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Tanzanians say they enjoy freedoms, but support government restrictions

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 713 | Darren Janz and Martin Fikiri Oswald

Summary

Tanzania's Constitution guarantees its citizens the rights to freedom of expression and association. Since the country transitioned from a one-party state under the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party to multiparty democracy in 1992, Tanzanians have been able to create and join opposition parties that contest elections, although the CCM has won every national election (Paget, 2021).

Particularly during the administration of former President John Magufuli (2015-2021), domestic and international observers raised concerns about legislation and government actions that posed threats to Tanzanians' rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association. In 2015, at least seven people were charged with spreading misinformation on the social media apps Facebook and WhatsApp under the Tanzania Cybercrimes Act, which had been signed into law earlier that year by Magufuli's predecessor, Jakaya Kikwete (Macha, 2016). The following year, at least five Tanzanians were charged with cybercrimes under the same act for criticising Magufuli on Facebook and WhatsApp (Brooks, 2016).

Independent media and political opposition likewise became targets of legal action. Between 2016 and 2020, Tanzania's information ministry banned the independent newspapers Mseto, Mawio, Mwanahalisi, and Tanzania Daima under the Media Services Act of 2016, alleging that they had spread misinformation in their reporting on government corruption (Nyeko, 2022). Over the same period, Tanzania's global ranking in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index fell from 71st to 124th (Aboud, Shomari, & Gusenberg, 2022). In 2016, the government banned politicians from holding political rallies outside their own constituencies, and subsequent years saw opposition party leaders and activists face harassment, arrest, abduction, and assassination (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Under President Samia Suluhu Hassan, who took office in March 2021, the government in 2022 lifted its bans on the four newspapers (Nyeko, 2022) and in early 2023 announced an end to its ban on politicians holding rallies outside of their constituencies (Dausen, 2023).

This dispatch examines Tanzanians' views on freedom of expression and association, incorporating results from the Afrobarometer Round 9 survey conducted in 2022 and from previous surveys conducted since 2012. While a majority of Tanzanians report feeling free to say what they think and to join political organisations of their choice, and most consider their country's media to be largely free, they also say that people have to be careful about what they say about politics.

A majority of Tanzanians express support for the government's right to ban organisations that go against its policies and to restrict the sharing of information that it disapproves of.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life.

Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been conducted since 1999. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer national partner in Tanzania, REPOA, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 2,400 adult Tanzanians in October-November 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Tanzania in 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021.

Key findings

- Majorities of Tanzanians say they enjoy basic freedoms of speech, association, and the media, though they have to be careful when discussing politics.
 - Six in 10 citizens (61%) report that they feel "completely free" to say what they think, a proportion that has rebounded from a low of 46% in 2017. Another 26% say they feel "somewhat free" to speak their minds.
 - But a majority (58%) say people "often" or "always" have to be careful about what they say about politics.
 - Four-fifths (80%) of citizens say they feel "completely free" to join any political organisation they want. Only 6% say they lack this freedom.
 - Eight in 10 respondents say the country's media is "somewhat free" (41%) or "completely free" (40%) to report and comment on the news without government interference.
- But many Tanzanians express support for the government's right to limit such freedoms.
 - Two-thirds (66%) say the government should be able to ban organisations that go against its policies.
 - While three-fourths (75%) of citizens say the news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption, half (49%) think the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.
 - More than seven in 10 citizens say the government should be able to limit or prohibit the sharing of news, information, or opinions that it disapproves of (71%) or that criticise or insult the president (76%).

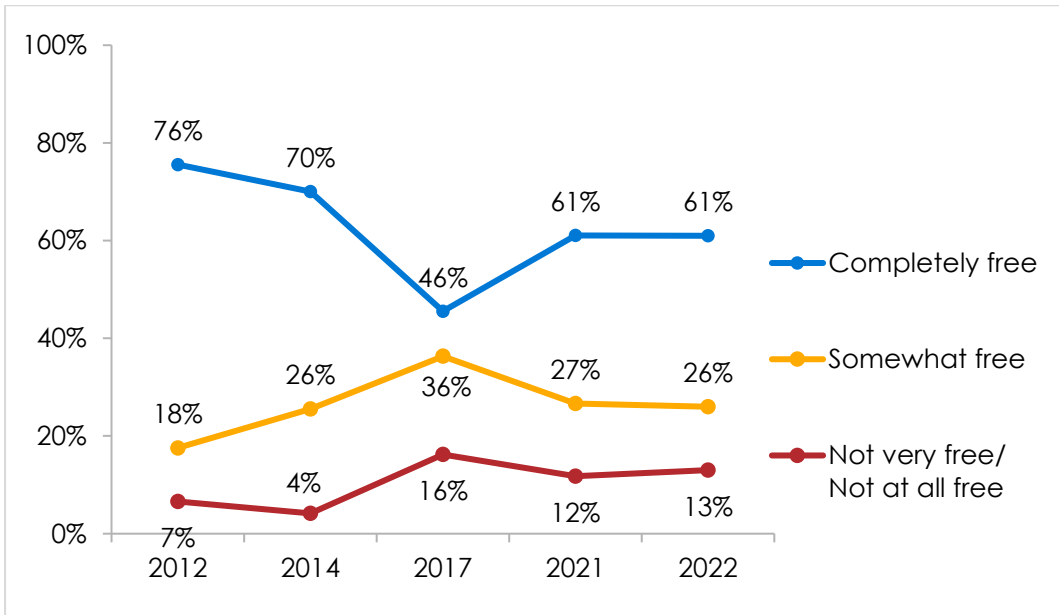
Are Tanzanians free to express their views and associate?

Six in 10 Tanzanians (61%) report that they feel "completely free" to say what they think. Another 26% indicate that they feel "somewhat free" to express their views, while 13% say they feel "not very free" or "not at all free" to speak their minds (Figure 1).

The proportion of Tanzanians who feel completely free to say what they think has rebounded significantly since the 2017 survey, when fewer than half of those surveyed (46%) provided this response. However, it is still 15 percentage points lower than in 2012 (76%).

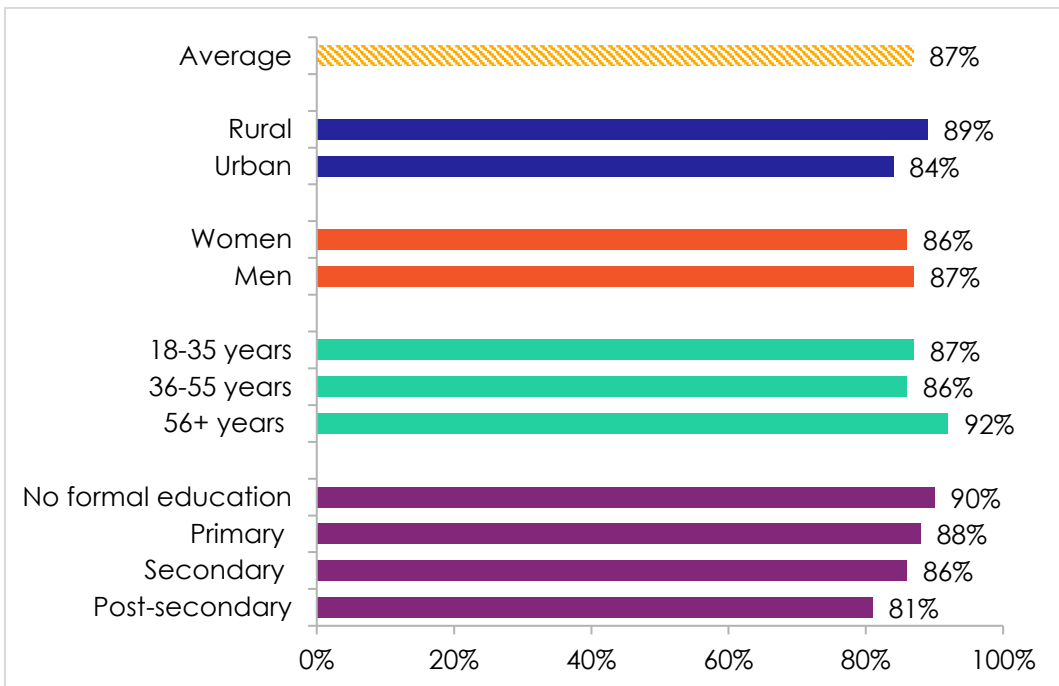
The proportion of Tanzanians who feel either "somewhat" or "completely" free to say what they think is highest among respondents aged 56 or older (92%), rural residents (89%), and those with no formal schooling (90%, compared to 81% of those with post-secondary education) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Freedom to say what you think | Tanzania | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to say what you think?*

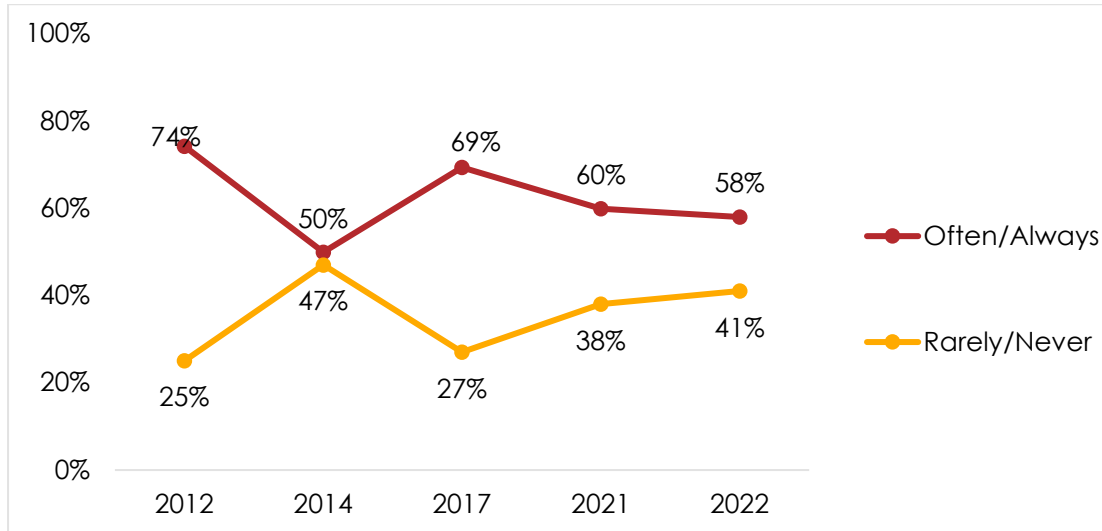
Figure 2: Freedom to say what you think | by demographic group | Tanzania | 2022



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to say what you think? (% who say "somewhat free" or "completely free")*

Even though most Tanzanians consider themselves free to speak their minds, a majority (58%) say that people "often" or "always" have to be careful about what they say about politics (Figure 3). This proportion has declined by 16 percentage points since 2012 (74%), including an 11-point drop compared to 2017 (69%).

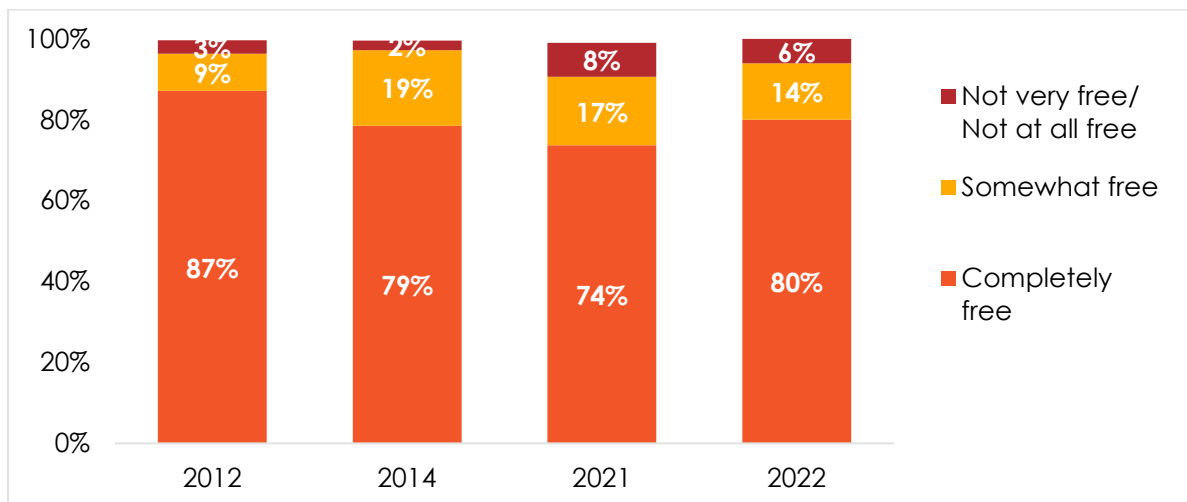
Figure 3: How often have to be careful what you say about politics | Tanzania
 | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?*

Meanwhile, a four-fifths majority (80%) of Tanzanians say they feel “completely free” to join any political organisation they want, while 14% feel “somewhat free” and only 6% feel “not very free” or “not at all free” to do so (Figure 4). The proportion of citizens who report that they feel completely free to join any political organisation declined from 87% in 2012 to 74% in 2021 before rising again in 2022.

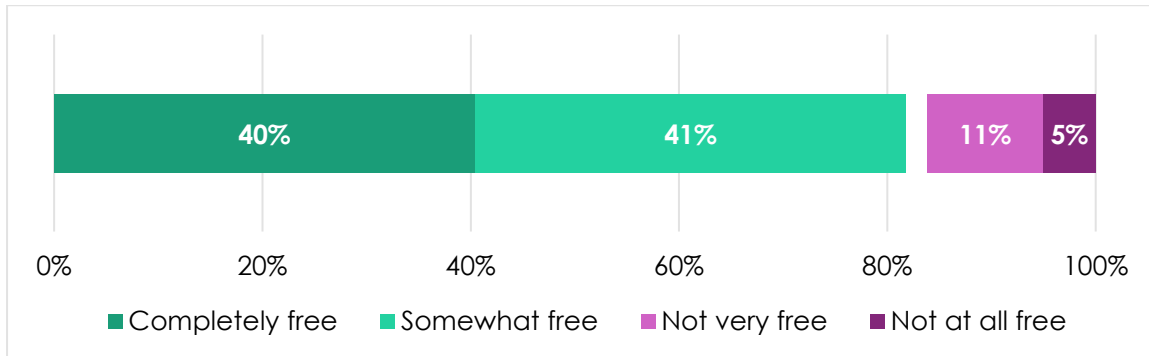
Figure 4: Freedom to join any political organisation | Tanzania | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?*
 Note: This question was not asked as part of the Round 7 survey in 2017.

Tanzanians also see their media as largely free to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government: 40% say it is “completely free,” and another 41% describe it as “somewhat free.” About one in six citizens (16%) say the country’s media is “not very free” (11%) or “not at all free” (5%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: How free is the news media? | Tanzania | 2022



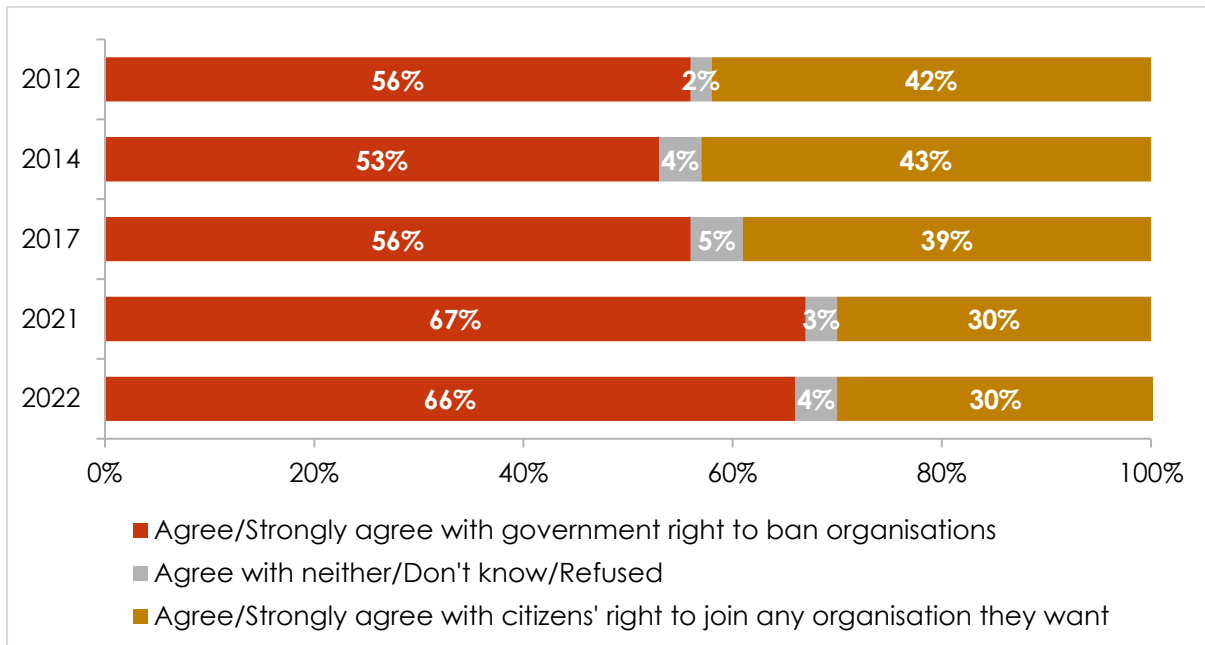
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government?

Views on restricting political and media freedoms

While most Tanzanians report feeling free to join any political organisation, two-thirds (66%) of citizens express support for the government's ability to ban organisations that go against its policies. Only 30% say Tanzanians should be able to join any organization they want, whether or not the government approves of it (Figure 6).

Support for a government right to ban organisations increased significantly between 2017 and 2021, rising from 56% to 67%.

Figure 6: Should government be able to ban organisations? | Tanzania | 2012-2022

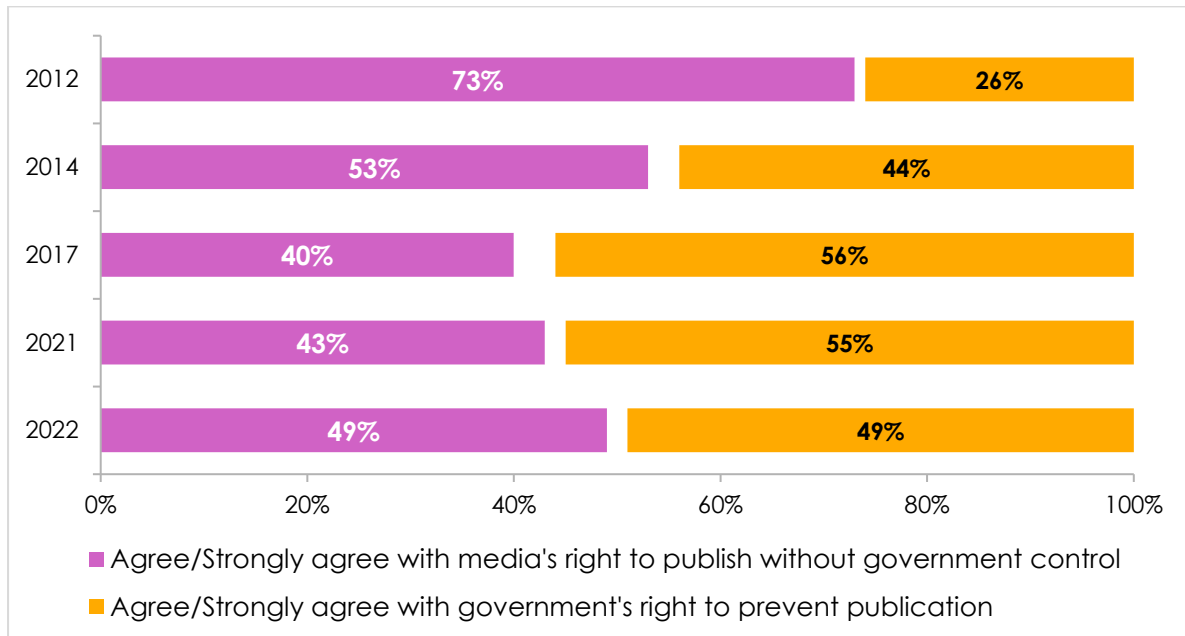


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should be able to ban any organisation that goes against its policies.
 Statement 2: We should be able to join any organisation, whether or not the government approves of it.

Tanzanians are divided on media freedom: Half (49%) say the government should have the right to prevent the publication of things that it disapproves of, while the other half (49%)

think the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control (Figure 7). Support for media freedom has risen by 9 percentage points since 2017 (40%) but remains well below the level recorded in 2012 (73%).

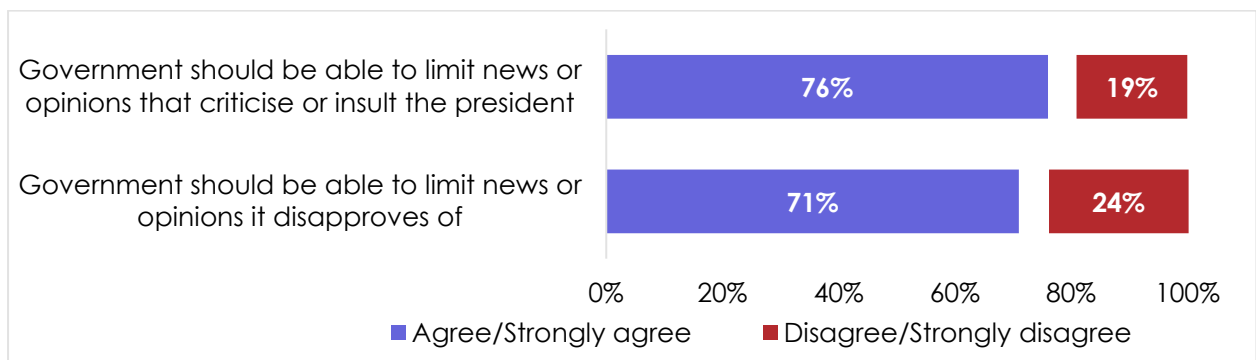
Figure 7: Media free to publish vs. government control | Tanzania | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.
 Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.

Moreover, in response to a question posed in Afrobarometer's 2021 survey, strong majorities say they favour the government's ability to limit or prohibit the sharing of news, information, or opinions that the government disapproves of (71%) or that criticise or insult the president (76%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Should government be able to limit sharing of news and opinions?
 | Tanzania | 2021

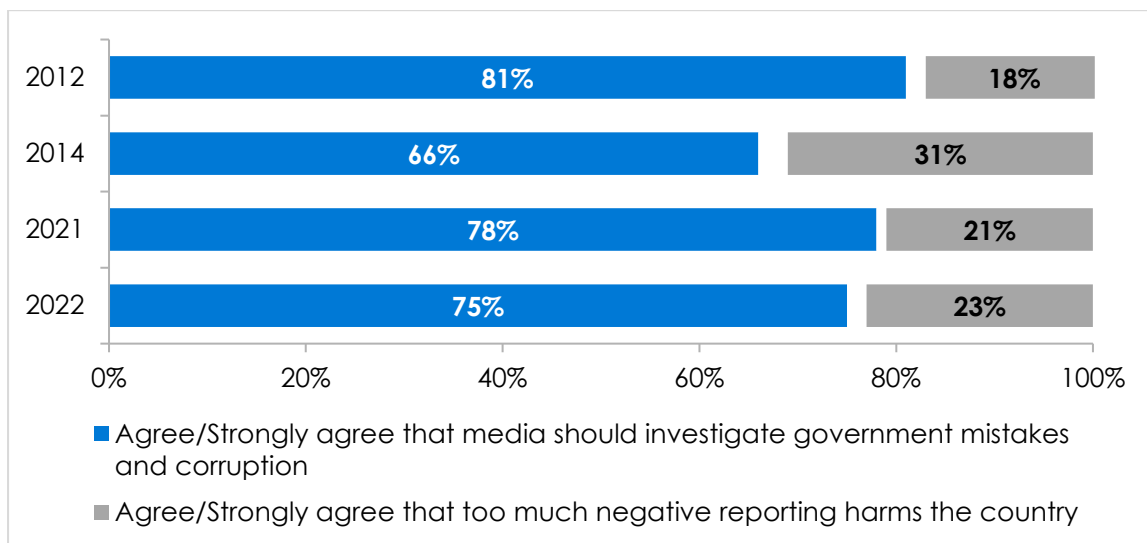


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit or prohibit sharing of:
 News, information, or opinions that the government disapproves of?
 News, information, or opinions that criticise or insult the president?

Despite widespread doubts about media freedom, most Tanzanians do support the media's watchdog role: Three-quarters (75%) say the media should "constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption," while only about one-fourth (23%) instead say that too much reporting on negative events, such as government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country (Figure 9).

Large majorities have consistently expressed support for the media's role in monitoring government over the past decade, although the proportion dipped to 66% in 2014.

Figure 9: Media should check government vs. avoid negative reporting | Tanzania | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.
 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.
 Note: This question was not asked as part of the Round 7 survey in 2017.

Conclusion

Despite the Tanzanian government's crackdown on freedom of speech and association under former President Magufuli, a sizeable majority of Tanzanians report feeling free to say what they think and to join any political organisation of their choice. However, most also think people have to be careful about what they say about politics.

While most citizens want the news media to investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption, a majority also express support for the government's right to ban organisations that go against its policies and to limit the sharing – by media outlets or individuals – of information and opinions that the government disapproves of or that criticise or insult the president.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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