Beyond Polarity in Zanzibar? The 'Silent' Referendum and The Government of National Unity

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Abstract

On 31 July 2010 the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar held a referendum to decide on the government of national unity so as to end the impasse between the two main political camps, each dominating one of the two islands of Unguja and Pemba. The outcome of the referendum was that the majority of Zanzibaris voted in favour of the government of national unity. This article revisits how the referendum was carried out in terms of observing the basic principles of a democratic referendum and whether the referendum would be a panacea for the polarisation between the two islands. The main argument held here is that the referendum fell short of observing some of the basic principles of a democratic referendum since it systematically suppressed the voices of those who opted for a 'No' vote. Besides this, the government of national unity created after the referendum was in essence the unity of the two major political parties, namely the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) and the Civic United Front (CUF). Relatedly, some of the fundamental issues causing polarisation are yet to be tackled, a situation which, if not addressed in time, would make this polarity a likely facet of Zanzibar's future politics.

Keywords
Zanzibar; referendum; government of national unity; CCM; CUF