Independent electoral commission in Tanzania: A false debate?

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Abstract

The electoral discourse in Africa today is dominated by the question of the 'independence' of an electoral management body as one of the prerequisites for free and fair elections. The central issue in the discourse is 'what constitutes the basic tests of an independent body'. By overemphasising the structures and legal framework of an electoral body, institutionalists assume that the actors and the electoral body are distinctive. Drawing from the 'institution-actor dichotomy' frame of analysis, this article argues that both the structure and behaviour of actors are essential in assessing the independence of an institution. Using Tanzania as a country case example, this article argues that the National Election Commission (NEC) does not pass the basic tests of an independent institution and hence its credibility is questionable for the key stakeholders. For NEC to be independent and autonomous, major reforms not only for the body but also for the entire political system and culture are needed in line with competitive politics.