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TANZANIA

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Introduction

1. ADF International is a faith-based legal advocacy organization that protects fundamental freedoms and promotes the inherent dignity of all people.
2. This report focuses on Tanzania's persisting challenges relating to the protection and promotion of freedom of religion or belief in the mainland as well as in Zanzibar where Christians continue to experience discrimination and violence.

(a) Freedom of Religion or Belief

Background

3. Approximately 55 percent of the 48.3 million people in Tanzania are Christian and 33 percent Muslim. The Zanzibar archipelago is 99 percent Muslim.¹
4. Civil society sources indicate a gradual increase in persecution of Christians and other religious minorities over the past 5 years. This is due to a combination of social, religious, and political forces. In regions like Zanzibar and coastal areas, where conservative Islamic practices dominate, Christians—especially converts from Islam—face intense pressure, harassment, and even physical attacks. This situation is exacerbated by Islamist terrorist attacks and extremist violence along Tanzania's borders with Mozambique.²

Legal Framework

5. Article 18 of the 1977 Constitution of Tanzania guarantees every person the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to seek, receive, and disseminate information, communicate freely, and be protected from interference with communication.³
6. Article 19 guarantees every person the right to freedom of conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or change one's religion or faith. These rights may only be limited by laws necessary in a democratic society to protect security, peace, societal integrity, or national cohesion. The term 'religion' is understood to include all religious denominations.⁴
7. Article 20 guarantees every person the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, association, and cooperation with others, including forming or joining associations or organizations 'formed for purposes of preserving or furthering his beliefs or interests or

¹ Organization for Religion Data Archives, *National Profiles: Tanzania – World Religion* (The ARDA) https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=219c#S_2, accessed 2 April 2026.

² Open Doors, *WWL 2025 – Tanzania Persecution Dynamics* (February 2025) <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/country-dossiers/WWL-2025-Tanzania-Persecution-Dynamics>, p.9-10.

³ Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, art. 18.

⁴ Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, art. 19.

any other interests'. Subsection (2) restricts the registration of political parties to those that do not 'aim to promote or further the interest of', inter alia, any faith or religious group.⁵

8. The enjoyment of religious freedom is unduly restricted under Tanzania's Penal Code, particularly sections 125 and 129, which criminalize certain acts and forms of expression relating to religion.
9. Section 125 makes it a criminal offence to destroy, damage, or defile a place of worship or any object held sacred by a class of persons where such conduct is intended to insult that religion, or where the offender knows that the conduct is likely to be regarded as an insult.⁶
10. Section 129 criminalizes the deliberate utterance of words, sounds, gestures, or the placement of objects intended to wound the religious feelings of another person. Conviction under section 129 carries mandatory minimum penalties, including a fine of no less than three million Tanzanian shillings or imprisonment for a term of no less than one year.⁷
11. Tanzania requires mandatory registration of religious organizations under the Societies Act, with five-year renewal periods. Section 3 defines a society as a club, partnership, or association of ten or more people, regardless of its nature. Sections 6(1) and 7(1) grant the Registrar of Societies the authority to approve or refuse registration, while Section 11 empowers the Minister of Home Affairs to cancel or refuse registration if a society is deemed 'prejudicial to peace, order, or good government in Tanzania.' These provisions give government officials broad discretion over the recognition and continued operation of religious organizations.⁸

Closure and deregistration of churches

12. Religious groups affected by the above registration laws report experiencing restrictions on their ability to express their religious and political beliefs.
13. Authorities have allegedly penalized clergy under the Societies Act for delivering 'political sermons' or making online statements perceived as critical of state authorities, citing the law's requirement that societies remain non-political and non-partisan.⁹ For example, the Ministry of Home Affairs deregistered Christian Life Church in July 2024 after clergy allegedly delivered sermons deemed contrary to Tanzanian values.¹⁰

⁵ Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, art. 20.

⁶ *Penal Code* (Ordinance 11 of 1930), sec. 125.

⁷ *Penal Code* (Ordinance 11 of 1930), sec. 129.

⁸ *Societies Act* (1954, last revised 2019), secs. 3, 6(1), 7(1), 11.

⁹ Juma Issihaka, 'Tanzanian government deregisters Gwajima's church over political sermons' *The Citizen* (2 June 2025) <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/national/tanzanian-government-deregisters-gwajima-s-church-over-political-sermons-5066656>.

¹⁰ Anugrah Kumar, 'Tanzania shuts down church after pastor's human rights criticism' *Christian Post* (16 July 2025) <https://www.christianpost.com/news/tanzania-shuts-down-church-after-pastors-human-rights-criticism.html>;

14. In June 2025, The Glory of Christ Tanzania Church (Kanisa la Ufufuo na Uzima), a church with approximately 70,000 members, was forcibly closed by police following a decision by the Registrar of Societies, citing alleged violations of the Societies Act.¹¹ The closure immediately followed Bishop Josephat Gwajima's announcement of a 7-day prayer campaign addressing a series of kidnappings and enforced disappearances in Tanzania.¹²
15. In a public press briefing in Dar es Salaam, the Registrar of Civil Societies under the Ministry of Home Affairs announced the church's closure, citing violations of the Societies Act. He stated that the church's leader had delivered sermons containing political content that were 'intended to stir up public dissent against the government' and that such conduct 'endangers national peace and stability.'¹³
16. The closure led to six months of confrontation, during which worshippers attempted to hold services outside the church premises. Police used tear gas on one occasion to disperse a gathering and arrested 52 congregants. The church and its legal team challenged the ban in the High Court, citing violations of the constitutional right to freedom of worship.¹⁴ With resolution by the courts, Prime Minister Mwigulu Nchemba issued a directive to reopen the church in November 2025. The church remains under official supervision.

Incidents of violence, arbitrary arrest and social hostility

17. In January 2022, the Dar es Salaam Special Zone Police Force issued a notice for Bishop Josephat Elias Mwingira of Efatha Church to report within 24 hours to a police station for questioning after he allegedly used his online ministry and public platforms to make several public accusations against the government. These included claims that there was a conspiracy by state officials to assassinate him, that the government had burned his farm in Rukwa Region, and other allegations of wrongdoing by state actors.¹⁵ He was released after questioning. The Special Zone police chief subsequently publicly warned that police would arrest and interrogate anyone who 'abuses the constitutional right to freedom of expression.'¹⁶

Pan African Visions, 'Tanzania's Government Orders Closure of Christian Life Church Led by Pastor 'Kiboko ya Wachawi'' (July 2024) <https://panafricanvisions.com/2024/07/tanzanias-government-orders-closure-of-christian-life-church-led-by-pastor-kiboko-ya-wachawi/>.

¹¹ Societies Act (1954, last revised 2019), sec. 2(1).

¹² The Chanzo, 'Tanzanian Government Lifts Ban on Glory of Christ Tanzania Church After Six Months' (25 November 2025) <https://thechanzo.com/2025/11/25/tanzanian-government-lifts-ban-on-glory-of-christ-tanzania-church-after-six-months/>.

¹³ Joseph Isangura, 'Government deregisters Gwajima's church over political sermons' Media Wire Express (2 June 2025) <https://mediawireexpress.co.tz/government-deregisters-gwajimas-church-over-political-sermons/>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Emmanuel Akinyoadé, 'Tanzania: Police Summons Controversial Bishop Mwingira' *allAfrica* (28 December 2021) <https://www.allafrica.com/stories/202112280028.html>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

18. In October 2025, Pastor Eleth Mtaita of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) in Babati District was allegedly abducted from his home by unidentified individuals armed with guns and taken in an unmarked vehicle. The Regional Police later confirmed Mtaita was arrested after allegedly 'inciting church members not to go out and vote' in the upcoming general election. He was questioned on claims he discouraged voter participation and later released. In response to Mtaita's arrest, the Regional Police Commander emphasized that '[r]eligious leaders should focus on matters of faith, not politics,' and warned that places of worship should not be used as 'platforms for political mobilisation.'¹⁷
19. The same police statement noted that authorities were also searching for another religious figure, Sheikh Juma Silima, from a mosque in the same area on similar accusations of discouraging voter participation.¹⁸
20. Human rights monitors, including Open Doors, report a pattern of attacks on churches and clergy in 2025. At least ten churches were attacked across Pemba and Unguja (Zanzibar) and in majority-Christian regions on the mainland. Several churches were vandalized and set on fire, targeting both large congregations and smaller worship communities.¹⁹
21. In May 2025, Father Charles Kitima, the Secretary-General of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) and a prominent government critic, was violently assaulted near the TEC headquarters in Kurasini, Dar es Salaam. He sustained severe head injuries and was hospitalized. The attack occurred hours after a recording of him criticizing what he described as 'lawlessness' and calling for electoral justice circulated on social media.²⁰
22. At least ten Christians were killed for faith-related reasons in Tanzania during the reporting period. Four were killed near the Mozambique border by Islamist militants operating in areas affected by spillover from the Cabo Delgado insurgency, and six were killed in Dar es Salaam, Chunya, Mbeya, Tabata, and other mainland locations by local extremists and clan members, reflecting diverse sources of risk for Christians. Most of these cases remain uninvestigated.²¹
23. The killings near the Mozambique border occur in the context of ongoing militant Islamist violence emanating from northern Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region, where extremist

¹⁷ Joseph Lyimo, 'Tanzania Lutheran pastor arrested for allegedly inciting congregation not to participate in next week's general election' *The Citizen* (Babati, 25 October 2025) <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/national/tanzania-lutheran-pastor-arrested-for-allegedly-inciting-congregation-not-to-participate-in-next-week-s-general-election-5244118>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Open Doors, *WWL 2025 – Tanzania Persecution Dynamics* (February 2025) <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/country-dossiers/WWL-2025-Tanzania-Persecution-Dynamics>, p.8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

groups such as Islamic State-linked factions have repeatedly targeted Christian communities.²²

24. Social and community pressures on individuals who convert from Islam to Christianity in Zanzibar remain acute. Converts experience family rejection, social isolation, harassment, and threats from community members opposed to their change of faith. In some cases, local religious leaders and mosque attendees have publicly identified converts as targets for discrimination during prayer gatherings.²³

Freedom of Religion or Belief in International Law

25. Tanzania acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1976 without reservations.
26. Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to the 'freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief'.
27. Article 19 protects the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to seek, receive, or impart information and ideas of 'all kinds'. Restrictions on this right are only permitted where they are necessary 'for the respect of the rights and reputations of others' or 'for the protection of national security, public order or public health or morals'.
28. Article 26 further mandates States Parties to 'prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection from discrimination' including on the ground of religion. Relatedly, Article 27 ensures that religious minorities 'shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, [...] to profess and practice their own religion.'
29. As emphasized in the Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 22:

'The fact that a religion is recognized as a State religion or that it is established as official or traditional or that its followers comprise the majority of the population, shall not result in any impairment of the enjoyment of any of the rights under the Covenant, including articles 18 and 27, nor in any discrimination against adherents to other religions or non-believers.'²⁴
30. The criminalization of religious expression under Tanzania's Penal Code, including provisions that prohibit conduct or expression deemed insulting to religion or intended to wound religious feelings, is incompatible with the narrow and strictly defined grounds for limiting freedom of expression under Article 19 of the ICCPR. As affirmed by the Human Rights Committee, laws that prohibit expressions perceived as disrespectful toward a religion or belief system—including blasphemy-type provisions—are not compatible with

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No 22 (48) on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (adopted 27 September 1993).

the Covenant.²⁵ Such laws are inherently vague and subjective, create significant risk of arbitrary or discriminatory enforcement, and function in practice to suppress dissenting views and minority religious beliefs rather than to protect any legitimate public interest.

31. In addition, the application of these provisions in a context of religious majoritarianism—particularly in Zanzibar, where Islamic institutions and norms play a dominant legal and social role—raises serious concerns of discrimination. The chilling effect of criminal sanctions for allegedly insulting religious beliefs or wounding religious feelings disproportionately impacts religious minorities, converts, and those expressing non-conforming beliefs.
32. In order to fully comply with its human rights obligations, Tanzania must afford equal and effective protection from all forms of discrimination and violence both in law and in practice, including by non-state actors.

(d) Recommendations

33. In light of the aforementioned, ADF International suggests the following recommendations be made to Tanzania:
 - a) Amend sections 125 and 129 of the Penal Code in accordance with Tanzania's international obligations on freedom of religion or belief and expression, including by repealing provisions that criminalize insulting religion or wounding religious feelings;
 - b) Review and amend the Societies Act to enable the prompt registration of religious associations without discrimination, and to ensure that religious actors can freely engage in peaceful expression and activities without fear of arbitrary deregistration, denial of recognition, or administrative harassment.
 - c) Guarantee effective protection of persons belonging to religious minorities, particularly converts, from discrimination, violence and harassment, including perpetrated by State and non-State actors;

²⁵ Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No 34 – Article 19: Freedom of Opinion and Expression* (12 September 2011) UN Docs CCPR/C/GC/34, 48.



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