 

¹Department of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Kilimanjaro Christian University College, Moshi, Tanzania

²Department of Security Studies, Institute of Accountancy, Arusha, Tanzania

Abstract

Arbitrary police interference in opposition activities in Tanzania has been a significant public concern since the re-introduction of multi-party democracy in the early 1990s. Local and international human rights bodies have frequently reported on the suppression of opposition activities, especially during the election periods. However, there is no comprehensive analysis of the legal and political factors behind these actions and their broader implications for Tanzania's future policy and governance. Using a cross-sectional design, this paper therefore investigated the causes of police force interference in opposition political rallies in Tanzania, its impact, and the challenges facing the police force in discharging its constitutional mandates. Primary and secondary data were used to gather relevant information. Findings show that police interference is primarily motivated by political agendas, with the ruling party leveraging law enforcement as a mechanism to suppress dissent and maintain control over the political landscape. The selective enforcement of laws, particularly the Public Order Act 1983, severely restricted the operational space for opposition parties and diminished democratic participation. These findings imply that; constant police interferences erode public trust in the police thus compromise its ability to discharge its constitutional mandates in a manner that respects civil liberties. Also, shrinks democratic space which is detrimental for national development. This paper recommends a reevaluation of the relationship between politics and policing in Tanzania to ensure that the police fulfill their role as impartial enforcers of the law and safeguard the democratic rights of all citizens.

Keywords

Police Interference, Opposition Political Activities, Democracy

1. Introduction

Tanzania re-introduced multiparty democracy after 27 years of single party system through constitutional amendment on 1st July 1992. The amendment recognized and allowed political parties to operate [4]. Since then, 19 political parties have been registered and operational. However, since police force has been accused of interfering in opposition political activities as if they are illegal. Various national and international bodies such as Amnesty International and Hu-

man Rights Watch have frequently reported on the suppression of opposition activities, especially during the election periods [9, 16]. The interference includes the banning of rallies, arbitrary arrest of opposition leaders, and the use of excessive force to disperse gatherings [2, 3].

Existing research and reports by human rights organizations have documented instances of such interference, often citing legal and political justifications provided by the au-

*Corresponding author: gasper.mpehongwa@kcmuco.ac.tz (Gasper Mpehongwa)

Received: 28 January 2025; **Accepted:** 14 February 2025; **Published:** 26 February 2025



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

thorities [2]. However, these justifications have been widely criticized for being overly broad and potentially abused to stifle legitimate political activities.

The Tanzanian police have often invoked legal provisions, such as those within the Public Order Act of 1983 and the Political Parties Act, of 2019 to justify their actions [9]. Additionally, political motivations, particularly the intention to sustain the ruling party's dominance, have been proposed as key drivers of this interference [8].

This paper sought to assess the causes and the implications of police interference in opposition rallies activities. Specifically, it addressed two research objectives;

1. Examine the causes of police force interference in opposition political rallies in Tanzania
2. Identify the challenges facing the police force interference in opposition political rallies in Tanzania

2. Materials and Methods

The study employed cross-sectional design which allowed the collection of large amounts of data at one point in time. Two major methods of data collecting were used; documentary review and in-depth interviews for key informants. Documentary reviews involved the analysis of the Constitution of Tanzania (1977), the Public Order Act (1983), the Political Parties Act Cap 258 R. E. 2019, and the Police General Orders (PGOs) among others. Also, landmark cases were revised. Key informants purposively selected based on their experience, such as senior police officers, human rights lawyers, and journalists who were identified through non-probability were interviewed. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Causes of Police Interference in Opposition Political Rallies in Tanzania

The causes of police force interferences in opposition political activities in Tanzania was investigated using three methods of data collections; in-depth interviews of key informants, documentary reviews, and observations. Results show that Public Order Act [1983] and the Political Parties Act [11] contained clauses that empowered authorities to restrict public gatherings. The Public Order Act allows police discretion to deny permits for rallies based on perceived threats to public order, a power frequently applied to opposition events. The Political Parties Act further limits opposition activities by setting strict requirements for party gatherings. Additionally, Police General Orders (PGOs) reinforced these restrictions, with PGOs number 231 and 232 outlining police protocols for public order that are interpreted to restrict opposition movements. Judicial rulings, such as *Tanganyika Law Society v. Inspector General of Police [2019]* and *Julius*

Mtatiro v. Attorney General [2017], questioned the constitutionality of such actions. The judiciary's mixed rulings exposed the complex interplay between the law and political pressure, where the legal framework appeared inconsistently applied to opposition and ruling party gatherings.

Hansard Reports from the Parliament of Tanzania, Session 10, October 2017, p. 35, reveals political narratives designed to frame opposition gatherings as threats to stability. This rhetoric aligns with the government's strategy of portraying any form of opposition as a risk to national cohesion, even when legal frameworks like the Public Order Act [10] do not necessarily support such claims. In such cases, state actors often invoke loosely interpreted security concerns to legitimize politically motivated actions. This manipulation of security discourse is common in states seeking to limit political pluralism, particularly when faced with rising opposition [14].

Mgaya [6] argues that the police have increasingly acted in the ruling party's interests rather than impartially enforcing the law. Mbunda [5] describes this shift: "*The police force has been transformed into a tool for silencing dissent, where their role is more about enforcing political will than protecting citizens' rights*" This is contrary to basic principles guiding police force as stipulated under General Police Orders #1 section 1 (a) which states "*all police officers are required to operate on the principle that Tanzania is a democratic country and is governed by the principles of the rule of law*". Further, Kapilima [2] notes that the Public Order Act [1983] has been weaponized to stifle opposition, especially regarding political assemblies. He argues, "*The legal framework surrounding public gatherings is not just about maintaining order; it has become a means to suppress opposition and control political discourse*".

Results from observations show that during opposition political rallies police exercise heightened surveillance, position reinforcements, and, in several cases, pre-emptively intervene purportedly aimed at preventing a perceived breach of public order. These actions, often portrayed as preventive security measures, are nothing more than intimidation tactics designed to suppress opposition voices [4]. Such conduct contrasts sharply with the police approach to ruling party events, which faces minimal scrutiny and interference. Police interventions in opposition were frequent and deliberate, which created an atmosphere of intimidation that dissuaded public participation in opposition events.

These observed practices led to the conclusion that police actions were not solely motivated by security concerns but appeared to serve as deliberate tactics for intimidating opposition supporters and curbing political dissent.

In-depth interviews with key informants from a range of stakeholders; including police officers, opposition leaders, civil society activists, government officials, journalists, and legal experts, reveals a similar orientation of police twisting the existing laws to stifle activities of the opposition to the advantages of the ruling party. An interview with a legal expert who is also an advocate of the High Court in Dar es

Salaam was quoted as saying; *“Police actions at opposition rallies often go beyond public order management and instead appear to be deliberately aimed at restricting political competition.”* Adding: *“The vague wording of the Public Order Act allows for almost any gathering to be deemed a threat, which the police use to justify excessive interventions against opposition events.”* Further, a civil society activist noted that *“The police’s excessive force and constant surveillance at opposition rallies have created a climate of fear, discouraging people from participating in political activities.”*

These quotations underscore a widespread perception of police bias against opposition activities and reveal the significant impact of these practices on the democratic freedoms of Tanzanian citizens. Such firsthand accounts underline how law enforcement actions, influenced by political agendas, have undermined impartiality in policing and diminished public confidence in Tanzania’s democratic institutions.

Similarly, an opposition party leader from Dar es Salaam remarked as thus; *“The police are no longer just enforcing the law—they are selectively applying it to silence opposition voices, often citing security reasons without cause.”*

Writing on the same subject, Mbunda [5] highlights how the police became increasingly aligned with the ruling party’s political agenda. The researcher points out that the legal frameworks governing public order are exploited to justify actions that were, in reality, intended to suppress political dissent. Further, Mgaya [6] substantiates this perspective, illustrating how legal structures were manipulated to frame opposition rallies as security threats. The study further emphasizes that the real issue is not the legality of the political activities themselves but the perceived threat they posed to the political dominance of the ruling party. This political influence extended into the actions of law enforcement, which prioritized the ruling party’s interests over public safety.

Reinforcing these findings, Mwombeki [7] study on intra-party conflicts highlights the internal political struggles within Tanzania’s dominant party, which led to heightened political insecurities. He argues that these tensions made the ruling party more likely to view opposition rallies as a destabilizing factor, prompting the use of law enforcement to curb opposition activities. Similarly, Shadrack [13] discusses how the police’s neutral role was increasingly undermined by political influences. He shows that the ruling party’s dominance extended into the functions of state security apparatuses, including the police, where political objectives overruled constitutional mandates for impartiality and public order.

Collectively, these scholarly works and legal analyses confirm that the increased police interference with opposition rallies was less about maintaining public order and more about protecting the ruling party’s political position. By leveraging legal frameworks and manipulating police directives, the government created a hostile environment for opposition activities.

Further, reports from political party, ACT-Wazalendo (Alliance for Change and Transparency), which documented

incidents of police interference in political rallies during the same period (ACT-Wazalendo, 2015-2020) revealed that police actions frequently involved excessive force and intimidation tactics aimed at suppressing opposition voices. This approach aligns with the broader insights provided by policy analysis papers from organizations such as the Open Society Foundation] and Twaweza [14], which emphasize the detrimental impact of politicized policing on democratic processes in Tanzania. These reports argue that the politicization of police functions undermines the rule of law and erodes public trust in state institutions, ultimately leading to a chilling effect on political dissent and public discourse.

The understanding that police actions were motivated by a desire to protect the ruling party’s interests rather than enforce the law was echoed in the testimonies of various stakeholders. In an interview with a senior police officer acknowledged that their interventions were understood as actions to preserve political stability for the ruling party, rather than as neutral law enforcement. This reflects a systemic problem where the police have been co-opted into serving the political agendas of those in power, rather than upholding the democratic principles of accountability and transparency.

The suppression of opposition rallies had far-reaching implications for Tanzania’s democratic processes. The findings suggest that police interference not only limited political participation but also eroded democratic norms by stifling dissent and discouraging public political engagement.

In a study of seven African countries, Ewald & Wohlgemu [18] reported similar trends of police interference in opposition activities in Africa. The author, citing an earlier work by Olukushi [19], reported that the causes for state machinery interference in opposition political activities mainly included the reluctance of the incumbent governments to concede to the multiparty framework, weak opposition parties, weak electoral framework, opposition parties heavily depending on external funding which makes them fall into the allegation that they promote foreign interests, and the winner take all model of democracy which further weakness the opposition.

Overall, the findings indicate that police force interference in opposition rallies are deeply influenced by political dynamics and facilitated by legal frameworks that grant broad discretionary powers to law enforcement. While the Constitution of Tanzania guarantees freedom of assembly, legislation like the Public Order Act 1983 and Police General Orders [12] is often interpreted to curtail this freedom, ostensibly to maintain national security. Judicial rulings and institutional reports further contextualize the impact of police actions on political pluralism, illustrating the need for reforms that reinforce the impartiality of law enforcement in Tanzania.

3.2. Challenges Facing the Police Force in Interfering with Opposition Rallies

This section presents the findings derived from interviews and documentary reviews, highlighting the difficulties faced

by police officers, the limitations they experienced, and the legal and ethical dilemmas inherent in their roles. The analysis draws from a diverse group of stakeholders, including police officers, opposition leaders, civil society activists, a government official, a journalist, and a legal expert.

Interviews with key informants from within the police force indicate frustration in balancing between directives often from political circles, ethics, and legal framework. A police officer from Dar es Salaam had these to share; *“We are often under intense pressure from the government to take action against opposition rallies. The political climate makes it difficult for us to act impartially”*

This sentiment highlights the dilemma faced by law enforcement professionals who are tasked with upholding public safety yet pressured by political interests that challenge their professional integrity. The perception of bias in law enforcement is a prominent concern among opposition leaders, who often criticized the police for their perceived allegiance to the ruling party. Many opposition figures view the police as agents of the ruling party rather than neutral enforcers of the law as one opposition leader from Dar es Salaam had these to say: *“It is clear to us that the police are not acting independently. They are following instructions from the ruling party, making it almost impossible for us to hold peaceful rallies”*

This erosion of public trust in police impartiality, as noted by Mbunda [5], poses risks not only to opposition parties but also to the general public, which may lose confidence in law enforcement as an unbiased institution.

Civil society activists and human rights organizations have highlighted the growing politicization of the police, often linked to laws like the Political Parties Act Cap 258, which they argue is manipulated by the ruling government to suppress opposition. Amnesty International [1] and reports from the Legal and Human Rights Centre [15] detail instances where police were deployed to silence opposition and civil society leaders, reinforcing the perception that law enforcement operates under significant political influence.

The Political Parties Act Cap 258 R. E 2002 and other legal frameworks were intended to regulate political activities, but are frequently seen as tools for controlling dissent rather than supporting democratic values. A police officer in Dodoma explained; *“There is times when we do not agree with the orders, but as police officers, we had to follow them. The pressure to control these rallies came from above, and it is difficult to navigate”* These accounts underline the moral and professional dilemmas police officers face, as they are often compelled to prioritize political directives over their commitment to fairness and impartiality. The intersection of politics and policing in Tanzania reveals a complex dynamic where law enforcement is frequently swayed by political pressures.

A legal expert who is an advocate of the High Court in Dar es Salaam summarized this by stating; *“Police officers are placed in a difficult position where their professional re-*

sponsibilities were overshadowed by the political imperatives of the time. This compromised their ability to act impartially”

The cumulative impact of these pressures, combined with a politicized legal framework, poses significant challenges for police officers as they balance their legal obligations with political directives. The acknowledgement of this internal conflict among officers is critical, as it illustrates the broader societal implications of police actions influenced by political considerations. Human Rights Watch [16, 17] documents systemic issues of politicization within the Tanzanian police force, which further complicate the country's law enforcement landscape. In addition, civil society activists emphasized the challenges police officers encounter while navigating political pressures.

Matenge [17] has highlighted that the lack of accountability mechanisms within law enforcement complicates efforts to ensure that police actions align with democratic principles. Without proper checks and balances, police officers may continue to find themselves caught between their duty to the public and the demands of political authorities, which undermines both the rule of law and public trust in the police force.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that police officers in Tanzania face significant challenges due to political pressures that compromise their ability to act impartially. These challenges not only affect the conduct of law enforcement but also undermine public trust and the legitimacy of policing as an institution. The insights gathered from interviews with various stakeholders, alongside documentary reviews, highlight the need for a reevaluation of the relationship between politics and policing in Tanzania. This reassessment is crucial for ensuring that the police can fulfill their role as impartial enforcers of the law, thus safeguarding the democratic rights of all citizens.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the findings indicate that police force interference in opposition rallies is deeply influenced by political dynamics and facilitated by legal frameworks that grant broad discretionary powers to law enforcement. In this regard, police officers in Tanzania face significant challenges due to political pressures that compromise their ability to act impartially. These challenges not only affect the conduct of law enforcement but also undermine public trust and the legitimacy of policing as an institution. This paper recommends a reevaluation of the relationship between politics and policing in Tanzania to ensure that the police fulfill their role as impartial enforcers of the law, thus safeguarding the democratic rights of all citizens.

Abbreviations

ACT-Wazalendo Alliance for Change and Transparency

PGOs (Patriots)
Police General Orders

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge all key informant who agreed to provide information including serving and retired police officers, political parties' leaders, civil societies as well as legal experts.

Author Contributions

Gasper Mpehongwa: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Brightius Titus: Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Amnesty International. (2019). The State of Human Rights in Tanzania.
- [2] Kapilima, V. C. (2023). Comparing the State of Democratic Elections in South Africa (2019), Tanzania (2020), and Ghana (2020). *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences*, 22.
- [3] Kwayu, A. C. (2022). Determinants of a political party's social media strategy: A comparative analysis of Tanzania's opposition political parties' Twitter practices. *Party Politics*, 236-247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211041039>
- [4] Mohabe, N. (2002). The Multiparty Reform Process in Tanzania: The Dominance of the Ruling Party. *African Journal of Political Science*, Vol 7 No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajps.v7i2.27333>
- [5] Mbunda, R. (2019). The Role of Police in Tanzanian Politics. University of Dar es Salaam Press.
- [6] Mgaya, A. (2018). Political Rallies and the Law in Tanzania. *African Studies Review*.
- [7] Mwombeki, D. (2023) Causes, Impacts and Solutions of Intraparty Conflicts in Tanzania from 1995 to 2020. Master's thesis. The Open University of Tanzania. <http://repository.out.ac.tz/id/eprint/3886>
- [8] Ouziel, L. M. (2020). Democracy, bureaucracy, and criminal justice reform. *BCL Review*, 523.
- [9] Paget, D. (2017). Tanzania: Shrinking space and opposition protest. *Journal of Democracy*, 153-167.
- [10] Public Order Act, No. 16 of 1983. (2002). Government Printer, Dar e salaam.
- [11] Political Parties Act Cap 258 R. E. (2019). Government Printer, Dar e salaam.
- [12] Police General Orders (PGOs). (2006). Government Printer, Dar e salaam.
- [13] Shadrack, J. T. (2020). Privatized policing duties in a constitutional state: the case of postcolonial Tanzania in socio-legal context. Doctoral dissertation. University of Warwick). <http://webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b3710625>
- [14] Twaweza. (2019). Public Order and Political Rights in Tanzania.
- [15] Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC). (2020). Tanzania Human Rights Report. LHRC, Dar es Salaam.
- [16] Human Rights Watch. (2020). Repression Mars National Elections Stop, Investigate, and Prosecute Serious Abuses. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/23/tanzania-repression-mars-national-elections>
- [17] Matenge, F. J. (2023). The Challenges of Enforcing Public Accountability: Experience from Tanzania. 11(2), *Polish Political Science Review*, 30-51. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2023-0014>
- [18] Ewald, J. & Wohlgemuth, L. (2012). Challenges for the Opposition and Democratisation in Tanzania: A View from the Opposition. *Africa Development*, 37(2), 63-95.
- [19] Olukoshi, A. O. (1998). The Politics of Opposition in Contemporary Africa. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.