

Tanzania has a female president. Does it have a feminist president?

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The late Magufuli had open contempt for women. President Suluhu has the power and political capital to change course.

Following the shock of President John Magufuli's death on 17 March, many Tanzanians are full of hope at what the rule of his successor might bring. President Samia Suluhu has already reversed some of her predecessor's stances. She has ordered bans on media outlets imposed by the previous administration to be lifted and initiated an expert coronavirus taskforce. Now, many would like to see Tanzania's first female president break with Magufuli's legacy on gender issues.

During his five or so years in office, President Magufuli exhibited contempt for women and girls repeatedly. In June 2017, for instance, he announced a ban on pregnant girls attending school, saying "we cannot allow this immoral behaviour to permeate our primary and secondary schools". This policy not only forced vulnerable children into further precarity but went against his own government's existing guidelines. In 2018, his administration banned family planning ads on radio and television. The government gave no reason for the move, but it came days after Magufuli had called people who use contraception "lazy", saying "they do not want to work hard to feed a large family".

The former president's disdain for women also came out in his rhetoric as he frequently went off script. During a function at State House in August 2020, for example, Magufuli said he would beat women from southern Tanzania who were planning to protest, adding "I am being

honest without hiding it". In the October 2020 elections, he asked voters in Temeke, Dar es Salaam, to vote for the ruling party's lighter-skinned candidate, saying he was more likely to listen to her than her darker-complexioned opponent.

These stances probably didn't lose Magufuli support, especially among his mostly rural and poorly educated base who traditionally admire machismo. His sexist comments were typically presented as jokes and were often wildly cheered by rally-goers and fans on social media. However, it is unlikely it won him votes that he didn't already have either.

President Suluhu inherits the same base and may be hesitant to move too fast and risk alienating it, but beyond this, there is little stopping her reversing many of the former president's positions. Magufuli's brand of misogyny seems to have reflected his personal views rather than being part of any greater government strategy. His stance on women became the state's. Now he is gone, Suluhu has the opportunity to let her own beliefs on gender shape official policy.

What does Suluhu stand for?

Based on her first days in office since her inauguration on 19 March, it is difficult to predict to what extent President Suluhu will attempt to tackle gender inequality.

On the one hand, she seemed to be aware of, and gearing up to confront, the deep-rooted patriarchal views that permeate Tanzanian society when she declared at Magufuli's state funeral: "For those with doubts if this woman can be the president of the United Republic of Tanzania, I want to tell you that the one you see standing before you is the president."

On the other hand, Suluhu's 29 March remarks on sexual corruption in universities have already disappointed gender advocates. They accuse the president of misrecognising the nature of the problem and downplaying its seriousness when she emphasised that the perpetrator and victim of sexual exploitation are "both adults".

Based on her background, it is also difficult to get a sense of Suluhu's beliefs. What we do know is that the 61-year-old is a seasoned politician

who knows what it takes to progress as a woman in Tanzania's male-dominated politics. Suluhu was first elected in 2000 as a member of the Zanzibar House of Representatives and became the only high-ranking female minister in the Zanzibari government. In 2010, she won a seat in the National Assembly. She was immediately appointed as a minister under President Jakaya Kikwete before she became vice-president when Magufuli took office in 2015.

From this experience, President Suluhu will know what it takes to get things done. The question remains of whether she has the political will to advance gender equality in a country where female representation in politics is low and women's earnings lag significantly behind men's.

If she does, reversing Magufuli's sexist ban on pregnant students going to school would send a clear- and politically cost-free - message that it will not be business as usual. Another straightforward move would be to increase the minimum age for females to marry to 18 years, in accordance with the 2019 Supreme Court of Appeal ruling that Tanzania's marriage act is currently unconstitutional.

The ball on these matters and more is in President Suluhu's court. Taking office on a wave of hope, she has all the power and political capital she needs to reverse Magufuli's regressive policies and focus instead on improving the welfare of women and girls in Tanzania. But like much at this point, the extent to which she will meaningfully break with her predecessor's looming legacy remains to be seen.

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