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Talking about the Neighbors: The Discourse on Refugees in Tanzanian Politics

Beth Elise Whitaker*

Although the people of western Tanzania have historically welcomed migrants from many neighboring areas, the 1990s influx of refugees from Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) was unprecedented in its magnitude and in the extent of the international response. Between 1993 and 1998, nearly 1.3 million people sought refuge in this previously isolated corner of the country. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) established massive relief programs to address the needs of refugees and, in some cases, local hosts. Suddenly, rural hinterlands were transformed into sprawling cities and sleepy towns became headquarters for hi-tech aid operations.

The massive refugee influx came at a time of significant economic and political change in Tanzania. After nearly thirty years of one-party state socialism, the government was moving hesitantly along a path of liberalization that included a shift toward capitalist development and the adoption of a multiparty political system. Economic reforms launched in 1986 led to renewed growth and increased rural production, but were accompanied by declining government investment in social services and a growing income gap. Starting in 1992, political reforms introduced multiparty competition and greater media freedoms, although the *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) party continued to dominate the political scene. As refugees flowed into Tanzania in the mid 1990s, therefore, the joint processes of economic and political liberalization were generating both excitement and uncertainty.

In a country with roughly 30 million people, the influx of more than one million refugees in a five-year period had important political implications. Interestingly, though, the massive refugee influx did not overwhelm Tanzanian politics. Refugee factions were not recruited into alliances with local political parties, ethnic divisions did not emerge within host communities, nor did the refugee situation become an issue around which Tanzanians were mobilized in large numbers. For the most part, these issues had little salience in the Tanzanian political context, particularly in refugee-hosting areas that were far removed from national centers of power.

Nevertheless, the refugee issue did become politicized and perhaps inevitably became a part of Tanzanian political discourse. For host populations in the western part of the country, time was divided into two periods: *kabla ya wakimbizi* [before the refugees] and *baada ya wakimbizi kuja* [after the refugee influx]. As the process of liberalization continued and the political environment became more open, refugees figured prominently in political debates at the local and national levels. Political actors seized upon the refugee issue when it served their own political purposes, but at other times strategically avoided placing it on the agenda. There was thus a range of

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emerging discourses and debates on refugees in Tanzania, although the specific arguments varied depending upon the context and the actors involved.

This article examines the discourse on refugees in Tanzanian politics, especially during the early years of liberalization in the mid 1990s. The first section examines the ways in which Tanzanian politicians both addressed and avoided the refugee issue, depending upon the context. Anti-refugee discourse often played better in Dar es Salaam than it did in western Tanzania, forcing politicians to negotiate a careful balance. The next section explores how the refugee issue factored into three broader debates that were fueled by economic and political liberalization. Even as the number of refugees in the country eventually declined, the debate about the role of foreigners continued. The third section moves beyond discourse to look at the link with actual government practice. In the end, on refugees and other issues, there was an apparent disjuncture between local citizens and national policymakers. The former believed that their views had little impact on the latter, and evidence suggests they are at least partly correct. In an era when democratization promises better links between the two groups, the removal of key issues from the realm of political debate represents a worrisome trend.

Addressing and Avoiding the Refugee Issue in Tanzanian Politics

Given the magnitude of the refugee influx into western Tanzania in the mid 1990s, there was a surprising void of rhetoric about it on the national political scene. In the campaign leading up to national multiparty elections in 1995, for example, none of the major political parties put the refugee issue on its platform.⁵³ This included newly formed opposition parties that could have taken the opportunity to criticize the ruling CCM. Individual candidates might have been expected to raise the subject during their campaigns, particularly in host areas, but the refugee presence in western Tanzania did not become a political rallying point. Instead, parliamentary candidates rarely discussed the issue during their tours through the area, nor did they make promises about the future of the refugee operation.

If the refugee presence in western Tanzania had such widespread implications, why would political candidates seemingly ignore it? The primary reason was the uneven distribution of the impact of the refugee presence. Simply put, some Tanzanians were benefiting, while others were not.⁵⁴ Aware of this dichotomy, politicians did not want to alienate either group. In interviews, Tanzanian villagers who were benefiting from the refugee situation recognized the difficult position in which candidates found themselves:

We wanted the refugees to stay and work for us on our farms. We didn't want them to go home. So the candidates were aware that they wouldn't get our votes if they talked negatively about the refugees. Instead, they talked about

⁵³ Max Mmuya, *Government and Political Parties in Tanzania (After the 1995 General Elections): Facts and Figures* (Dar es Salaam: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Dar es Salaam University Press, 1995); Max Mmuya, *Tanzania: Political Reform in Eclipse: Crises and Cleavages in Political Parties* (Dar es Salaam: African Medical and Research Foundation, 1998).

⁵⁴ Beth Elise Whitaker, "Refugees in Western Tanzania: The Distribution of Burdens and Benefits Among Local Hosts," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, 4 (2002): 339-358.

finding better prices, especially for coffee, and opening a factory to refine the local brew.⁵⁵

Indeed, when asked why politicians did not discuss the refugee issue more explicitly in their campaigns, an unsuccessful opposition candidate explained,

The refugee issue was very delicate. We had to handle it with care. There were those who supported [the refugee presence] and those who didn't, so we tried to avoid saying anything.⁵⁶

Of course, this candidate was himself benefiting from the refugee presence, as were many others, so any discussion of the issue could also have been perceived as biased. Rather than speaking out to advocate repatriation, resettlement, or the status quo, therefore, would-be members of parliament sought to avoid the issue altogether. Clearly, even the lack of discourse on refugees was the result of strategic political decisions.

Compared to parliamentary candidates, the 1995 presidential candidates were somewhat more willing to speak about the refugee situation during their campaigns through western Tanzania. The two leading candidates both made a point of visiting Ngara district, which had the smallest local population but hosted the largest number of refugees at that time. They reportedly commented on the difficulties of the refugee situation for Tanzanian hosts, although the CCM candidate (and eventual winner) was more cautious in making any commitments about the future. Even so, the refugee issue remained a touchy subject, in large part because the candidates knew they could not please everyone.

While politicians were hesitant to take on the refugee issue in western Tanzania, they discussed it frequently when speaking in other areas of the country. Several members of parliament from the area were known for complaining about the refugee situation, primarily in an effort to attract more attention (and resources) to their constituencies. During parliamentary sessions, outspoken members portrayed the refugee presence as extremely negative and criticized the government for being too soft. When ministers announced in parliament new measures to control the movement and activities of refugees, they received loud applause and stamping of feet.⁵⁷ In November 1998, when new refugee legislation came up for a vote, nearly all of the 29 parliamentarians who spoke on the bill blamed refugees for crime, terrorism, environmental degradation, and other problems, and accused the government of caring more for refugees than its own citizens.⁵⁸ The bill, which called for a more restrictive approach toward refugees, passed virtually without opposition.

⁵⁵ Due to the similarity of what they said, quotes from two anonymous interviewees have been combined here into a single panel. For more on the use of panels, see Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). The quotes have been translated from Swahili by the author.

⁵⁶ Interview with Onesmus Kabugumila, NCCR-Mageuzi parliamentary candidate, 1 May 1997, Karagwe, Tanzania.

⁵⁷ *The Guardian*, 30 July 1997.

⁵⁸ *The Guardian*, 16 November 1998.

When constituents at home learned of the anti-refugee statements of their representatives, they were not always supportive. In early 1998, for example, hosts in Karagwe district heard that their long-time member of parliament had stated publicly that the district would not accept any more Rwandan refugees. Instead of supporting the views of their representative, many Tanzanians were upset about his statement and claimed instead that they wanted refugees there. Although others had more positive reactions to the member's statement, it is clear that there was a much broader range of opinions among constituents than was articulated by their elected representative. Overall, politicians expressed much more nuanced views on the refugee issue when campaigning in refugee-hosting areas, while voicing rather more simplistic positions focused on the negative aspects of the refugee presence when speaking in other contexts.

Interestingly, rather than reflecting the complexity of hosts' views in their constituencies, the statements of these parliamentarians may have been shaped by the perceptions of Tanzanians in other areas of the country. In Dar es Salaam especially, where the majority of lawmakers lived, the attitude toward the refugee presence was overwhelmingly negative. Taxi drivers, merchants, and other urban residents expressed surprising resentment toward refugees. They conveyed pity for their compatriots further west and associated the refugee presence with violence, insecurity, and environmental destruction. They found it hard to believe that host communities actually experienced some benefits as a result of the refugee situation. In the national political discourse, the refugee issue was widely viewed from a negative perspective and did not reflect the complex dynamics of the experience in host communities.

This negative perception was also evident in the media portrayal of the refugee situation. After the process of political liberalization began in the early 1990s, more than 20 independent publications started to offer alternative views to those of the state-owned media. Even so, virtually all of the country's newspapers were published in Dar es Salaam, and rarely reached readers in rural areas. A rough survey of 98 newspaper headlines in the mid 1990s that included clear references to refugees found that 46 percent reflected a negative perception of the refugee situation, as compared to just 10 percent portraying the refugee presence as having positive aspects. The remaining 44 percent could be classified as neutral in that they were brief fact-based articles reporting the most recent numbers of refugee arrivals or the statements of various officials. A more systematic survey of newspaper articles in Costa Rica also found that the media's portrayal of refugees was more negative than hosts' attitudes.⁵⁹

In addition to being more numerous, the Tanzanian headlines that described the refugee situation negatively often used exaggerated imagery and phrases. Examples from English-language newspapers include headlines such as "Refugees from Rwanda and Burundi create desert in Karagwe,"⁶⁰ "Armed Refugee Terror,"⁶¹ and "Refugees: Perennial problem?"⁶² Sensational headlines about crime and

⁵⁹ Mario A. Ramírez, *Refugee Policy Challenges: The Case of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica* (Washington DC: Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistance, Georgetown University, 1989).

⁶⁰ *Mtanzania*, 3 January 1996.

⁶¹ *The Guardian*, 10 June 1998.

⁶² *Sunday Observer*, 28 January 1996.

environmental degradation were a sure way to attract readers. The few headlines that highlighted positive aspects of the refugee presence concentrated on benefits to the local economy: “Karagwe cash in on refugees”⁶³ and “EU commits \$26.4 million to rehabilitate refugee affected areas in Kigoma.”⁶⁴

Partly in response to negative headlines, UNHCR made a concerted effort to improve the popular perception of refugees in Tanzania. It hired a public relations expert to hold press conferences and publicize beneficial aspects of the refugee presence. He escorted a Tanzanian journalist and photographer to refugee-hosting districts to give a new spin on developments in the field. The UNHCR country office also started publishing *Milestone*, a quarterly journal targeted at government officials. UNHCR representatives were very open about their attempts to change the portrayal of the refugee issue at the national level. As the external relations officer explained, “We are not just blowing our own horn; we want people to recognize that we don’t just come in and leave.”⁶⁵ Even with these efforts, UNHCR found it difficult to get the national discourse to move beyond its negative view of refugees. According to another UNHCR official, “We have failed to prove the economic value of the refugee presence. We know it’s true, but it’s an uphill battle to convince others.”⁶⁶

Thus, there was an apparent disconnect between the perspectives of people in host communities and those of elite leaders at the national level. While hosts in western Tanzania described the refugee presence as having brought both costs and benefits to their villages, members of parliament, government officials, journalists, and the urban public continued to portray the refugee situation as largely negative. In many ways, this message was directed more toward the international audience than domestic constituents; an emphasis on the burden of hosting refugees put pressure on donors to respond. Even so, the assumption underlying political liberalization is that increased competition will encourage elected leaders to be more accountable to the views of their constituents. But on the matter of refugees at least, the articulated positions of elite leaders painted only one side of the story, while alternative viewpoints were effectively silenced.⁶⁷ As a result, the complexity of the refugee situation in Tanzanian host communities was not thoroughly reflected in national political discourse.

The Role of Refugees in Other Political Debates

Although the government’s handling of the refugee situation in Tanzania did not become the subject of widespread political debate, refugees did figure prominently in several other debates in the mid 1990s. Politicians used the issue strategically when it furthered their arguments about other matters. These broader debates concerned the stability of the new multiparty system, the role of foreigners in the country’s economic and political arenas, and the responsibility of government in bringing about

⁶³ *Daily News*, 15 October 1996.

⁶⁴ *Daily Mail*, 23 November 1998.

⁶⁵ Interview with Vincent Parker, UNHCR public relations officer, 27 October 1997, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

⁶⁶ Interview with Henrik Nordentoft, UNHCR senior official, 4 August 1998, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

⁶⁷ Mario Ramírez describes a similar “public silence” imposed on the refugee subject in Costa Rica that revealed who the important decision makers were. See Ramírez, *Refugee Policy Challenges*.

economic development. While refugees were not the focus of any of these debates, images of them and references to them were evoked as just one among several arguments through which politicians attempted to make their points.

Stability in a Multiparty Era

During the national election campaign in 1995, candidates from the ruling CCM party sought to raise concerns about the stability of the country in the new multiparty era. They claimed to offer voters a known quantity, a conservative approach that would avoid radical—and possibly negative—changes. Opposition party candidates, on the other hand, sold themselves as a fresh alternative that would be more accountable to the demands of the people. To an extent, the campaigns reflected an ongoing “democratization debate” about the value of holding multiparty elections at all. CCM party stalwarts argued that the political process already was competitive under the one-party system, and that the donor-driven shift to a multiparty system only served to turn Tanzanians against one another. According to this reasoning, if opposition parties were to gain power, the politics of hate and division would expand, and instability would be the likely outcome.

This sort of argument is not new. Drawing on examples from nineteenth century Europe, Albert Hirschman illustrates what he calls “the jeopardy thesis”—the claim that a new advance will somehow put an older one at risk.⁶⁸ Authoritarian leaders around the world have long used these arguments to resist liberalization and protect the status quo. In Africa, leaders such as the late Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Daniel arap Moi of Kenya argued that the adoption of a multiparty system would generate ethnic animosities, thereby leading to widespread violence.⁶⁹ Where political liberalization was inevitable, ruling parties claimed that only their leaders (unlike those of new opposition parties) could protect the public peace. Incumbent Kenneth Kaunda’s party used such arguments, for example, during the 1991 multiparty election campaign in Zambia.⁷⁰

In the Tanzanian case, the jeopardy thesis posited that a shift to multiparty competition would put unwanted strains on a sense of national cohesion that the one-party state had taken years to cultivate.⁷¹ Multiparty politics were portrayed as inherently divisive and confrontational, and necessarily leading to instability. Implicit in this argument was the assumption that the cohesion of the earlier stage was normatively more desirable, a claim supported by reference to Tanzania’s long record of peace and stability within a volatile region. In the national campaign in 1995, CCM candidates regularly used this argument to dissuade voters from picking opposition

⁶⁸ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁶⁹ In 1992 and 1997, in what many saw as an effort to create a self-fulfilling prophecy, Kenyan authorities allegedly provoked a series of ethnic clashes in the Rift Valley Province to deter people from voting for the opposition.

⁷⁰ National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the Carter Center of Emory University. *The October 31, 1991 National Elections in Zambia* (Washington DC: National Democratic Institute, 1992).

⁷¹ Michael Chege, “The Return of Multiparty Politics,” in Joel D. Barkan, ed. *Beyond Capitalism vs. Socialism in Kenya and Tanzania* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994).

candidates, presumably in an effort to protect them from unprecedented instability and hardship.

In exploiting this jeopardy argument, ruling party strategists gave refugees a starring role. CCM candidates repeatedly told voters that their selection of opposition candidates would lead to instability and violence, and that Tanzanians would become refugees like those from Rwanda and Burundi. Politicians frequently argued that the refugee-generating conflicts in neighboring countries were the result of multiparty politics, and similar wars could break out just as easily in Tanzania.⁷² Several villagers provided compelling descriptions of CCM campaign tactics:

The CCM used the refugees to show an example of a situation of *vurugu* [disorder]. They said, “Look at these refugees, they are here because they had a war as a result of *vyama vingi* [multipartyism]. Friends, if you elect another political party, we Tanzanians will have problems just like these refugees, meaning that wars could break out. Therefore, it is better that you elect CCM, which is the party with experience.” People saw this as true and were scared of making changes.⁷³

While convincing to many voters, this argument was viewed as a scare tactic in some circles. The suggestion that multiparty competition would lead to widespread violence in Tanzania similar to that of neighboring countries seemed far-fetched. Others saw the argument as a thinly veiled technique to keep people from demanding too much in an era of political liberalization.

In addition to campaign rhetoric, the jeopardy argument found its way into the performances of a CCM-sponsored theater troupe, Tanzania One Theatre (TOT).⁷⁴ The group was based in Dar es Salaam but traveled around the country spreading the party message. The trademark song of the group’s leader, Captain Komba (himself a member of the CCM National Executive Committee), was entitled “CCM is Number One.” It was in another popular song called “*Mambo Sasa*,” though, that Komba deplored the recent violence in Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, and Somalia. The song’s lyrics concluded by praising “the party” (CCM) as the protector of peace and stability in Tanzania.⁷⁵ Again, the party’s representative invoked frightful images of violence and chaos to persuade voters to stand by CCM rather than electing its opposition.

⁷² This argument was not generally perceived as a threat by the CCM to take up arms and instigate violence if it lost in the multiparty elections. Such a scenario was virtually unimaginable in the Tanzanian context. Instead, the approach was designed solely to evoke fear of the unknown.

⁷³ This panel consists of quotes from five anonymous interviewees that have been translated from Swahili by the author.

⁷⁴ TOT claimed to be financially independent of CCM, but, as Laura Edmondson argues, it was clear that “admission fees alone did not pay for the \$65,000 sound system imported from the U.S. in 1997, or for their shiny red minibus...; it was widely believed that CCM funds were used in both transactions.” See Laura Edmondson, “Popular Art, Political Change: The Performance of Power in Tanzanian Theatre,” paper presented at the 41st Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Chicago, Illinois, October 29-November 1, 1998.

⁷⁵ Edmondson, “Popular Art, Political Change.”

The most extreme example of the use of the jeopardy argument was a campaign commercial that aired on Tanzanian television in the months prior to the 1995 election. The relevant clip reportedly showed video images of Rwandan refugees streaming across the border into Tanzania, accompanied by an audio message that the Rwandan conflict was the result of multiparty competition and that Tanzanians should continue to vote for CCM. The implication again was that if people elected opposition parties, the political situation in the country would deteriorate as it had in Rwanda. The video was shown repeatedly in Dar es Salaam and other areas of the country in the run-up to the election, although it was eventually withdrawn from the airwaves after controversy emerged over its tactics. Through their exploitation of these widespread perceptions and fears about becoming refugees, therefore, ruling party candidates convinced voters to pursue a conservative approach and to select stability over change. By the time of the 2000 election, CCM leaders were less concerned about the opposition threat and largely resisted the temptation to revive such arguments in their campaign.

Foreigners in the Economic and Political Arenas

The refugee situation also figured into a broader national debate about the role of foreigners in the Tanzanian economy. This dialogue, dubbed the “indigenization debate,”⁷⁶ especially targeted the Asian business community, which was perceived to have benefited disproportionately from recent policies of economic liberalization. In 1992, a controversial opposition figure, Reverend C. Mtikila, exploited underlying resentment against this minority group and provoked crowds to ransack Asian-owned businesses in Dar es Salaam.⁷⁷ The populist preacher also questioned the loyalties of Asians, and accused them of corruptly buying off CCM leaders for their own economic benefit and to the detriment of the country.⁷⁸

Although Mtikila’s own party was not registered, several other opposition parties tapped into his politics and espoused similar views of economic nationalism. The opposition party NCCR-Maguezi supported what it called *uzawa* [indigenization] and advocated a policy of preferential treatment for indigenous people within a wider free market economy.⁷⁹ The CCM initially resisted indigenization, which it portrayed as racist and divisive. (This played into CCM efforts to discredit the opposition for allegedly provoking instability and turning Tanzanians against one another.) As indigenization gained popular support, however, CCM sought to coopt nationalist sentiment. By 1994, the ruling party campaigned openly for indigenous people to assume control of the Tanzanian economy.⁸⁰

Although focused against the Asian minority, the indigenization debate fueled wider concerns about the loyalties of foreigners living within the country and the extent to which these groups could influence Tanzanian economic and political development.

⁷⁶ Aili Mari Tripp, *Changing the Rules: The Politics of Liberalization and the Urban Informal Economy in Tanzania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁷⁷ Chege, “The Return of Multiparty Politics.”

⁷⁸ Max Mmuya and Amon Chaligha, *Political Parties and Democracy in Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Dar es Salaam University Press, 1994).

⁷⁹ Mmuya, *Tanzania: Political Reform in Eclipse*.

⁸⁰ Mmuya and Chaligha, *Political Parties and Democracy in Tanzania*.

There emerged a general climate of xenophobia within some circles. In Dar es Salaam, for example, the results of the parliamentary election for one district were disputed because the victorious CCM candidate was born in Burundi. A court eventually dismissed the case, finding that the candidate was in fact a Tanzanian citizen since his parents had both been born in the country and had never renounced their citizenship.⁸¹ Similar court petitions were filed contesting the citizenship of several other parliamentary candidates, though their outcomes varied. More recently, in 2001, the government declared four political figures non-citizens, but gave them the option of applying for naturalization.

In western Tanzania, this concern about the political involvement of foreigners focused on the refugee population, especially the possibility of refugees voting in national elections. In 1995, both CCM and opposition parties accused each other of registering large numbers of refugees to vote in several border constituencies. Political parties were also alleged to have taken advantage of intermarriage between refugees and Tanzanians to register more voters for their own electoral gain.⁸² Although government officials claimed that refugees were not allowed to leave their camps during elections, a former CCM official speaking on the condition of anonymity admitted that some refugees very likely voted due to confusion over “who was who.” In 1997, witnesses testified in Tanzania’s high court that non-citizens from Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda had been permitted by local officials to vote in the 1995 elections in Bukoba rural district.⁸³ Though there were certainly isolated incidents, there was no evidence of any widespread strategy to recruit refugees into political parties. Even so, in the context of the national debate over indigenization, refugees clearly represented another group whose political loyalties were open to question.

In recent years, as the number of refugees in Tanzania has declined, there have been fewer concerns about the possibility of them voting in elections. The debate has continued about foreigners participating in politics, though, particularly as the process of economic liberalization gained momentum. Anti-foreigner rhetoric again has focused largely on the Asian minority, but increasingly has targeted South Africans and other foreigners who have bought properties sold off by the government through privatization. One politician has gained popular support for his renewed promotion of *uzawa* to shift control of the economy from “non-indigenous Tanzanians” to “African Tanzanians.”⁸⁴ Plans are underway to issue national identity cards in an effort to more easily distinguish citizens from non-citizens. Although refugees have never been the primary focus of this debate, the growing climate of xenophobia in Tanzania has provided the context for increasingly restrictive asylum policies within the country.

⁸¹ *The Guardian* and *The Daily News*, 12 November 1997.

⁸² J. C. Mwakasege, “The Impact of Refugees on Host Communities: The Case of Kasulu, Ngara and Karagwe,” paper presented at the International Workshop on the Refugee Crisis in the Great Lakes Region, Arusha, Tanzania, August 16-19, 1995.

⁸³ *The Daily News*, 15 October 1997.

⁸⁴ Iddi Simba, *A Concept of Indigenisation*, pamphlet produced in Dar es Salaam, May 2003.

Government Responsibility for Development

It was not the presence of refugees *per se* but rather the role of the relief operation that was exploited by politicians in a third political debate. At issue was whether the government was primarily responsible for bringing about development, or if that task fell instead on private individuals and international organizations. In the context of the ongoing process of structural adjustment, this debate took on considerable importance. As basic social services such as health care and education were subjected to cost-sharing measures, the dividing line between public and private responsibility was increasingly blurred. In addition, in the multiparty era, there was disagreement about whether the ruling party should be held accountable for the failures of its development policies over the previous three decades.

In western Tanzania, the massive refugee influx brought with it a major international relief operation. Over time, in addition to providing services to the refugees, agencies started to implement relief and development projects in host communities. They focused on education, health, infrastructure, and the environment, sectors in which the Tanzanian government was increasingly unable to sustain quality services. As a result, international agencies became a sort of substitute for the government and were in fact better able than their state counterpart to deliver on development promises. Many Tanzanians came to believe that these organizations had an obligation to assist them, even more so than their own government.⁸⁵ As the relief operation continued through the 1990s, the government eventually sought to reign in these external actors by establishing coordination structures and increasing the involvement of local NGOs. Even so, relief and development projects remained largely in the hands of donor-funded organizations that were only narrowly accountable to the public interest.⁸⁶

As international agencies increased their visibility in Tanzanian villages, opposition parties sought to make it a political issue. In particular, they used donor-funded projects to highlight the ways in which the CCM government was not living up to its responsibilities. In one community, for example, an international NGO encountered unexpected opposition to its participatory approach toward rehabilitating the local primary school. The NGO agreed to provide resources and materials that were not available locally—skilled labor, cement, nails, etc.—while villagers were expected to contribute their time and labor toward construction. The theory was that community participation would encourage a sense of ownership and foster a desire to maintain the school in the future. This approach had worked well in several other villages, but stalled in this situation, as described by the project coordinators:

In [that community], we had problems getting people to take responsibility. There were political conflicts between CCM and NCCR. NCCR supporters told people to not cooperate with our project. They argued that the government (in other words CCM) should provide schools for free, and that the villagers

⁸⁵ Loren B. Landau, "Beyond the Losers: Transforming Governmental Practice in Refugee-Affected Tanzania," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16, 1 (2003): 19-43.

⁸⁶ Peter Gibbon, ed., *Liberalized Development in Tanzania* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1995).

shouldn't have to do it themselves. This affected their willingness to participate.⁸⁷

Eventually, NGO representatives persuaded local opposition leaders that a rehabilitated school would benefit the community at large, regardless of the political debate over who was responsible for its construction.

The debate over government responsibility for development was not unique to western Tanzania, but many projects in that area would not have started in the first place were it not for the refugees. More often than not, the argument that the government should be taking greater responsibility for local development fell on deaf ears. Many people had long since given up on the ability of the government to facilitate development. Rather than demanding that the government make good on its promises, as opposition parties would have liked, Tanzanians searched instead for alternative agents of development, which they found in international NGOs. Indeed, by the time of the 2000 elections, all political parties were turning their attention to these agencies. Rather than blasting the CCM for its failures, for example, an opposition candidate in Kasulu promised to go to Geneva if elected to demand more support from UNHCR.⁸⁸ President Benjamin Mkapa himself became increasingly vocal in his calls for donors to address the “unbearable burden” of the refugees.⁸⁹ Thus, while the political debate continued over who should be responsible, Tanzanians tried to get development resources from wherever they were available.

Beyond Political Discourse

It is no surprise, given the changes that took place in western Tanzania after 1993, that the refugee issue became a part of broader political debates. Politicians exploited the issue when it furthered their own purposes, and similarly avoided the topic when it represented a liability. The creativity with which political candidates sought to make an issue, or a non-issue, of the refugee situation could be regarded as a logical outcome of the shift to multiparty competition. Even so, for several reasons, one should not overestimate the importance of the refugee issue in Tanzanian politics.

First, the refugee situation was just one of many issues of concern to voters in Tanzania. Other issues were more important, and more politically salient, in different contexts at different times. During the 1995 election, for example, a leading concern in Karagwe district was corruption within the local cooperative union, which had not paid farmers for their coffee crops in three years. According to interviewees, the election outcome was influenced more by the coffee scandal than the refugee situation, especially because one opposition candidate had ties to the cooperative union. Thus, the assumption that the refugee issue would be any more important than other issues neglects the complexity of local politics.

Second, it was not necessarily the refugee presence that was at issue for Tanzanian hosts, but rather some aspects of the situation. Most hosts would have been glad to

⁸⁷ Interview with Phil Chandler and Kathy Chandler, Christian Outreach, 3 March 1998, Kasulu, Tanzania.

⁸⁸ Landau, “Beyond the Losers.”

⁸⁹ *The Daily News*, 12 January 2002.

keep the positive effects of the refugees if the negative ones could have been eliminated. Perhaps the problem of greatest concern was the increased level of insecurity. To many Tanzanians, peace and security are matters of special political salience. According to the results of a poll conducted in nine rural regions in mid-1995, Tanzanians viewed security as one of the primary responsibilities of government.⁹⁰ As one farmer argued, “You can’t get development without having *usalama* [security] first.” That the refugee issue entered into political debates, therefore, may have had more to do with related concerns rather than any special salience of that issue.

Finally, these debates often occurred at the realm of discourse rather than actual practice. Regardless of what politicians said, their statements generally had little impact on the ground. Many Tanzanians argued that democratic politics was just a series of unfulfilled promises:

The candidates begged for our votes and promised us projects, water, and roads. NCCR said they would bring a tractor to every village. CCM promised us industries and said they would look for a market for our coffee. The president promised us electricity [*laughter*]. We’ve waited and waited until today, but we have not seen anything. We didn’t believe all these things would really come, although it would be nice. It was all just politicians’ lies. Many promises were made, but no one would fulfill the promises. Why? Because what they were seeking has already been secured [votes]. Why should they bother? When the next elections come around, though, we’ll see them back here again.⁹¹

This level of cynicism was expressed after just one multiparty election, although Tanzania had long held semi-competitive elections within the single party. The pattern that emerged in both periods generated similar frustrations about the relationship between discourse and practice.

Indeed, when it came to refugees in Tanzania, democratic pressures did not play a role in determining government policy.⁹² Refugee policy was charted instead by officials who were insulated from electoral politics. The president was ultimately responsible for the most significant decisions, including closing the border in 1995 to prevent a further influx and forcibly repatriating half a million Rwandans in 1996. But his closest advisors on these matters were in the executive branch and the ruling party, not the elected parliament. In the late 1990s, Tanzania cracked down on refugees. Restrictions were placed on their movement and the military conducted round-up operations in local villages. As regional security became an overriding concern, responsibility for refugee policy shifted from the refugee division of the Ministry of

⁹⁰ John C. Sivalon, “Towards the Elections 1995: A Preliminary Report of the Third Research Session Investigating the Political Attitudes of Rural Tanzanians,” TADREG working paper series #4, Department of Sociology, University of Dar es Salaam, August 1995.

⁹¹ This panel includes direct quotes from five interviewees and reflects the expressed sentiments of many others.

⁹² Interview with Jonathan Lwehabura, President’s Office, 24 July 1998. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; interview with Nippe Mdoe, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 August 1998, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Home Affairs to the President's Office and military departments.⁹³ A new refugee law passed by parliament in 1998 provided some guidelines, but the detailed policy released in 2003 was developed behind closed doors and without public input. On refugee issues, along with other policy matters, there was no clear mechanism linking public debates to government action.

Conclusion

The influx of refugees and relief resources into western Tanzania had important implications in the national political arena. Politicians sought to exploit the refugee issue when it served their own purposes. Representatives from host areas complained loudly about the refugee presence at the national level as a way to attract attention and resources to their constituencies. While campaigning in those same constituencies, however, they were aware that hosts were divided on the issue, and strategically avoided placing it on the agenda. Enterprising politicians also raised the refugee issue whenever it furthered their arguments on other matters. In this way, refugees played a small but recognizable part in debates about the potential risks of multiparty elections and the role of foreigners in the economy. The relief operation also factored into a broader debate about the appropriate role of government in facilitating economic development.

The findings from Tanzania are consistent with those from other refugee contexts. It is common for politicians in host countries to highlight the refugee issue when it can increase their own bases of support or weaken political enemies. Similar patterns have been observed in Congo, Costa Rica, Malawi, and Pakistan, among others. Of course, the possibilities for political manipulation of the refugee issue are not limited to the developing world. Refugee and immigration issues are frequently used to mobilize voters in industrialized countries. One need only think of some conservative politicians in the United States and Europe to realize that the exploitation of anti-foreigner sentiment is a common political strategy, perhaps especially in important constituencies in democratic countries.⁹⁴

Beyond the strategic use of the refugee issue by politicians, there was a disjuncture between the discourse on refugees in host communities and the discourse on refugees in the rest of Tanzania. Generally, refugee-related discussions at the national level did not reflect the complexity of opinions at the local level. Ultimately, this disjuncture was reproduced in government policy toward the refugees. Many government decisions were not supported, or were not clearly understood, by people in host communities. Hosts were openly critical of restrictions placed on refugee movement and the round-up operation of long-term refugees in local villages. The disjuncture was also demonstrated through hosts' statements about their own influence in the decision-making process. Repeatedly, hosts argued that their opinions had no role in determining policies, and that policymaking was the domain of government elites. When it came to refugee policy in particular, their suspicions were largely correct.

⁹³ This was confirmed in July 2003 by a representative from the Ministry of Home Affairs who asked to remain anonymous.

⁹⁴ Jeannette Money, *Fences and Neighbors: The Political Geography of Immigration Control* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

Although the disjuncture between the local level and the national level in Tanzania existed even before the refugee influx, it was highlighted again by that situation. The divide was particularly important in the context of political liberalization, when it is generally assumed that leaders will adopt policies that are shaped by public demands. In this case, however, the local-national disjuncture limited the extent to which public opinion was translated into government action. Hosts thus became increasingly disenchanted with the political process and their ability to participate in it. In this way, the refugee situation in Tanzania could ultimately contribute to growing frustration with the unfulfilled promises of democratization, a possibility that has even broader political implications.