

Complicated History of Conflict in Zanzibar

Tanzania is a unitary republic in East Africa composed of mainland Africa (Tanganyika) and the archipelago in the Indian Ocean (Zanzibar). It was only 46 years ago in 1964 that Zanzibar became part of Tanzania by uniting with Tanganyika. The two regions have led completely different histories, and because of this, Zanzibar has been granted a high level of autonomy. The president is the leader of the autonomous government.

Zanzibar comprises two main islands, Unguja and Pemba. Their population ratio is 6 to 4. These islands also have different histories which contributed to the conflict and instability in Zanzibar. There were years of strife which led to the formation of political parties.

The long-time ruling party of Zanzibar, the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM: Party of the Revolution), has supporters from Unguja Island. The majority of people in Unguja are Africans.

In contrast, the support base for the Civic United Front (CUF) in Pemba Island is composed mainly of Arabs. The first incidence of violence between the two islands happened in the 1960s during the fight for independence. Zanzibar, led by Arabs, broke away from Britain and was dubbed "The Sultanate of Zanzibar." But a month later, a revolution led mainly by Africans who were dissatisfied with the ruling sultan broke out. More than 5,000 Arabs were killed. This resulted in the establishment of the "Republic of Zanzibar and Pemba."

Apart from armed conflict, economic disparity between the two islands has always been a problem. Pemba was the wealthier of the two islands, it being the world's largest production and export base of cloves in the world at the time. But with clove production and exports beginning to decline in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the development of Unguja's tourism industry, the balance of wealth between the two islands tilted in Unguja's favor. The CUF has strengthened its power base by playing on the dissatisfaction of not-so-wealthy people of Pemba Island. Such complicated factors led to conflict between the two and parties.

However, both racial/ethnic groups speak Swahili and practice Islam. Because they share the same cultural foundations, it may be assumed that the institutionalization of the power sharing deal was realized due to a heightening recognition as the same Zanzibarians that cooperation pays off.

Although it's the first time for Zanzibar to implement a power sharing system, the idea was not entirely new to them. The government of the Republic of Tanzania had used power sharing policies until 1992. The old Constitution of Tanzania had appointed the president of Zanzibar as the vice president of Tanzania. Over the years, the people of Zanzibar might have developed a sense of affinity to the idea of power sharing policies.