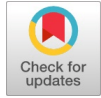




Reading the Future in the News: How Headlines Framed Political Polarisation in Tanzania's 2020 Elections



Emmanuel Ngabo, Dotto Paul Kuhenga

Abstract: Tanzania has conducted seven general elections since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1992, the first in 1995 and the last in 2025, held every five years as provided in the 1997 constitution. The 2025 general elections witnessed unprecedented large-scale protests. These events marked a sharp departure from Tanzania's long-held image as one of the most politically stable and peaceful countries in Africa. Popularly referred to as MO29 (Maandamano ya Oktoba 29/ October 29th protests), the events were not coincidences but manifestations of previously unresolved electoral political issues. Since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Tanzania, each election has been reported to fall short of being a 'free, fair and competitive' process. This study, using a mixed methods design, applies a framing analysis of headlines in three leading national newspapers, Habari Leo, Mwananchi, and Nipashe, to examine how electoral narratives in the 2020 General Elections news hinted at political realities facing Tanzania. The study advances two central arguments: first, that the unrest during the 2025 general elections was closely connected to previously unresolved election grievances and, second, that political polarisation in Tanzania has intensified to its highest level since the reintroduction of multiparty politics and is on the rise. The 2020 General Elections news reported expressions of electoral grievances from especially opposition political parties, with headlines filled with polarising discourses. This news framing explains the subsequent realities of Tanzania's electoral politics witnessed during the 2025 general elections. The analysed headlines defined Tanzanian society as politically polarised, a reality that Tanzania must reckon with to survive future election-related complications.

Keywords: News Framing, Political Polarisation, General Elections

Nomenclature:

CNN: Cable News Network
INEC: Independent National Electoral Commission
MMR: Mixed Methods Research
MO: Maandamano ya Oktoba 29 (October 29th Protest)
NEC: National Electoral Commission (now INEC)
SGR: Standard Gauge Railway
ZEC: Zanzibar Electoral Commission
ANC: African National Congress
UPDP: United People's Democratic Party
CUF: Civic United Front
NCCR: National Convention for Construction and Reform

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NLD: National League for Democracy
NRA: National Reconstruction Alliance
UDP: United Democratic Party
TLP: Tanzania Labour Party
CCM: Chama Cha Mapinduzi
TANU: Tanganyika African National Union
AMNUT: All-Muslim National Union of Tanganyika
UMD: Union for Multiparty Democracy

I. INTRODUCTION

Tanzanian media have been reported to be constrained in content objectivity during elections [16], victimised by powerful political and financial interests [37], and subject to media censorship [28]. However, the 2020 General Elections news headlines accurately predicted the political realities facing the country today. Tanzania, a country in East Africa, has for decades occupied a unique place within the region's political landscape, often celebrated as an exemplar of peace, with a remarkable record of political stability [32] and social cohesion [35]. In contrast to the political conflicts that have characterised much of the region [14], Tanzania's post-independence political trajectory has been marked by the absence of large-scale political violence and a sustained commitment to national unity and peace. Literature regards Tanzania as an exemplary case in building and maintaining national unity in Africa [6]. This reputation has been fostered through a political culture that emphasises civic harmony, discourages ethnic politics [28] and prioritises collective order over adversarial political competition characterised by incidents that discourage inter-party electoral rivalry [5].

Tanzania, a union of two independent states, Tanganyika and Zanzibar, was formed on 26 April 1964 through an Act of Union signed by the first Presidents Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere and Sheikh Abeid Amani Karume, respectively [16]. The history of political dynamics in Tanzania indicates that each state gained independence (Tanganyika in 1961 and Zanzibar in 1964 following the revolution) from a multiparty political system [43]. The state of Tanganyika, up to 1962, had a multiparty system with political parties such as the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU, 1954), United Tanganyika Party (UTP, 1956), African National Congress (ANC, 1958), and the all-Muslim National Union of Tanganyika (AMNUT, 1959), with legislative council elections held in 1958/59, 1960 and the 1962 presidential elections, where TANU won in a landslide victory against ANC. Zanzibar also had a multiparty system with political parties such as the Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP, 1955), the Afro-Shiraz Party (ASP, 1957), and the Zanzibar and Pemba People's Party (ZPPP,



1959), with pre-revolution multiparty elections held in 1957, 1961, and 1963. In 1963, ASP secured 13 seats, compared to 9 for each of the other parties, ZNP and ZPPP. Still, despite its majority victory, ASP was not permitted to form the government, which triggered the 1964 revolution and led to ASP coming to power [34]. Following TANU's victory and the 1964 revolution, the two states soon united to form the United Republic of Tanzania, or simply Tanzania, in 1964 [12].

Then, the Tanzanian state deliberately crafted its national identity around *umoja* (unity) and *amani* (peace), thereby embedding stability as a political goal [42]. During these early years, the TANU and ASP political parties, dominant in Tanganyika and Zanzibar respectively, institutionalised a one-party system [43]. Elections under this arrangement were held in 1965, 1970 and 1975. This setup was further strengthened by the creation of Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), which consolidated political authority and limited overt ideological pluralism. Elections held under CCM took place in 1980, 1985, and the last in 1990. These elections were all peaceful, largely because political dissent was contained within a single political structure as the party dominated politics due to the institutionalisation of a 'one-party' system [9].

The transition to multiparty democracy in 1992, following constitutional amendments that legalised opposition parties, marked a significant political shift. CCM re-registered in the same year, while many other political parties were registered the following year. In 1993 alone, the Civic United Front (CUF), Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA), National Convention for Construction and Reform (NCCR) and Union for Multiparty Democracy (UMD) were registered. Other parties registered in 1993 are the National League for Democracy (NLD), the United People's Democratic Party (UPDP), the National Reconstruction Alliance (NRA), the African Democratic Alliance Party (ADA-TADEA), the Tanzania Labour Party (TLP), and the United Democratic Party (UDP). Currently, there are 19 fully registered political parties [24]. Seven multiparty elections have been held from 1995 to 2025 at five-year intervals, under a 1977 constitution provision.

The reintroduction of multiparty politics signalled a rapid but uneven process of democratisation, during which the ruling CCM adapted to the new environment with relative ease. At the same time, opposition political parties have lamented an uneven playing field in the country's political processes [26]. The transition revealed structural weaknesses in both state and media institutions that had long operated under centralised control. The ruling party, through the state, did not relinquish its grip on the sole national broadcasting agency [1]. This sudden shift to multiparty democracy exposed structural faults within the media fraternity. The once-loyal state media under the one-party system had to grow and transform abruptly to become not only tolerant but also platforms for diverse ideas, in sharp contrast to the single narrative available to journalists for almost three decades during the one-party era.

Tanzania election news reporting highlights this challenge. Before the 2015 general elections, research had revealed serious shortcomings in media coverage. The reporting during the 2015 electoral cycle showed little, if any,

improvement. A report noted marginal gains in pluralistic reporting but persistent tendencies towards partisan practices [37]. By 2020, however, the media landscape had contracted under increased state control and restrictive legislation [29] [30], including the Media Services Act of 2016 and the Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations of 2018. These legal frameworks limited independent journalism and strengthened state dominance over political narratives [27]. Additionally, it is further confirmed that censorship, intimidation, and the strategic use of legal instruments severely restricted critical reporting during the 2020 elections [28]. Thus, the 2020 General Elections were characterised by a restrictive media environment, where legal and institutional barriers constrained independent journalism.

Ideally, in electoral contexts, media serve as watchdogs and educate the audience about key national issues, such as public policies, politicians' personal lives, and the character of candidates [17]. While media and election studies highlight lapses in media coverage of elections, a subject crucial for democracy, this study appreciates such insights. Still, it goes further to examine how, despite such malpractices within the media fraternity, newspaper headlines during the 2020 general elections may have, through news framing, reflected political realities in Tanzania. Within the process of journalistic news production, one of the key decisions every journalist repeatedly faces concerns which 'aspects of a perceived reality' to foreground; how to 'connect' these aspects; and thus, what meaning to ascribe to an unfolding sequence of events [7]. This process, known as media framing, involves selecting and emphasising particular aspects of reality to construct specific meanings. Through framing, media define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies [13]. In fact, frames not only identify what or who is at stake but also influence how political actors, events and controversies are perceived by the public.

In electoral contexts, framing significantly influences how citizens perceive the legitimacy of institutions, the integrity of processes and the credibility of political actors. Frames that highlight conflict and scandal, a study argues, tend to increase cynicism and polarisation, while those that focus on issue-based discussion encourage democratic participation [33]. As noted, in Tanzania, existing research has predominantly focused on media performance, ethics, and press freedom. Still, a crucial gap remains in the discursive construction of elections: how journalistic framing practices reflect and shape current political dynamics. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by analysing how three leading newspapers: *Habari Leo*, *Mwananchi* and *Nipashe* framed the 2020 General Elections in their headlines and how such framing predicted contemporary democratic realities in Tanzania.

The three newspapers embody different editorial orientations: *Habari Leo* is government-owned and aligned, while *Mwananchi* and *Nipashe* maintain independent stances. By analysing their coverage, this research traces how polarising frames emerged across the media spectrum to support two main arguments.





First, the unrest of 2025 cannot be understood in isolation but must be seen as the result of trajectories already evident in the 2020 election. Second, that political polarisation in Tanzania has become more intense than at any other time in its multiparty era, a condition both demonstrated by and reinforced through media narratives. By examining how newspapers defined these issues and diagnosed their causes, this study situates journalism not merely as an observer of democracy but as an active participant in its development or decline. In doing so, it contributes to wider debates on media and democracy in Africa, where the press often fluctuates between watchdog and mouthpiece. In Nigeria, for instance, it is argued that the interaction between government and the media swings between fragile cooperation and institutional hostility, thereby undermining the media's role in promoting transparency [10].

II. THEORETICAL LITERATURE

Over the past few decades, a substantial body of scholarship has examined how media framing influences public understanding of elections. A study conceptualises news framing as a selective process, as some realities are highlighted while others are relegated to the background [23]; that is, framing is seen as a process of selecting and emphasising particular aspects of reality to promote a specific interpretation. In electoral contexts, frames not only define what or who is at stake but also how political actors, events and controversies are perceived [40]. One of the focuses of contemporary studies has been examining the implications of framing for political polarisation, a less tolerant and more fragmented public [11].

In America, partisan media narratives are powerful agents of polarisation, often reinforcing ideological divides and eroding public trust in electoral outcomes, as exemplified by scandals surrounding the 2016 US presidential election, where the 'Women Harassment Controversy of Trump' and 'Clinton's Email Scandal' were foregrounded [4]. This form of polarisation has significant implications for policy deliberation, as it highlights the negative aspects of candidates, making their manifestos less visible. Similarly, although Trump received more coverage than Clinton during the same election, findings regarding the framing of the candidates' coverage were mixed, with no notable differences in the personal coverage of the two candidates [18]. These studies suggest a significant neglect of crucial policy issues during these election campaigns, indicating that news outlets were particularly interested in sensationalising the character and personality aspects of Trump and Clinton. Similar results were noted: newspapers, regardless of political orientation, used polarising discourse around the 2020 presidential election, thereby partly contributing to a divided US society [8]. This division was reflected in the prevalence of the topos Threat/Crisis/Defeat, indicating a focus on negativity. Another study on Fox News, CNN, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and other outlets from the same 2020 US election claims that polarised perceptions of election legitimacy were linked to a tendency to trust and consume polarised media. Consumption of Fox News was associated with decreased perceptions of election legitimacy over time,

whereas consumption of other outlets was linked to increased perceptions of election legitimacy over time [19]. In Latin America, a study explores how Brazilian media framed Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 campaign as a populist disruption rather than a democratic regression [2]. It reveals a dissonance: while foreign media warned of threats to democracy, domestic outlets depicted Bolsonaro's victory as evidence of democratic resilience, thereby downplaying the authoritarian implications of his populism.

In Europe, a study on polarisation suggests that media employ the 'We vs Them' framework to highlight and distinguish group identities, often creating mocking or insulting names for the 'other' [22]. Another study in the same European context indicates that the decline of informal democratic norms accompanies the polarisation of party systems around social-cultural issues, with one side ostensibly defending the people and the other allegedly betraying them by supporting minorities, migrants, liberals, international institutions, university professors, and various other threats [38]. In Spain, research demonstrates that polarised pluralism leads to frame sponsorship by leading political parties and newspapers [39]. These media framing practices imply that polarisation functions as a systemic dynamic in which political actors strategically depict conflicts as moral struggles between 'the people' and 'the others'. Media reinforce these frames through partisan alignment, potentially undermining democratic norms such as pluralism and tolerance.

In Asia, a study in India finds that news outlets more often use conflict frames when reporting on national parties than on regional parties. Since national parties attract more citizens' attention than regional parties, this may further reinforce public perceptions that politics is highly negative and excessively partisan, thereby increasing polarisation [15]. Meanwhile, a study in Pakistan examines polarisation and extremism and recommends replacing politics of vendetta, hatred, and revenge with respect, reconciliation, and accommodation. All political parties should immediately establish a code of conduct to halt hate speech, discrimination, and the use of abusive language. No party should undertake actions that could destabilise the country or damage the political environment, as they directly affect the well-being of the population [3]. The two studies suggest that political polarisation in Asia is driven by media practices and elite political behaviour, especially through conflict-focused news framing and adversarial rhetoric.

In Africa, a media framing study in Zimbabwe shows that the conflict frame is the most prominent in the coverage of the 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections by The Herald and NewsDay. Consequently, the study contends that such approaches in politically sensitive situations can reinforce divisions, potentially leading to political hatred and violence [25]. In Nigeria, the contents of three newspapers, namely *The Punch*, *This Day*, and *The Guardian*, were analysed. It was found that, through various metaphorical expressions, the media can communicate certain statements made by political actors. These expressions are interpreted differently by voters, and their interpretation often increases with each election year [21]. Meanwhile, a study in Ghana

reveals that news channels reported on Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo and John Dramani Mahama episodically, emphasising their corruption scandals, controversies, and integrity issues rather than their manifesto policies [17].

East African studies further illuminate the structural constraints facing the press in transitional democracies. In Kenya, news coverage of Members of Parliament is largely influenced by political access and commentary on corruption, favouring elite voices while marginalising policy discussions. The findings show that criticising the government, commenting on corruption and highlighting committee or party leadership are the strongest predictors of MPs’ coverage in the national press [20]. However, in neighbouring Uganda, a study provides a different experience as it highlights key challenges journalists face during elections, including state harassment and intimidation, arrests of those deemed critical of the state, and denial of access to vital information. Due to concerns for their own safety, journalists have responded to the insecure work environment by engaging in self-censorship, thus providing biased or limited information to the public [41].

Together, these perspectives highlight a key insight: framing is a site of power. It acts as a bridge between structural constraints (such as state influence or ownership patterns) and discursive outcomes (such as polarisation or consensus). As a result, analysing framing practices within specific political contexts, such as Tanzania’s evolving multiparty democracy, provides not only empirical insights

into media behaviour but also theoretical tools for understanding how journalism helps create or undermine democracy. While global and African literature has significantly advanced knowledge of media framing in electoral contexts, few studies have examined how these dynamics unfold within Tanzania’s distinct political path. Existing Tanzanian research has mainly focused on press freedom, state control and journalistic ethics, leaving the discursive aspects of election reporting with a yawning gap.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Mixed Methods Research (MMR) design to analyse how three newspapers framed news about the 2020 General Elections. The choice of a mixed approach was guided by the need to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative meanings in existing media framing practices. A quantitative content analysis was conducted on 518 front-page election stories drawn from *the Habari Leo*, *Mwananchi*, and *Nipashe* newspapers, representing government- and privately owned-press orientations. Framing categories were developed deductively from classical framing theory and inductively from themes specific to the Tanzanian context. The unit of analysis is an individual news article appearing on the front page during the period from 26 August to 31 October 2020. The following indicates the code sheet for frame analysis.

Table I: Structured Content Analysis Codebook for Systematically Capturing Framing Contexts Related to Electoral Grievances and Political Polarisation in the News

<i>A: Formal aspects and context data</i>		
001	Coder 1. Coder A 2. Coder B 3. Coder C 4. Others	Who is coding?
002	Author Text	Please write the name of the news reporter.
003	Newspaper	In what newspaper was the article published? 1 <i>Habari Leo</i> 2 <i>Mwananchi</i> 3 <i>Nipashe</i>
004	Title of article Text	Write down the entire title of the article
005	Date NUMBER (max. 6 digits)	Write the date when the article was published, Use six digits: YYMMDD (200924) for 24 th September 2020 So, H201026 will represent <i>Habari Leo</i> of 26th October 2020, M200913 <i>Mwananchi</i> of 13th September 2020 N201004 <i>Nipashe</i> of 04 th October 2020
006	Main topic? (For each news story, code the day of the campaign, the length, the dominant issue and all actors featured; you may use a separate sheet for qualitative analysis.) <i>What is the main topic of this article?</i>	
a)	Always choose the topic that is the most specific. If there are two or three different topics, choose the one with the most paragraphs dedicated to it.	
	1	Elections (i.e. electoral processes, voter and campaign trail stories)
	2	Economy and Employment (e.g. youth unemployment)
	3	Education and science





	4	Environment and climate change
	5	Union matters
	6	(New) Constitution
	7	Corruption
	8	Ongoing national major/mega projects (Stigler, SGR, Airport, Port) and infrastructure
	9	Security and peace
	10	Other issues.
	11	Good governance
(Where you find a different topic, use a separate sheet to describe)		
007	Polarising story	Especially when candidates or other actors show no tolerance, viewing others as adversaries instead of friends, relatives, spouses and siblings who only happen to differ in some political matters with them <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 The story pits one group or individual against another, uses hate speech and insults 2 The story offers an alternative view between two extremes, i.e. there are consensus moderation points to each group arguing for their stakes 3 The story is focused on its own storyline, i.e. a source from one perspective, and they are not speaking against others
008	Dominant frame direction	(Assess the story as a whole and choose the more dominant aspect) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pro ruling party/establishment, maintaining the current 'status quo' 2. Pro opposition to the change of the 'status quo' 3. Pro ruling but call for change 4. Pro opposition but maintain the status quo 5. Mostly neutral or the story points to other interests
009	Negativity	Choose the aspect that is most emphasised <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Negative toward the ruling party 2 Negative towards opposition 3 Positive towards the ruling party 4 Positive towards opposition 5 Mostly neutral

Source: Researchers adopted from previous research, and some elements were added as they were relevant to the Tanzanian context)

While enabling comparisons across *the Habari Leo*, *Mwananchi* and *Nipashe* newspapers, formal elements such as coder identity, author names, newspaper, headline, and publication date ensured uniformity, traceability, and dependability throughout the coding process. Coding choices were influenced by narrative prominence, and contextual factors, such as the main theme, enabled the identification of key issues highlighted over the campaign period. In addition to analysing dominant frame orientation and the tone (positivity/negativity) toward actors, the instrument also examined polarisation by determining whether stories encouraged conflict, moderation, hate speech or single-perspective narratives. Qualitative content analysis was applied to a few selected articles to supplement the quantitative analyses and reveal the interpretive reasoning, rhetorical devices, and contextual subtleties of framing practices beyond numerical patterns.

IV. FINDINGS

This study analysed a total of 518 headlines across *Habari Leo*, *Mwananchi*, and *Nipashe* newspapers, encompassing stories about candidates (John Magufuli (CCM), Tundu Lissu (CHADEMA), Hussein Mwinyi (CCM, Isles), Seif Sharifu Hamad (ACT-Wazalendo Isles), Ibrahim Lipumba (CUF), and Benard Membe (ACT-Wazalendo mainland)). It also included stories on non-candidate actors such as the police, the NEC (now INEC), the ZEC, international communities and organisations, civil society, and others. The study examined 204 *Nipashe* news stories (39.4%), followed by

165 from *Habari Leo* (31.8%), and 149 from *Mwananchi* (28.8%). Among these 518 articles, various frames emerged regarding how the three newspapers portrayed political realities concerning electoral grievances and political polarisation.

A. Election by Selection

The 2020 General Election emerges as a deeply troubling episode in Tanzania’s electoral history, as reflected through front-page newspaper coverage. Rather than foregrounding democratic competition and electoral fairness, the three newspapers largely depicted a sombre picture of an electoral process marked by tensions, restrictions and unresolved grievances. The 2020 General Elections featured in 87 (16.8%) news articles as a main topic in the front pages of the three newspapers. *Habari Leo*, on the one hand, allocated the highest proportion, covering 42, which is 25.5% of its total election-related stories. This extensive focus aligned with the newspaper’s government-affiliated nature, prioritising narratives that reinforced confidence in the electoral process. On the other hand, *Mwananchi* covered 18, 12.1% of its total coverage, while *Nipashe* contributed 27, 13.2%. This overall prioritisation of the election as a topic reflects the national debate surrounding the credibility of the electoral process and public concerns about transparency, fairness, and the integrity of the process. The following table depicts how the three newspapers’ headlines captured the contentious episodes of the 2020 general elections:



Table II: The Three Newspapers' Depictions of the 2020 General Elections in their Headlines

Newspaper Code	Front Page Headlines	Key Framing Devices
H201022	NEC yatolea ufafanuzi upigaji kura (NEC provides clarification on voting)	Ufafanuzi (Clarification)
H201016	IGP aonya watakaofanya vurugu uchaguzi mkuu (IGP warns those who will cause chaos in the general election)	Aonya, vurugu (Warns, chaos)
H201026	Polisi waagizwa kulinda amani kwa gharama yoyote (Police ordered to safeguard peace at all costs)	Waagizwa, kwa gharama yoyote, amani (Ordered, at all costs, peace)
H200927	Lissu apongeza polisi kwa kazi nzuri (Lissu praises the police for good work)	Apongeza polisi (Praises police)
M201011	CHADEMA, NEC wapishana hoja nne (CHADEMA, NEC dispute four points)	Wapishana (Dispute)
M201011	CUF wapigwa 'stop' kufanya kampeni Mtwara mjini siku 10 (CUF banned from campaigning in Mtwara town for 10 days)	Wapigwa stop (Banned)
M200913	NEC yaweka msimamo rufaa za ubunge (NEC maintains stance on parliamentary appeals)	Msimamo (Stance)
M201003	NEC, Lissu ni jino kwa jino (NEC, Lissu are tooth for tooth)	Jino kwa jino (Tooth for tooth)
M201004	Kamati ya maadili yamwonya Lissu kuendelea kampeni leo (Ethics committee warns Lissu against continuing campaign today)	Yamwonya (Warns)
M200920	Msaidizi mwingine wa Membe akamatwa Dar (another Membe aide incarcerated)	Akamatwa (Incarcerated)
M200928	Vyama vyalia na NEC (Parties cry out to NEC)	Vyalia (Cry out)
N200902	Rufaa 557 zatusia NEC (557 appeals land at NEC)	Rufaa 557 (557 appeals)
N201022	Vilio kila kona viapo mawakala (Cries everywhere as agents take oaths)	Vilio (Cries)
N201004	NEC yamwonya Tundu Lissu (NEC warns Tundu Lissu)	Yamwonya (Warns)
N201016	Maalim Seif azuiwa kampeni kwa siku 5 (Maalim Seif barred from campaigning for 5 days)	Azuiwa (Barred)

Source: Research, 2024

These news headlines from the three newspapers show a consistent focus on election control and severe measures rather than electoral fairness, highlighting warnings, bans, punishments, and orders without scope, such as "protect peace at all costs". The strict measures and actions were directed against opposition figures, including Tundu Lissu, Maalim Seif, and Benard Membe. Several headlines emphasise the authorities' efforts to maintain order, such as police being 'ordered to safeguard peace at all costs' or the IGP warning of 'chaos', framing the electoral environment as one in which state actors dictated acceptable behaviour. Opposition parties and their candidates appear consistently marginalised, with reports of being 'barred' or 'banned' suggesting selective enforcement and potential suppression of dissent. Overall, these headlines collectively reflect a pattern of mishandled elections, portraying a tightly controlled process that limited opposition activities. The headlines also frame state authority as the ultimate guarantor of peace and legality.

First and foremost, *Habari Leo* newspaper, consistent with its government affiliation, framed the 2020 elections as a legitimate, orderly and credible process, emphasising confidence in the electoral institutions. For example, in its story *Mabalozi wapongeza demorasia ya Tanzania (Ambassadors Praise Tanzania's Democracy)*, the newspaper quotes ambassadors praising the country's peaceful democratic process:

The newly appointed ambassadors of the United Kingdom, Pakistan, and Switzerland to Tanzania have praised the country for its peaceful transfer of power through general elections. Speaking yesterday, they expressed their satisfaction with the electoral campaign process, stating that Tanzania serves as a lesson for other nations (H201006).

This narrative reinforces a perception of procedural legitimacy and positions Tanzania as a model democracy. Similarly, in the same newspaper, a story *'ACT yaipongeza NEC na ZEC'* reveals internal contradictions. Although the headline implies opposition approval, the quoted ACT-

Wazalendo attorney Omar Said Shaban explicitly alleges electoral sabotage, saying:

Our investigation has revealed that what happened was a deliberate act of sabotage carried out by election supervisors in the constituencies I mentioned. These officials intentionally submitted false information to the National Electoral Commission (NEC) by filling out Form No. 9B, falsely stating that the decisions to disqualify our candidates or the rulings on objections were made on August 26. This was done to create the impression that the appeals submitted on August 28 and 29 were filed beyond the deadline, which is completely untrue' said Shaban (H200922).

There is nothing in the story to indicate that the attorney commended the commissions, but ample evidence points to allegations of misconduct by the commissions. The misalignment between the headlines and content illustrates a manipulative framing strategy that emphasises institutional credibility while marginalising dissenting voices. In another story: 'Watazamaji wasema uchaguzi ulikuwa huru' (Observers say the elections were free). The story quoted a team of election observers from the East African region, headed by a Burundian citizen, who is the only source quoted: 'According to the election criteria outlined in the East African Community election guidelines, this election met all the standards and was free and fair (H201031)'. This selective sourcing affirms *Habari Leo's* overarching pattern of legitimising the electoral process and silencing controversy.

Next is *Mwananchi* newspaper, which adopted a neutral yet subtly critical tone, often acknowledging electoral irregularities but with less explicit confrontation with state institutions. The article *'Zitto ataja kilichoengua wagombea'* highlighted disqualification discrepancies:

Candidates from various opposition parties have been disqualified for various errors, unlike those from the ruling party, none of whom made any mistakes in filling out forms from the councillorship level to the presidency (M200907). In the same story, Zitto Kabwe lists administrative violations:





Returning officers in Zanzibar forged objections because the respective candidates did not write them. Election supervisors refused to accept photographs, resulting in candidate forms being submitted without pictures. They also declined to accept appeal forms and failed to provide written reasons for disqualifying candidates. Additionally, election supervisors fabricated reasons beyond those outlined in the regulations and election guidelines.

By highlighting procedural misconducts, *Mwananchi* exposed electoral flaws yet refrained from overtly indicting electoral bodies, maintaining a balance between critique and caution, more of a self-censorship practice. Similarly, '*Vyama vyalia na NEC majibu ya rufaa*' presented the elections as a bureaucratic standoff between the NEC and opposition parties rather than outright repression. This moderate tone positions *Mwananchi* as an independent voice navigating between watchdog journalism and regulatory constraints.

Finally, in this regard, *Nipashe* newspaper employed an emotive, oppositional framing, depicting the 2020 elections as a melancholic episode for Tanzanian democracy while confronting state institutions. In one story, the then CHADEMA chairman is quoted:

Opposition parties such as the UDP and TLP faced no objections when they declared their support for the CCM candidate, and the registrar said nothing. However, when ACT-Wazalendo and CHADEMA made their statements, their letters were rejected, said Mbowe (N201005)

The story highlights the Registrar's uneven treatment of political parties' activities. Similarly, '*CHADEMA, ACT katika mihani, msajili atoa onyo kali, wenyewe wafunguka*' (CHADEMA, ACT put to the test. Registrar issues a stern warning; they themselves open up-N200924) depicts the Registrar's actions as targeted intimidation, while '*Lissu asimulia alivyopigwa mabomu Lindi*' offers a vivid account of police brutality.

Presidential candidate Tundu Lissu (CHADEMA) narrated how police in Lindi disrupted his campaign rallies, preventing him from addressing the public. While in Lindi yesterday, Lissu was unable to speak to the people after the police used tear gas to disperse the crowd. Following the incident, Lissu stated that it was the ward executive officer who ordered that tear gas be used against the citizens who had gathered to listen to him (N201023).

Framing choices such as using words like 'kitanzini' (in a trap), 'mkong'oto' (to strike), 'vyalilia' (outcry), 'vilio' (lamentations), and 'afunguka' (to open up) may dramatise and evoke empathy and moral outrage. Thus, *Nipashe's* framing humanised opposition struggles and depicted the election as a moral crisis rather than a routine democratic exercise.

Generally, the news revealed militarisation of the political process, with police brutally harassing opposition candidates such as Tundu Lissu, Maalim Seif, Benard Membe and others. Additionally, the news exposed NEC's (now INEC) challenges in overseeing the process and the office of the registrar of political parties' mistreatment of the main

opposition, especially in its selective approach to political actors. Long lists of irregularities were highlighted in the opposition's outcries, including the disqualification of their candidates, the 557 appeals, and numerous campaign suspensions. The three newspapers painted a picture of an election far from being free and fair, despite *Habari Leo's* attempts to legitimise it. Noted editorial differences between *Habari Leo* and the two other newspapers are understandable, given their distinct orientations. Still, the differences between *Mwananchi* and *Nipashe* are intriguing, since *Nipashe* displayed boldness in confronting what oppositions' outcries labelled as electoral injustices. This observation is important since *Mwananchi* usually led in taking critical stances, but in this study, *Nipashe* was bolder; it could be for a reason. The picture painted in the news about the election is that it was the most polarising in recent years of Tanzania's democracy, with one side legitimising it and the other challenging its integrity, particularly in the 87, when the election was the main topic. Rather than election by the people, the newspapers' reportage suggests that this was selection by elites.

B. Politically Polarised Tanzania

This study examined polarising rhetoric in the news across all three newspapers. The findings indicate that a polarising frame dominated coverage, appearing in 175 articles (34% of the total). *Nipashe* led with 70 articles (34.3%), followed by *Habari Leo* with 63 (38.2%) and *Mwananchi* with 42 (28.2%). This polarisation was not limited to opposition or ruling-party-friendly media. Still, it was evident throughout the press spectrum, as seen in the selective portrayal of candidates and their political parties. While opposition figures were often framed negatively, as in headlines with big, bold text in *Nipashe* (201007): *Mgombea Ubunge apata Mkong'oto*, (H200912): *Vyama 6 vyakiri kampeni kusuasua*, and (M201003): *NEC Lissu sasa jino kwa jino*, *Lipumba* was the exception, receiving minimal but positive coverage. The rest of the opposition generally faced negative coverage. Meanwhile, the ruling party's candidates, particularly *Magufuli* and *Mwinyi*, received overwhelmingly positive coverage from all three newspapers.

Dominant framing findings indicate that pro-CCM stories were 259 (50%), with *Habari Leo* publishing 124 (75.1%), *Mwananchi* 49 (32.9%), and *Nipashe* 86 (42.2%). Pro-opposition stories numbered 182 (35.1%), with *Habari Leo* recording 25 (15.2%), primarily supporting smaller parties apart from CHADEMA and ACT-Wazalendo; *Mwananchi* had 78 (52.3%), and *Nipashe* 97 (47.5%). These framing patterns reveal a clear bias, with *Habari Leo* displaying the strongest pro-CCM stance and the least support for the main opposition parties. At the same time, *Mwananchi* showed a more balanced approach, slightly favouring the opposition. *Nipashe*, although still leaning towards the ruling party, had nearly equal coverage of pro-CCM and pro-opposition stories. The following news headlines further confirm the data.

Table III: Polarising News Headlines from the Habari Leo Mwananchi and Nipashe Newspapers

Newspaper Code	Headlines	Framing Device(s)
H201024	JPM akemea wanasiasa wanaochochea fujo (JPM condemns politicians inciting chaos)	Akemea wanaochochea fujo (Condemns, inciting chaos)
H200922	Magufuli aonya serikali za majimbo (Magufuli warns against regional governments)	Aonya (Warning)
M200923	CCM, Chadema wavutana hoja za majimbo, vitambulisho (CCM, CHADEMA clash over federal system and machinga ID)	Wavutana (clash)
M201003	‘NEC Lissu Sasa Jino kwa Jino’ (NEC and Lissu Now Tooth for Tooth),	Jino kwa jino Tooth for tooth
N200923	JPM atoa tahadhari sera za vyama (JPM gives caution on party policies)	Hadhari (Caution)
N201013	JPM: Tanzania ina maadui wengi (JPM: Tanzania has many enemies)	Maadui (Enemies)
N200915	JPM kujenga uchumi bila kutegemea wafadhili (JPM to build an economy without reliance on donors)	Uchumi bila kutegemea (Economy without reliance)

Source: Research 2024

While *Habari Leo* newspaper defined polarisation as stability versus defiance, emphasising state authority and national unity, *Nipashe* and *Mwananchi* portrayed polarisation as citizens versus institutions, highlighting common injustices and marginalisation. In this sense, by amplifying hostile remarks, the three media particularly worsened the already-existing political polarisation. This adversarial framing of existing political divisions may have not only reproduced but also intensified Tanzania’s widening political gap, allowing hate speech to go unfiltered. At the same time, communication of party manifestos remains sidelined, while wording such as *jino kwa jino* emphasises antagonism between the electoral commission and opposition candidates.

Moreover, at the candidate level, the two leading candidates, John Magufuli and Tundu Lissu, were portrayed as embodying contrasting visions for Tanzania’s future. Their statements represented a broader ideological conflict: Lissu’s liberal reformism versus Magufuli’s nationalist continuity. The three newspapers’ portrayal of this dichotomy reinforces the sense that Tanzania was at a crossroads between systemic change and state preservation, a theme that permeated election news discourse.

Lissu reiterated that the absence of international community partnerships for economic growth poses an existential threat. He was quoted as saying, ‘The candidate also responded to accusations that imperialists were using him, stressing that only people without sense despise them. Lissu emphasised that if the ‘so-called imperialists’ were to stop their aid to the country for just one week, Tanzania would disappear from what he called the world map (N200927).

Lissu used a hyperbole, that Tanzania will ‘cease to exist’ on the world map in the absence of foreign aid. His eyes being depicted as glued externally for international trade and dealings, Lissu reinterpreted this as beneficial to private enterprises in Tanzania, arguing, "Lissu stated that one of the key priorities of his party’s government would be to build a foundation for an independent economy driven by the private sector. He said that the party’s government would lay the groundwork for economic growth by welcoming private-sector participation from both within and outside the country, ensuring a conducive environment through favourable tax policies and efficient institutions (N200831).

Lissu and other opposition candidates were accused of having dual citizenship by Magufuli, who warned that ‘they can go (outside the country) anytime they want’. Lissu himself was not hesitant to mention the matter: ‘Lissu outlined several priorities he would focus on if given the

mandate to lead the country. He stated that his government would form a small cabinet of ministers, invest in irrigation-based agriculture, allow dual citizenship, and make Kiswahili the language of instruction at all levels of education in the country (H200910). According to the newspapers, he views affairs in a global context and is ready to embrace development partners from around the globe.

On the other hand, Magufuli was quoted in *Habari Leo* as urging voters to ‘sweep out’ the opposition, framing them as ‘dirties’ and so unfit for leadership. The phrase is *Nendeni mkawafagie nje ili wajifunze* (Go and sweep them out so they can learn a lesson):

On the morning of October 28 this year, go and sweep them out early so they can learn a lesson. Tanzanians are not subjects for experiments. First, they want to place the country under a federal system of governance, and now their manifesto also states that they plan to use our minerals as collateral. In the end, they might even pledge our wildlife, which would push the country into another form of enslavement,’ said President Magufuli (H200923).

The candidate positioned the opposition as rubbish obstacles to national progress rather than legitimate political contenders, and *Habari Leo* amplified it. Similarly, in *Nipashe*, Magufuli’s statement on COVID-19 *Walitaka kuleta chanjo, kutuuzia dawa ili wapate pesa. Niliwakwamisha* (They wanted to bring vaccines and sell us medicine to make money. I blocked them).

They wanted to bring vaccines and sell us medicine to make money. I blocked them. I said we would pray to God, and COVID-19 would disappear. Today, it is no longer here. Now they are using all kinds of tactics, including bringing traitors and sending people to insult us, but Tanzania remains strong (N 201013).

This indirectly implied that opposition-backed policies were externally influenced and harmful. These statements, framed as direct quotes in news reports, reinforced an ‘us-versus-them’ political narrative, fuelling polarisation in the campaign media rhetoric. The use of hate speech and name-calling, such as ‘traitors’, in the newspapers depicts politically related hatred in Tanzania. Unfiltered derogatory remarks were frequently quoted in election news reports, with little to no effort to neutralise their inflammatory nature. Opposition leaders were labelled as ‘vibaraka wa mabeberu’ (puppets of imperialists/foreign powers), a phrase that portrayed them as unpatriotic and working against national interests (H201013). CHADEMA was labelled

'traitors', and ACT-Wazalendo was dismissed as 'hao wengine' (the others, 'us vs them').

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The three newspapers did not merely report the 2020 General Elections; they reflected interpretive realities. *Habari Leo* newspaper legitimised the 2020 General Elections through positive institutional framing, *Mwananchi* mediated justice violations through cautious neutrality, and *Nipashe* dramatised opposition struggles through emotive discourse. *Habari Leo* avoided negativity towards the ruling party and served as a conduit for the state's historical self-image, prioritising harmony over contestation. *Mwananchi's* approach suggests self-censorship, with avoidance of overt criticism of institutional bias as a survival strategy. *Nipashe* never questioned the ruling party, despite taking a somewhat more critical stance than *Mwananchi*; instead, the newspaper redefined electoral reporting as a moral crisis rather than a procedural exercise, portraying the 2020 General Elections not as a celebration but as an ideal under siege. These findings align with a study in Nigeria suggesting that the interaction between government and media oscillates between fragile cooperation and institutional hostility, thereby undermining the media's role in promoting transparency [10]. Incidents of potential self-censorship have also been reported in Uganda, where journalists, concerned for their safety, respond to the insecure work environment by engaging in self-censorship, leading to biased or limited information dissemination [41]. Similar results have been found in Tanzania, with censorship, intimidation and the strategic use of legal instruments severely restricting critical reporting during the 2020 elections [28]. By documenting administrative malpractice, such as the forged objections in Zitto Kabwe's claims, *Mwananchi* performed a watchdog function, albeit within safe interpretive boundaries.

This study revealed that the three newspapers provided negative coverage of opposition candidates, especially the two main opposition parties, CHADEMA and ACT-Wazalendo. Meanwhile, the police, NEC and the office of the registrar were portrayed as oppressive in *Nipashe* and *Mwananchi*, while *Habari Leo* depicted them as custodians of peace. In this context, negative coverage, based on scandals and misconduct within the mentioned organs, framed them in a way that distanced them from the harmonious language historically central to the national strategy of umoja (unity), as the Tanzanian state has built its national identity around umoja (unity) and amani (peace). It has embedded stability as a political ideal [42]. Conflict and scandal tend to increase cynicism and polarisation, while those focusing on issue-based discussion promote democratic engagement [33]. Indeed, while opposition candidates were generally framed negatively, the ruling party candidates were overwhelmingly portrayed positively. This differs slightly from the US context, where partisan media narratives are powerful agents of polarisation, often reinforcing ideological divides and diminishing public trust in electoral outcomes, exemplified by scandalous issues of the US presidential elections in 2016, where 'Women Harassment Controversy of Trump' and 'Clinton's Email Scandal' were foregrounded [4].

With this kind of coverage, where opposition parties and their candidates receive negative coverage while the ruling party and its candidates are portrayed favourably, it is clear that polarisation in Tanzania was less due to partisan bias in the media and more to the election environment itself. The 2020 general election environment was characterised by a restrictive media landscape, in which legal and institutional barriers constrained independent journalism [36]. Since the election of John Magufuli as president in 2015, the media landscape has contracted under increased state control and restrictive legislation [30], including the Media Services Act of 2016 and the Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations of 2018. As the election itself emerged as a widely discussed issue, it featured in 87 articles, with it as the main headline topic. Rather than emphasising democratic competition and electoral fairness, the three newspapers mostly portrayed a sombre picture of an electoral process characterised by tension, restrictions and unresolved grievances. In the 2020 elections, the news highlighted clashes between the state apparatus and opposition, likely undermining any remaining trust in democratic institutions, particularly after numerous candidate disqualifications, unprecedented campaign suspensions, and police brutality. The main opposition, CHADEMA, did not participate in the 2025 general elections, with a catchphrase 'no reform, no election' [31].

While it is premature to conclude that the three newspapers fostered cynicism in Tanzania, it is reasonable to assert that the circulating news revealed deep-seated hatred and divisions among actors in the 2020 General Elections, foreshadowing realities in the 2025 General Elections. The news coverage of the 2020 General Elections revealed political hostility and a fragmented discourse. This study reports Magufuli using hate speech such as kawafagie (go and sweep them), implying that opposition candidates were rubbish to be removed, and vibaraka (puppets), portraying them as unpatriotic and working against national interests. CHADEMA was labelled 'traitors' and ACT-Wazalendo dismissed as 'hao wengine' (those others, an 'us vs them'). Lissu also used polarising language, like when he asserted that 'only people without sense despise imperialists. The newspaper framing suggests that polarisation in Tanzania is depicted not as conflict but through hate speech. The three newspapers allowed insults to slip through their editorial filters, enabling such polarising language of intolerance towards 'the other group' to appear in the news coverage of the 2020 general elections. Again, it cannot be said that the newspapers had partisan interests (*Habari Leo*, perhaps), but rather they amplified existing political polarisation. However, outside politics, Tanzanians are generally a united nation. In the 2025 General Elections, two camps were competing, 'Oktoba tunatoka Vs Oktoba tunatiki', which translates to 'We will go out (to protest) in October Vs we will vote in October'. A study in the US finds that newspapers, regardless of political stance, used polarising discourse around the 2020 presidential election, thereby partly contributing to a divided US society, as evidenced by the prevalence of the topos Threat/Crisis/Defeat, which indicates a focus on negativity [8]. Tanzanian society was politically divided along these

two camps when approaching the 2025 General Elections, thus leading to a 'violent rupture from October 29, 2025 onwards.

VI. CONCLUSION

Generally, the three newspapers did not merely report on the 2020 General Elections; they reflected interpretive realities that may help explain the ensuing chaos in future elections. *Habari Leo* newspaper legitimised the 2020 General Elections through positive institutional framing; Mwananchi communicated electoral injustices through cautious neutrality; and *Nipashe* dramatised opposition struggles through emotive discourse. Despite these limitations, the analysed headlines accurately prefigured the political breakdown that ensued in the 2025 general elections. While it is premature to conclude that the three newspapers fostered cynicism in Tanzania, it is reasonable to assert that the circulating news revealed deep-seated hatred and divisions among actors in the 2020 General Elections, foreshadowing realities in the 2025 General Elections. The 2020 General Elections news revealed political hostility and discourse fragmentation, accurately predicting future election challenges in Tanzania, such as the 'violent rupture on October 29, 2025 (MO29), Oktoba tunatiki Vs Oktoba tunatoka and 'No reforms, No elections.' Therefore, the complications of the 2025 General Elections can be seen not as isolated incidents but as the result of years of electoral mishandling and discursive polarisation by political, apolitical, and media actors. The Tanzanian press, caught between state authority and civic resistance, reflected and amplified the nation's electoral anxieties, where journalism transitioned from merely mediating to also amplifying and potentially catalysing divisions. To prevent future breakdowns, reconciliatory efforts and arrangements need to be emphasised, with media messages (print, electronic, and especially online) reframed to move beyond narratives of hatred and contempt towards issue-based ones.

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