

Nyerere, the devout Catholic

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Tanzania is, by its Constitution, a secular state. The population of Tanzania is made up of people of different religious orientations, the majority being Muslims and Christians, who each make up about 40 per cent of the population. There is also a small number of Tanzanians who do not belong to any of the conventional religious groupings. Nyerere was a strong practising Catholic, but he was also a strong believer in the principle that religion should be separated from politics.

Nyerere wanted to build a secular state that guaranteed freedom of worship for all. He wanted to build a strong united nation, and he was aware of the risk of social and political conflicts that can be fuelled by religious intolerance. At independence most schools were owned and managed by religious organisations, particularly the Catholic Church. Fearing that free and equal access to faith schools would not be guaranteed for every Tanzanian, Nyerere nationalised all faith schools. Hospitals owned by faith institutions were also nationalised. Despite being a devout Catholic himself he did not allow the Catholic Church to influence or interfere with his government in any way.

Advocate of secular state

Nyerere was an advocate of the secular state, and this remains one of the pillars of Tanzania's unity today.

In his post-independence speeches, in which he addressed Muslim and Christian leaders separately, Nyerere emphasized the need for a secular state, saying in simple terms that while Tanzania lacked a single,

unifying national religion, Tanzanians as individuals had their own respective religions. He explained at length the fact that Tanzania, unlike the United Kingdom or Saudi Arabia, did not have state religion. The constitution of Tanzania expressly provides for a secular state and it is illegal to establish a political party on the basis of religious faith. Tanzania is one of the few African countries to enjoy high levels of religious tolerance. In part, this is because families often contain members who are of different faiths. It is not uncommon for husband and wife to subscribe to different religious beliefs: the law permits them to join in matrimony through a civil marriage process.

Although Nyerere was deeply religious he was neither a religionist nor a tribalist. People from all walks of life, regardless of their religious beliefs, race, or ethnic origin, formed his government. Nyerere always reminded people that in appointing government officials or ministers his main concern was the ability and competence of the individual, not his religious orientation, race or tribal origin.

Non-discriminatory policies

Many of the founder members of TANU were Muslims. When Nyerere decided to step down from the premiership soon after independence in 1962 to consolidate TANU, it was Rashid Kawawa, a Muslim, to whom he handed office. Subsequently he appointed Dr Salim Ahmed Salim, another Muslim, his prime minister in 1984. He eventually handed the presidency to Ali Hassan Mwinyi a Muslim in 1985 when he voluntarily stepped down.

It was Nyerere who asked Muammar Gaddafi of Libya to provide the funds to build a big and beautiful mosque for the Muslims of his village at Butiama. This is the legacy of Nyerere that as a Tanzanian I feel very proud of. This legacy still resonates with all of us in Tanzania today.

We have to hold on to Nyerere's teachings and not give religion and religionist leaders any opportunity to break our unity. Nyerere's outstanding integrity and intense love for his fellow human beings ran across the lines of geography, race, colour, religion and gender. His lifelong philosophy rested on the premise that all human beings deserve equal freedom, justice, respect and dignity and as he once said: "I am an ardent believer in the freedom and welfare of the individual." **F**

Mwalimu Nyerere (centre), former President Benjamin Mkapa and Dr Pius Ng'wandu at a University Graduation Ceremony where Mwalimu was awarded an honorary Doctorate.

