

# What happened to “African socialism”?

## A reply to a reader

By Chris Talbot  
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*The following is a letter from a WSWS reader, followed by a reply by Chris Talbot.*

Over the last few years I've come to rely on WSWS to gain proper perspective on world events, both current and past. I am absolutely amazed at the depth of perspective offered routinely here at WSWS, and I am thankful that I chanced upon this web site some years ago! Kudos! What a pity, the likes of Fox News (Faux News) has airtime and is viewed by so many when those same viewers would be so much better served by the analysis offered here on WSWS.

On to my question: I was wondering if WSWS has ever done an historical analysis of what happened to “so-called” socialism (African Socialism) as practiced in post-colonial Africa. I am particularly interested in Tanzania and its president right after Tanganyika gained its independence, Julius Nyerere (the Mwalimu). I've actually lived in Tanzania, and from talking to those who knew President Nyerere, he tried to get socialism right. What happened? It would make for an interesting case study. Thank you for your consideration of my question.

JL

Dear JL

The question of what happened to “African Socialism” or “Pan-Africanism” is a vital one for anyone wishing to understand why the situation facing the population of Africa today is so catastrophic. We have attempted to address this issue in many of our articles on Africa, [1] though not specifically in relation to Tanzania.

Tanzania is now one of the poorest countries in Africa—GNP per head is a mere US\$280 a year, 51 percent live in poverty (defined at 65 US cents per day) and it ranked at 162 out of a world total of 177 countries in the UN Human Development Index. According to UNAIDS, out of a population of 35 million, some 1.6 million people are infected with HIV and 160,000 died as a result of AIDS in 2003. It may be one of the poorest countries, but it is unfortunately not untypical of countries throughout the continent. Even in South Africa, the most developed capitalist economy in Africa, 10 years after the end of apartheid some 4 million people out of a population of 44 million live in “extreme poverty” (subsisting on less than US\$1 per day); and as a result of AIDS, the average life expectancy has dropped by approximately 10 years.

Nationalist movements and governments throughout Africa—whether those that took up arms like the ANC or those that were granted independence by the colonial powers like Tanzania—have been completely unable to halt the devastating impact of global capitalism on the continent or to secure any real independence from imperialism. Tanzania, for example, now owes some US\$3 billion to Western banks and pays out more in debt repayment each year than it spends on health care.

Nyerere, like the leaders of most of the British colonies, was cultivated by Britain to keep control of the mass opposition to colonialism in Africa that had developed after the war and to keep Tanganyika, as it then was called, within the Western sphere of influence. As a British Foreign Office document put it in 1959, “...Pan-Africanism in itself is not

necessarily a force which we need regard with fear and suspicion. On the contrary, if we can avoid alienating it and can guide it on lines generally sympathetic to the free world, it may well prove in the longer term a strong, indigenous barrier to the penetration of Africa by the Soviet Union....” [2]

In the 1950s and 1960s, the expansion of the world economy enabled the Western powers to expand middle class social layers—government functionaries, administrators in the welfare state, academics, lawyers, etc.—through which they could maintain their rule. In the oppressed countries a similar layer developed, and it was this layer that was handed power in the period of decolonisation. Tanzania had received so little investment under British control that very few people had been educated above primary level, and such a middle class layer hardly existed.

With aid from Britain, Nyerere attracted many academics, teachers and aid workers from the West to assist in the training of new administrators and teachers to fill the vacuum. He was able to use his experience gained with the British Labour party to make socialist-sounding speeches, and many idealistic students and socialist-minded people were drawn to Tanzania during the 1960s—I think this is what you remember.

Nyerere built up the Tanganyika Africa National Union (TANU) during the 1950s, the organisation that was to take power in 1961. Although Tanganyika was extremely poor, Nyerere had the advantage over other nationalist leaders in that there were no dominant ethnic groups, there was a lingua franca (Swahili), and the white settler community was very tiny.

He carried out nationalisations in the small industrial sector (the economy was mainly agricultural and very underdeveloped), increased taxes, and made some headway with welfare state provisions, especially in education. Government ministers and party officials were banned from having shares or directorships in companies or from receiving more than one salary. Nyerere's conception was that the emergence of larger-scale private capitalists would fragment the weak layer of functionaries that ran the country.

The idea of developing a nationally based economy with a large state sector was hardly unusual in the 1960s—in countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Cuba, and Burma, the ruling elite carried out nationalisations and made limited improvements in education and health care. They were able to use the growing Cold War antagonisms, leaning for support on the Soviet Union and, where possible, extracting aid from the West. Nyerere became expert at this type of maneuvering.

Those political groups and intellectuals who claimed that this was a new way of building socialism were essentially acting as the representatives of an expanding middle class layer. They were sowing illusions in the national development strategies that were favoured in the 1950s and 1960s.

Some Western intellectuals praised the apparent freedom of political discussion in Tanzania and turned a blind eye to the repression of opponents that took place under TANU—for example, Nyerere called in British troops in 1964 to put down a mutiny of the Tanganyikan Army.

One such leftist writer now notes the existence of “Nyerere’s fist beneath the velvet glove” and bemoans a “kind of paternalism, or perhaps a certain brand of residual Stalinism, that made it so difficult for many of us on the left” to speak out about the repression of opponents of the Tanzanian regime. [3]

In 1964, Tanganyika and newly independent Zanzibar merged to form Tanzania. Aid was then restricted from the US and Germany because the regime that had taken over in Zanzibar was pro-Soviet. Aid was also cut back from Britain in the period 1965-1968 because Nyerere opposed Britain’s support of the white minority regime in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Facing serious economic problems in a country with very little industry, Nyerere looked to China for aid in the mid-1960s as an alternative to the West, but also became increasingly influenced by Maoist ideas, especially in relation to agriculture. In the Arusha Declaration of 1967, he proposed building a socialist state based on the millions of poor peasants through village cooperatives (ujamas).

At first, there was considerable resistance amongst the peasants, living mainly in isolated farms, to this “villagisation” programme. Getting the peasants to move into the villages and break their age-old customs was clearly a huge operation. How much force was used and how much political persuasion is disputed—as already noted, writings on Tanzania by left-leaning intellectuals tend to gloss over the realities.

Over the first part of the 1970s, nearly 8 million people were moved into ujama villages. Peasants were allowed to cultivate individual plots for subsistence crops, but large-scale private ownership was not allowed. Nyerere wanted cash crops cultivated collectively on the Chinese model. But, just as in China, there were serious problems involved in attempting to develop production on a peasant base—let alone in developing the socialism that Nyerere claimed he was building. (On China see [4].)

The result of ujama was that the production of cash crops on which the country depended for foreign exchange actually fell. The crisis in the world economy in the 1970s was partly the cause of this, but ujama policies could not halt the continued stagnation of the economy. Between 1967 and 1975, Tanzania achieved an average rate of growth of just 1.4 percent while its population grew by 2.8 percent.

Without large-scale industry, including production of agricultural machinery, without production of inputs—fertilisers, pesticides, etc.—without adequate infrastructure, technical skills, etc., schemes such as ujama were completely unfeasible. Even in a very large country like China, with wide-scale collectivisation, “it was impossible to create an advanced industrialised economy...isolated from the world economy and without the conscious and enthusiastic involvement of the working masses themselves.” [4]

Even more problems faced Nyerere in his foreign policy. Once in power, the aspiring ruling classes throughout Africa accepted the national divisions imposed by the colonial powers, even though the borders between the African nations had no validity in terms of geography or ethnic grouping. “Pan-African” attempts at uniting nations together soon disintegrated as the new leaders wanted above all to keep control of the instruments of the state that they had each inherited from the colonial powers.

In 1967, Nyerere joined in an East African Currency Union with Kenya and Uganda. It lasted 10 years, but it completely failed to stop competition and conflict breaking out between these national enclaves. By 1978, the Ugandan despot Idi Amin invaded Tanzanian territory. In 1979, Tanzania was forced to retaliate, sending its army into Uganda and overthrowing Amin. The cost of this operation, together with support that Tanzania was giving to the guerrilla independence movements in Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia, further damaged the already weak economy.

Although Nyerere was able to secure more aid from the West during the 1970s (US\$2.7 billion between 1971 and 1981), Tanzania was effectively

bankrupt when Nyerere stepped down as president in 1985. Since then, the Tanzanian government has accepted all the World Bank and International Monetary Fund measures, privatising large parts of the state sector and opening up the economy to foreign investment. Needless to say, these free market measures have ensured that Tanzania remains one of the poorest countries in Africa.

The evolution of countries like Tanzania is a complete confirmation of the bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism and a vindication of the Trotskyist analysis. You are correct to use the qualification “so-called” socialist with bourgeois nationalist countries, like Tanzania, that called themselves socialist in post-colonial Africa. None of the governments or independence movements throughout the continent could be called socialist in a Marxist sense.

Trotsky’s analysis of the class dynamics of oppressed nations made at the beginning of the twentieth century is entirely relevant today. In his Theory of Permanent Revolution—the theory on which the 1917 Russian revolution was based and a workers’ state established—he explained that the emerging bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development could not carry out national revolutions modeled on France in 1789.

They were incapable of carrying through their own bourgeois revolution because class relations had fundamentally changed during the nineteenth century. In Russia, the growth of the working class faced the bourgeoisie with a far greater danger than the old feudal setup or the depredations of imperialism.

Thus, the working class would now play the decisive role in the democratic revolution, and the democratic revolution would carry over into a socialist revolution, overthrowing capitalist property ownership. Such a proletarian revolution could not be confined to a single country like Russia but would have a revolutionary impact on the rest of the world. Moreover, to construct a socialist economy in backward Russia depended on the extension of the revolution into the more advanced countries of Europe.

It is this class analysis that explains the impotence of Nyerere and TANU before the onslaught of imperialism in the IMF and World Bank measures of the last two decades. The middle class and aspiring bourgeois layers that ruled Tanzania were opposed to any movement that would have mobilised the workers and poor peasants on a continent-wide basis against imperialism. Their interests lay in maintaining a grip over their national enclave. As long as the Soviet Union gave them a counterbalance to the West, they could present themselves as socialists, but with the collapse of the USSR they have embraced the economics of the free market.

To base one’s political outlook on Trotsky’s conception—the revolutionary potential of the working class—is the only viable strategy for countries like Tanzania and the whole African continent. The working people and poor masses can be emancipated politically, economically and culturally only by a socialist movement that takes production and finance out of the hands of private capital and repudiates the debt to the foreign banks. Attempts to turn back to national economies based on a layer of state functionaries are doomed to failure—graphically illustrated in present-day Zimbabwe. Such a working class movement would have to be an international one from the outset, part of a socialist revival in Europe, America and the advanced capitalist countries to overthrow the profit system.

I hope this outline goes some way to answering your question on what happened to Tanzania and to African Socialism.

Best regards,

Chris Talbot

**Notes:**

[1] A reply to a Nigerian correspondent

[19 May 1997]

Justifying the role of imperialism in Africa

[4 August 2000]

The significance of Leon Trotsky's thought for Africa today

[28 October 2000]

[2] *Decolonisation, the British Experience since 1945*, Nicholas J. White, Longman, 1999, p. 125

[3] *Julius Nyerere: the Theory and Practice of (Un)democratic Socialism in Africa*, John S. Saul

[4] Deng Xiaoping and the fate of the Chinese Revolution

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