

Online Article

Terrorising Academic Freedom in Tanzania

On 3 July 2026, Melkisedeki Kitunzi Kaijage, an assistant lecturer in Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Dodoma (UDOM), was summoned to appear at the police station. He presented himself there on 8 July, accompanied by the deputy chairman of the University of Dodoma Academic Staff Association (UDOMASA), a lawyer by profession. Kaijage was taken into police custody allegedly for having incited people to demonstrate on the public holiday called Saba Saba, held on 7 July. This was the second time Kaijage had been arrested. ‘On December 9, 2025, he was arrested over a lecture delivered the previous day, after informers in his classroom allegedly told police he was inciting demonstrations planned for that date’ (Kuwanda 2026).

Kaijage remained in custody for seventeen days, contrary to the law, which requires the police to charge an accused person in court within twenty-four hours. UDOMASA filed an application in the High Court on 12 July. The case was eventually heard on 21 July. The judge ruled that Kaijage be released on bail. While the family and UDOMASA were processing bail, on 23 July, Kaijage was brought to the magistrate’s court

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on charges of terrorism, an offence which is not bailable. The particulars of the offence on the charge sheet read thus:

MELKISEDEK KITUNZI KAIJAGE, on 03rd day of July 2026 at the University of Dodoma area within Dodoma Region, committed a terrorist act to wit; threatening to burn public buildings and police residences within the United Republic of Tanzania, with the aim of seriously intimidating members of the Public of the United Republic of Tanzania.

The charge is dated 22 July—that is, a day after the High Court’s ruling.

The particulars of the offence read as if they have been cut and pasted from a template. They singularly lack the necessary details that could enable the accused to meet the accusation. Where exactly in the university were the threats issued? In a lecture room? Under a tree? In a public hall? Were the threats verbal or written? What was the medium used to issue the threat—social

media? a lecture? a public rally? What was the audience—students? passers-by? street vendors? What were the contents of the threat? A host of other questions could be posed but they would be unnecessary. The objective of the drafter of the charge is clear—to charge Kaijage with an unbailable offence not only to ‘punish’ the accused but to drive fear among and intimidate his academic peers.

No reasonable Tanzanian could imagine that a university lecturer would issue a threat to burn public buildings and police residences. But there we are! We are being told that even after the unrest around the general elections on 29 October 2025 resulted in the killings of hundreds of youths, and the subsequent all-pervasive fear that reigns over the country, we still have an isolated Tanzanian courageous enough to issue threats to burn public buildings and police residences.

Kaijage was promptly transferred from police custody to Isanga prison, ready for a long haul in custody. The case is likely to follow the same pattern, of a long spell of remand, that is becoming the new normal. Every time the case is called for mention, the prosecution applies for adjournment on spurious grounds like ‘investigations

are not complete'. Unfortunately, our courts invariably oblige without further ado. At the least, the court could raise the obvious question: Why was the accused arrested in the first place if the investigations were not complete?

And in this case, there are lots of other questions. Initially, the police took Kaijage into custody on charges of incitement, not terrorism. So, presumably within a day after the court order of release they found out that in fact he had not actually incited the public to demonstrate but rather threatened to burn public buildings and police residences to intimidate the public. Which is which? You don't intimidate the public that you are encouraging to demonstrate. Or maybe, in police thinking, Kaijage's original intention was to incite the public but while in police custody he changed his mind and decided to intimidate the public! This may sound illogical and absurd—but then absurdity is not foreign to coercive state apparatuses that thrive on the logic of force rather than the force of logic.

Kaijage's case is not isolated. On 3 July two other lecturers, Johaiven Revelian Bikongolo and Titus Joseph Kituli from St John's University of Tanzania at Dodoma, were arrested on allegations of mobilising demonstrations for the upcoming Saba Saba Day. It is said that one of the lecturers was arraigned after delivering a university lecture on Ethics and Good Governance during which historical corruption scandals were discussed. The ghosts of non-accountability and lack of public integrity continue to haunt the powers-that-be. They cannot even withstand the recalling of past scandals, perhaps for fear that current scandals might also surface.

To the credit of UDOMASA and the Tanzania Higher Learning Institutions Trade Union (THTU), they issued statements condemning the arrests and detentions and calling for the immediate release of the academics. The Africa Coalition for Academic Freedom (ACAF) based in Accra, Ghana also issued a statement addressed to the President of Tanzania. In addition, two opposition parties—ACT-Wazalendo and Chadema—condemned the detention. Comments and postings on social media expressing apprehension for the future of academic freedom and autonomy of the university as the site of debates and critical thinking have continued.

One conspicuous silence so far, regrettably, has been that of the University of Dar es Salaam Academic Staff Association (UDASA), which has yet to issue a statement of solidarity. UDASA, by the way, is the originator of the respected Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics adopted in 1990. This Declaration in turn inspired the continent-wide Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility. Both declarations have been instrumental in sparking debates on the importance of academic freedom and autonomy of the university as a site of critical thinking.

Academic freedom on the continent and elsewhere has been under severe strain over the past decade as states are becoming increasingly repressive and intolerant. Neoliberal chickens are coming home to roost. Various policy measures like privatisation, marketisation and the commodification of social services have resulted in enormous social inequality and massive unemployment among the youth, the

so-called Gen Z. This has led to youth protests and demonstrations, which states, bereft of any credible solutions, have responded to with ever more repression. Use of force is becoming the new normal, which we, Tanzanians, had the misfortune of witnessing in October last year. The official estimate by the Commission of Enquiry was that some 518 people were killed, many by gun shots—it is a gross underestimation. So far no one has been held criminally or politically accountable for this killing and mayhem. Society has been deeply traumatised. It lives in fear as the security apparatus continues its relentless campaign of arrests, detentions and abductions, with no signs of relenting.

As I was writing this piece, a newspaper report announced that some thirty members and leaders of the Chadema party, including four university students, have been charged with terrorism. The particulars of the offence, it seems, are not very different from those of the Kaijage case (*Mwananchi*, 25 July). As I said, there is a cut-and-paste template used in many of these cases. Meanwhile, the chairman of Chadema, Tundu Lissu, remains in prison on a charge of treason. His trial seems to go nowhere except to keep him under lock and key indefinitely.

The African intellectual community is at a crossroads. The incessant repression of our people under near-fascist and authoritarian regimes in many of our countries calls for a major continent-wide debate on our social responsibility. The choice before us is clear: we either accept being silenced and go under, or we continue beating the drums of resistance, whatever the cost.

References

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