

# Christians in Tanzania

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**Abstract:** Tanzania has long existed as one of Africa's most religiously and ethnically diverse states. There are over 100 different linguistic groups in the nation, and over 130 different tribes. In terms of religion, the country is essentially split between those who practice Christianity, and those who follow Islam. Still others devote themselves to animism and other native religious practices. The majority of Christians in Tanzania are Catholic, and make up a small majority of those living on the mainland. In Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous island of Tanzania, a vast majority of the population follows the teachings of Islam. For centuries Tanzania provided a case study in religious and ethnic relations in Africa, as each group has been relatively successful in maintaining peace with one another. However, during the past decade, we have witnessed a change. Tensions, particularly between Christians and Muslims, are on the rise. Extremist groups have gathered steam in Tanzania and the region, which has caused Christians to become anxious of their situation in the country.

**Keywords:** Tanzania, Christianity, Extremism.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to address the concerns Christians face in contemporary Tanzania and to shed light on the issues they face now, and in the future. Although Christians and Muslims have existed amicably for centuries in Tanzania, the past decade has witnessed an upsurge in religious extremism. This includes the rise of al-Shabaab in the region, among other extremist groups. In recent times, 2013 marked a particularly violent period in Tanzania; however, research has shown that the violence and animosity between Christians has not significantly improved since then. Rather, Christians continue to face threats from their Muslim neighbors, leaving them in a precarious situation. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the full history of Christian-Muslim relations, it will serve as a means to understand why Christians feel threatened, and how they perceive their future in Tanzania.

## II. TANZANIA: A DIVERSE SOCIETY

### A. Overview of Tanzania

Tanzania is located in sub-Saharan East Africa. The Indian Ocean forms its eastern boundary. Off its coast lies the island of Zanzibar, an integral part of present day Tanzania. Counterclockwise, beginning on its northern border, Tanzania is surrounded by Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique on its southern border. The estimated population of Tanzania is nearly 54 million, which is comprised of 95% Bantu, subdivided into over 130 tribes. The remaining 5% is comprised of Arab, Asian and European ethnicities. The official languages of Tanzania are Kiswahili and English. Arabic is spoken on Zanzibar. There are many local languages as well.<sup>1</sup> On the Tanzanian mainland 35% of the population is Muslim, 61% Christian and the remaining are followers of local native religions.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid

**B. History**

The Portuguese, in 1498, were the first Europeans to reach what is now Tanzania. The Portuguese subsequently dominated most of the Tanzanian coastline until they were ousted from Zanzibar by Omani Arabs in 1699. In the latter 1800's Germany with British acquiescence established a "sphere of influence" over mainland Tanzania while the British controlled Zanzibar.

The Germans were expelled from Tanganyika (as Tanzania was then called) by the British, supported by South African and Belgian armed forces in 1916. Tanganyika then became a British mandate under the League of Nations. In 1946, under the United Nations, the mandate became a British trust territory. In 1961, Tanganyika obtained independence from Britain. In 1963, Zanzibar became independent.<sup>2</sup> In 1964, Zanzibar that had been an Omani Sultanate and a major slave trading center under, previous to the British, Omani Arab rule, was bloodily merged with Tanganyika to form Tanzania; an estimated 17,000<sup>3</sup> people, mainly of Arab descent, were slaughtered. In 1998, the U.S. Embassy in Tanzania's largest city, Dar es Salaam, was bombed, (simultaneously with the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya) killing many.

**III. CHRISTIANITY IN TANZANIA**

Christianity first came to Tanzania in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the coming of Catholic missions emanating from the Indian Ocean coast. The missions moved inland and began to establish themselves in various communities. At first unaware of the teachings of Christianity, many locals began to accept the religion, and Christianity spread across the mainland. The Christian community had grown substantially by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and in 1961, Tanzania gave the Catholic community its very first African cardinal, Mgr. Laurean Rugambwa.<sup>4</sup>

As noted by *Catholics and Cultures*, Almost a third of Tanzania's Christians are Catholic; however, there are other Christian groups in the country:

As in much of Africa, Catholicism in Tanzania has a sizeable if not dominant status. Approximately 30% of the Tanzanian population identifies as Catholic, making it the largest Christian church in the country. Catholics coexist and at times compete with their religious brethren from a variety of Christian traditions, including historic Lutheran and Anglican mission churches as well as burgeoning Pentecostal churches. Catholics also practice their faith in the midst of a large number of other believers; Tanzania has some of the largest populations of Muslims and practitioners of traditional religion in East Africa.<sup>5</sup>

**IV. RELIGIOUS TENSION AND VIOLENCE IN TANZANIA**

A serious concern about the future of Tanzania lies in the burgeoning tensions between religious communities—particularly between Muslim and Christian communities. Succinctly stated by Katherine Davis, writing for the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University:

In addition to the unfortunate social consequences of certain religiously affiliated traditions, religions within Tanzania have also helped to create divisions within society. Tanzania's religious plurality occasionally results in social tension rather than peaceful coexistence, and stress has become particularly visible between the country's large Muslim and Christian populations. Several examples serve to illustrate the issues that have emerged as a by-product of the country's religious diversity. There have been threats by Muslims against hotels that serve alcohol in Zanzibar, and Christian newspapers have carried negative articles about Islamic customs. Muslims have complained about unfair treatment, as

<sup>2</sup> Note: Historical Data In Previous Two Paragraphs From Tanzania Profile, *Bbc News Africa*, June 18, 2013.

<http://www.Bbc.Co.Uk/News/World-Africa-14095868>

<sup>3</sup> Zanzibar Profile, *Bbc News Africa*, June 19, 2013.

<http://www.Bbc.Co.Uk/News/World-Africa-14115176>

<sup>4</sup>James Jay Carney, Krystina Kwizera-Masabo Introduction: Catholics In Tanzania Comprise Nearly A Third Of Country's Diverse Religious Landscape

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

prior governments would not formally acknowledge Muslim schools, and Christians have argued that they are less likely to receive scholarships or jobs because of the remaining influence of a former Muslim president.<sup>6</sup>

Christian-Muslim tensions have been ongoing. 2013 was a particularly dire year. During that year, the U.S. State Department reported on Muslim-Christian religious tensions;

- incidents of looting and burning of churches in Dar es Salaam and Stone Town;
- two shootings that targeted Catholic priests in Stone Town, one of which resulted in a death
- an attack with an explosive device at a Catholic church opening in Arusha, resulting in seven deaths and several injuries;
- an incident during which incendiary devices were thrown at a Lutheran church in Dar es Salaam;
- a bomb threat at a Lutheran church in Dar es Salaam;
- a separate acid attack against a Muslim imam also in Zanzibar;
- an explosive device tossed into a crowd gathered for an opposition political rally in Arusha resulting in three deaths and several injuries;
- an acid attack on a Catholic priest in Stone Town, Zanzibar.<sup>7</sup>

On February 11, 2013, in Buseresere, in the northeast of the Tanzanian mainland, a Christian Pentecostal pastor was beheaded by Muslim extremists when they attacked him and fellow Christian parishioners at their Church.<sup>8</sup> Tensions were also high in Zanzibar where on August 08, 2013, two young British women suffered severe injuries as the result of an acid attack. Although local police refused to link the attack to rising tensions in Zanzibar between the overwhelming majority Muslims and minority Christians there, it should be noted that an Islamist separatist group, *Uamsho* (Awakening), in Zanzibar is pushing for the dissolution of the union between Tanzania and Zanzibar as part of its goal to implement *Shari'a* law on Zanzibar.<sup>9</sup>

Tensions in Tanzania also increased after the September 21, 2013, bombing of the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, Tanzania's northern neighbor. The bombing was carried out by members of Islamic Al-Shabaab extremist organization that is allied with Al Qaeda<sup>10</sup> and centered in Somalia. It appears that Al-Shabaab is increasingly present not only in Kenya, but also in Tanzania; "There is an Al Shabaab network that extends down through Kenya and Tanzania."<sup>11</sup> This observation is reinforced by the recent arrest, reported on October 08, 2013, of eleven Al-Shabaab "recruits" in the Nanyumbu District of the southern Tanzanian mainland,<sup>12</sup> far away from Kenya.

While 2013 represented a devastating year for Christians in Tanzania, attacks continued into 2015 and 2016. Citing findings from *Morning Star News*, the *Christian Post* reported the following in September 2015:

<sup>6</sup> Katharine Davis On The Social Impacts Of Religion In Tanzania, <https://Berkleycenter.Georgetown.Edu/Posts/Katharine-Davis-On-The-Social-Impacts-Of-Religion-In-Tanzania>.

<sup>7</sup> Tanzania (Including Zanzibar), U.S. Department Of State - Travel – Bureau Of Consular Affairs, Sept. 30, 2013. [http://Travel.State.Gov/Travel/Cis\\_Pa\\_Tw/Cis/Cis\\_1038.Html](http://Travel.State.Gov/Travel/Cis_Pa_Tw/Cis/Cis_1038.Html)

<sup>8</sup> Pentecostal Pastor Beheaded In Tanzania, *Christian Press.Com*, Staff Report, Updated Oct. 11, 2013. <http://Www.Christianpress.Com/World/425-Pentecostal-Pastor-Beheaded-In-Tanzania.Html>

<sup>9</sup> British Women Victim Of Acid Attack In Zanzibar, *Reuters (Huff Post World)*, Ali Sultan, Aug. 08, 2013. [http://Www.Huffingtonpost.Com/2013/08/08/British-Women-Acid-Attack-Zanzibar\\_N\\_3725029.Html](http://Www.Huffingtonpost.Com/2013/08/08/British-Women-Acid-Attack-Zanzibar_N_3725029.Html)

<sup>10</sup> Al Shabab, *Council On Foreign Relations*, Jonathan Masters, Sept. 23, 2013. <http://Www.Cfr.Org/Somalia/Al-Shabab/P18650>

<sup>11</sup> EXTREMIST GROUP GAINS Foothold AMONG KENYANS, *NEW YORK TIMES*, NICHOLAS KULISH & JOSH KRON, OCT. 09, 2013. [http://Www.Nytimes.Com/2013/10/10/World/Africa/Extremist-Group-Gains-Foothold-Among-Kenyans.Html?NI=Todayshadlines&Emc=Edit\\_Th\\_20131010&\\_R=0](http://Www.Nytimes.Com/2013/10/10/World/Africa/Extremist-Group-Gains-Foothold-Among-Kenyans.Html?NI=Todayshadlines&Emc=Edit_Th_20131010&_R=0)

<sup>12</sup> TANZANIA ARRESTS 11 AL-SHABAAB 'RECRUITS', *AFRICA REVIEW*, ABDALLAH BAKARI AND KATARE MBASHIRU, OCT. 08, 2013. [HTTP://WWW.AFRICAREVIEW.COM/NEWS/TANZANIA-ARRESTS-11-AL-SHABAAB-RECRUITS-/-/979180/2023654/-/11YIXM0/-/INDEX.HTML](http://Www.AFRICAREVIEW.COM/NEWS/TANZANIA-ARRESTS-11-AL-SHABAAB-RECRUITS-/-/979180/2023654/-/11YIXM0/-/INDEX.HTML)

Muslim extremists burned down three churches in Tanzania last week and issued threats to the area's Christians, a leading persecution monitoring group has reported. According to pastors who spoke with Morning Star News, three churches in northwest Tanzania were set ablaze last Tuesday causing everything inside them to burn. Fortunately, no one was injured. The churches that were torched were the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, the Evangelical Assemblies of God and the Living Water International Church, all of which are located in the Kashfa village area in the Bukoba district. "What is worrying us is that the burning of the three churches happened within a span of two hours," Vedasto Athanas, the pastor of Living Water International Church, told Morning Star News. "What is even more worrying is that we have been receiving threats from Muslim extremists that they want churches reduced in this area... Additionally, a woman who converted to Christianity after marrying her Christian husband was beaten and burned by her Muslim parents late last year in Muheza."<sup>13</sup>

The situation has not significantly improved. According to Open Doors International's 2017 Annual Report, Tanzania ranked number 33 on its World Watch List of religious persecution. According to the 2017 report, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism during the past four years in the region has increased the dangers facing Christians:

The militant movements in Somalia and Kenya are presently having a serious impact on the country. For example, Tanzanian security forces arrested 10 suspected al-Shabaab militants and discovered bomb-making materials during the raid of a mosque. It should also be noted that the population of the Zanzibar Archipelago is mainly Muslim, and many in the region think they are being purposely and systematically deprived of development opportunities by Tanzania's central government. The inclusion of the Sharia court provision in the constitution would only worsen the situation, the debate over which has already divided the nation.<sup>14</sup>

In its most Recent report, Open Doors International notes that Christians suffer persecution in Tanzania—not only on Zanzibar, but also on the mainland:

All Christian communities in Tanzania are experiencing Christian persecution to some degree, but the Christian population on the Muslim-majority island of Zanzibar suffer the most. These Christians are frequently isolated, marginalized and denied access to community resources. Throughout the country, there have been waves of attacks against Christians, their property and churches that have resulted in the loss of life. Bullying, harassment and physical attacks, as well as arson, have occurred at the hands of radical Islamic groups. Churches have a difficult time obtaining the necessary registration and building new churches, as well as getting permits for assembly and preaching.<sup>15</sup>

Adding to the picture, the Counter Extremism Project notes that,

The Somali-based al-Shabab has also influenced Islamic extremist networks in Tanzania, with a presence in the country since at least 2008, according to some Tanzanian officials. While authorities have linked al-Shabab to numerous domestic extremist incidents, a number of attacks—as well as extremist religious leaders—remain unaffiliated with the Somali terror group and may instead be linked to and inspired by domestic political grievances. Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda, for example, a Tanzanian Islamic preacher, has propagated a mix of domestic grievances and religious fervor to incite followers to violence. Ponda's key message has been that the National Muslim Council of Tanzania (BAKWATA)—Tanzania's official Islamic organization responsible for electing the country's top mufti—is corrupt, counter to the true interests of Muslims, and therefore inherently un-Islamic. While al-Muhajiroun of East Africa—a pro-al-Shabab group based in Kenya—has praised Ponda in its official statements, there is no evidence confirming Ponda's membership or affiliation with that group, or with any regional or international extremist movement.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "MUSLIM RADICALS SET CHURCHES ON FIRE, THREATEN TO ERADICATE CHRISTIANITY IN TANZANIA," *THE CHRISTIAN POST*, SEPTEMBER 29, 2015: [HTTP://WWW.CHRIIANPOST.COM/NEWS/MUSLIM-EXTREMISTS-SET-CHURCHES-ON-FIRE-THREATEN-TO-ERADICATE-CHRISTIANITY-IN-TANZANIA-146470/](http://www.christianpost.com/news/muslim-extremists-set-churches-on-fire-threaten-to-eradicate-christianity-in-tanzania-146470/).

<sup>14</sup> "Tanzania: World Watch List 2017," Open Doors International: [Https://Www.Opendoorsusa.Org/Christian-Persecution/World-Watch-List/Tanzania/](https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/tanzania/).

<sup>15</sup> "Tanzania," Open Doors International 2018 World Watch List: [Https://Www.Opendoorsusa.Org/Christian-Persecution/World-Watch-List/Tanzania/](https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/tanzania/).

<sup>16</sup> "Tanzania: Extremism And Counter Extremism," Counter Extremism Project: [Https://Www.Counterextremism.Com/Countries/Tanzania](https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/tanzania).

## V. CONCLUSION

The purpose in this analysis of pointing out the transnational activities of Al-Shabaab in sub-Saharan East Africa, including in Tanzania, is because it forebodes increasing extremist Islamic pressure on the Christian populations in this part of the world, as it has increased the pressure on and the persecution of Christian populations in North Africa and throughout the Middle East – including Christians such as the Coptic Christians in Egypt, Maronite Christians in Lebanon, Christians in Syria, Christians in Iraq – and in South Asia at the hands of the Taliban in Pakistan. Without doubt, it has and will consequently increase the danger to individuals in these parts of the world. As demonstrated by the recent Islamic Al-Shabaab terrorist attack in Nairobi, Kenya, and by the arrest in southern Tanzania of Al-Shabaab recruits, Al-Shabaab and other Islamic extremist groups throughout the region, including Al Qaeda, are gaining strength. As their strength grows, pressure on Christians and violence against them in this part of the world will increase.

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