Singing the King's Song? Examining Uchawa in Tanzanian Political Culture

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Abstract
This article critically examines Uchawa, a Kiswahili term denoting sycophancy, exaggerated praise, and opportunistic loyalty, as a political technique in Tanzanian politics. Specifically, it examines how uchawa is strategically deployed by political actors to signal loyalty, secure proximity to power, navigate elite competition, influence access to political and state resources, and reinforce leader-centred political narratives. Using a qualitative case-study design, the article analyses media narrations, political speeches, semi-structured interviews, parliamentary debates and civil servants. Thematic analysis through neo patrimonialism, symbolic politics and bureaucracy was adopted for data analysis. Evidences show that uchawa converts loyalty into bureaucratic and political influence that enables access to decision makers and state resources. Two insights emerge: First, uchawa operates as an informal tool of access allowing actors to navigate patronage networks; second, its routine performance discourages dissent and weakens merit-based advancement, thereby constraining policy innovation and institutional autonomy. Though uchawa can result into short term cohesion, it erodes accountability mechanisms and the entire trust of the public to institutions. Meritocratic recruitment and promotion are recommended with effective whistleblowing and dissent protections, transparent performance evaluation, and institutional accountability mechanisms to reduce incentives for performative loyalty. These measures can improve administrative professionalism, policy responsiveness, and citizen confidence by reducing dependence on personal connections and symbolic loyalty.

Keywords: *Uchawa, Symbolic Authority; Personalised Power; Neo-Patrimonialism; Political Culture*

INTRODUCTION

The operation of political systems does not only appear through formal institution alone but also through informal practices, relational strategies

and symbolic performances that normally determine access to political power (North, 1990; Scott, 1998). In this view, uchawa is one of such practices in Tanzania which has commonly been associated with exaggerated praise, strategic flattery, and performative loyalty toward political leaders. For the sake of this study, uchawa is operationally defined as the deliberate use of excessive praise, public commendation, deferential language, and visible demonstrations of personal loyalty by political and non-political actors to cultivate proximity to powerful individuals and obtain political, material, or career-related benefits. Although sometimes dismissed as ordinary political etiquette, its recurrent presence in political practices warrants a critical investigation as a potentially consequential form of informal political culture.

Specifically, what becomes problematic is that an existing scholarship on Tanzanian political practices and culture has extensively focused on political institutions, leadership and state–society relations with limited attention to uchawa which contemporary appears as a distinct mechanism through which political actors negotiate influence and reproduce hierarchical authority.

Evidences from history show that Tanzania had a centralized dominance of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) under Julius Kambarage Nyerere and later Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) which changed to multiparty politics in early 1990s (Hyden, 2006). Nevertheless, personal loyalty and patronage networking continued to mediate political access and career advancement (Chachage, 2003). Under this scenario, uchawa represents political capital convertible into tangible benefits within patronage relations (Miguel, 2004; Shchukin & Arbatli, 2022). Notwithstanding this, an alternative thinking views public praise as a culturally embedded aspect of leadership instead of an inherently manipulative behaviour. The challenge therefore remains to distance ordinary political appreciation from strategically performed loyalty.

Building on this discussion, the study makes focus on three objectives such as to conceptualise and operationalize uchawa as an informal political practice in Tanzanian political system; to examine how uchawa operates within Tanzania's political and institutional environment; and finally, to assess its political implication to democratic governance, power, accountability mechanisms and policy executions. Such objectives

give a general view for the subsequent review and analysis of the literature.

Contemporary manifestations of uchawa in Tanzanian practices extend beyond political speeches, parliamentary debates, party communications, and bureaucratic interactions. During the presidency of John Pombe Magufuli, for example, parliamentary speeches frequently emphasized his personal virtues and leadership qualities, sometimes overshadowing substantive policy scrutiny (Kweka, 2019). Similarly, reverential language in local governance and political party communications has contributed to the normalization of performative loyalty (Lemarchand, 2012; Msagalla, 2024). Yet such practices should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of political subservience: supporters may genuinely express admiration, while political actors may simultaneously use praise strategically.

The contemporary political environment has transformed rather than eliminated uchawa. Multiparty competitive politics, expanding media platforms, personalised political communication, and increasingly visible leader–follower interactions have created a new space in which loyalty is publicly performed and rewarded. Hierarchical advancement intensifies these incentives (Englebert & Dunn, 2013; Buur et al., 2024), while performative politics highlights how political actors signal allegiance before relevant audiences (Butler, 1997; Goffman, 1959). The issue remains equally important because excessive leader-centred praise weaken critical thinking and scrutiny, institutional checks, and meritocratic decision-making (van de Walle, 2001; Cope & Versteeg, 2024), although it may also generate cohesion within political organisations.

The scholarly relevance of studying uchawa lies in connecting informal institutions, patronage, political performance, and personalised authority. Its policy relevance concerns institutional accountability, leadership recruitment, public-sector professionalism, and the capacity for constructive dissent. Existing analyses on Tanzania have identified elite accommodation and personalised authority (Cooksey & Kelsall, 2011; Kitoka, 2024), alternatively this study advances knowledge by treating uchawa itself as an analytically identifiable political mechanism. Its distinctive contribution is to explain how performative praise can convert symbolic loyalty into institutional influence and decision making under

particular conditions that contribute to the reproduction of political hierarchy and authority.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The literature review below focuses on *uchawa* through a political and organisational lens instead of treating it as personal flattery. The review brings on board neo-patrimonialism and personal rule, symbolism and personalization, incentives and organizational behavior as well as democratic accountability and deliberative norms. The review further situates Tanzanian evidence in a wider East African (Uganda and Kenya) perspective to distinguish what may be seen as country specific from wider patterns of politics and institutional dependence. The aim is therefore to assume that uchawa produces democratic decline and also to examine how the contemporary scholarship on African politics explains its emergence, function and effects. Attention is drawn on limited but growing scholarship that utilizes the term uchawa alongside practices like sycophancy, clientelism, patronage and political loyalty.

Neo-Patrimonialism and Personal Rule in the Context of *Uchawa*

Neo-patrimonialism gives a point of departure as it narrates how formal rules co-exist with informal relationships through which political access and resources are negotiated (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; van de Walle, 2001; Bippa, 2024). In this line of argument, bureaucracy and constitutions do not disappear; instead their operations may be refined by personal networks and unequal access. Equal attention to the interaction between institutional structures and informal political practices is also given by Chabal and Daloz (1999), Herbst (2000) and Danziger (2020). However, the neo-patrimonial view has got criticism for examining African politics as consistently informal and personalised, thereby under-estimating institutional variation and actors' strategic use of formal rules. For example, in Tanzania, the institutional framework assist to interpret uchawa as an exchange-oriented practice through which praise and demonstrations of allegiance may generate social visibility, protection or access.

Facts of history of centralized political mobilisation and networks of influence support this interpretation (Hyden, 2006; Kweka, 2019; Mwinuka et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these studies do not inherently establish a direct causal relationship between praise and material reward. A more cautious reading is that uchawa becomes consequential where

political actors believe that proximity to influential officeholders has organisational value. Scholars like Cooksey and Kelsall (2011); Lemarchand (2012) and Pedersen and Jacob (2019) present more generally how patronage and relational exchange can affect the culture of public sector and they also show that bureaucratic performance, policy objectives and institutional rules may coexist with informal incentives.

The evolving scholarship depicting uchawa presents the concept harder. Studies like Nyonzo (2024) distance uchawa from professional networking by explaining it as gaining favour through flattery and favoritism rather than merit and noting its movement from celebrity culture into politics. For example, the literal discussion of "Chawa wa Mama" that has gained momentum in the period of 2023 to 2026 illustrates how the label has become politically organized and publicly recognizable rather than remaining a private interpersonal behaviour.

More recently, Tanzanian public commentary has described uchawa as a form of political followership, while also acknowledging that supporters can disseminate political messages and build political and economic networks, meaning that not every form of loyalty is necessarily sycophantic. Such observations are important because they challenge an overly negative definition of uchawa and suggest that its meaning is contested. A senior government official's 2025 warning against entertaining uchawa likewise framed the problem in terms of the loss of honest feedback rather than merely corruption or patronage.

A comparative analysis on this phenomenon may be made to analyse the facts about uchawa and its practices in politics. In Kenya for example, political sycophancy is discussed in relation to legislators and political actors who publicly defend their power incumbents, while East African commentary has connected such behaviour to the protection of political power and impunity. A different institutional setting is provided in Uganda where long-term incumbency and leader-centred politics have generated hot debates on political loyalty. Comparative research on Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania further demonstrates that leader-centred mobilisation takes different forms according to party systems, political histories and relationships between elites and citizens. Thus, uchawa is best understood as a Tanzanian expression of a broader repertoire of political attachment, while its specific meanings and consequences remain context dependent.

Much of the existing literature uses broad categories of patronage, clientelism and personal rule that capture related processes but do not necessarily identify uchawa as a distinct practice. In this regard, claims about uchawa should not be inferred automatically from evidence of patronage or personalisation. The concept requires attention to observable acts, including praise, public defense, ceremonial association, online advocacy and selective silence, while also identifying the audience, setting and expected return. This approach can distinguish uchawa from ordinary partisan commitment, professional networking, public diplomacy or culturally appropriate respect. It also permits comparison across Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda without assuming that equivalent vocabulary denotes equivalent political behaviour. Such conceptual precision is particularly important because the available Tanzanian evidence is partly journalistic and normative rather than based on systematic fieldwork. The emerging public debate nevertheless demonstrates that uchawa has become sufficiently visible to warrant empirical investigation, including interviews, discourse analysis and observation of parliamentary, party and administrative settings.

Personalisation of Power and Political Symbolism in the Context of *Uchawa*

Scholarship on personalisation helps to explain why practices such as uchawa persist even when formal institutions are well established. Political symbolism matters because ceremonies, speeches and public recognition can simplify complex institutional processes by attaching government performance to identifiable leaders (Edelman, 1988; Geertz, 1973). In Tanzania, this dynamic has been visible in political communication and representations of development, where leadership figures can become associated with national progress and problem-solving (Hyden, 2006; Msagalla, 2024; Osei & Bruhn, 2024).

The critical question, however, is why personalisation persists. One explanation is institutional: where accountability mechanisms are weak, access to decision-makers is concentrated, or political competition is uneven, actors have incentives to cultivate individual relationships because those relationships can reduce uncertainty. A second explanation is informational. Praise provides leaders with signals of support, while followers use public association with leaders to demonstrate reliability. A third is historical: long-standing party dominance can normalize leader-centred political communication and make institutional and personal authority difficult to separate. A fourth is material and career-related:

appointments, visibility and access to political networks may make proximity valuable. These mechanisms suggest that personalisation is not simply imposed from above; it can be reproduced by actors who calculate that association with powerful figures offers benefits or protection.

This interpretation is supported, but not fully resolved, by studies of Tanzania. Mdukula (2025) and Msagalla (2024) draw attention to leader-centred political communication, while Mwinuka et al. (2024) and Kweka (2019) illuminate relational political practices. Yet the literature still gives limited systematic attention to how ordinary politicians, bureaucrats and other actors decide when to praise, when to remain silent and when to dissent. The distinction matters because uchawa may sometimes be strategic communication, sometimes genuine support, and sometimes coercively induced conformity. Treating all three as equivalent risks overstating personalisation.

East African comparison again reveals variations. Analysis of Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda associates leader-centred politics with different forms of populist mobilisation, institutional histories and claims to represent "the people." Tanzania's experience under Magufuli, for example, is analysed as a distinctly personalistic governing style, whereas Kenya and Uganda display different configurations of electoral competition, elite bargaining and incumbent-party organisation. The implication is that personalisation should be analysed as an outcome of institutional incentives and political histories rather than assumed to be a fixed cultural characteristic.

Organisational Behaviour and Incentive Structures in the Context of *Uchawa*

Rather than repeating the neo-patrimonial argument, organisational behaviour directs attention to how institutions shape individual choices, expectations and communication. In this perspective, the key issue is not simply whether resources are exchanged through networks, but how employees and political actors interpret organisational signals about acceptable behaviour. Scholars such as Geertz (1973), Edelman (1988), Pedersen and Jacob (2019) and Msagalla (2024) help to illuminate how symbols, rituals and organisational meanings influence conduct.

Within Tanzanian political and administrative organisations, uchawa can therefore be examined as a behavioural response to perceived expectations. Actors may praise leaders because such conduct is

rewarded, because criticism is perceived as risky, because colleagues do it, or because they genuinely identify with the leader or programme. These motives are analytically distinct. Cooksey and Kelsall (2011), Englebert and Dunn (2013), and Lemarchand (2012) indicate that institutional performance in African settings is shaped by combinations of formal procedures, organisational norms and political incentives. Tambe and Kopacheva (2024) similarly encourage attention to how institutional actors operate within political environments where formal and informal expectations overlap.

The important contribution of this perspective is to shift the analysis from "leaders rewarding loyalists" to the organisational production of behaviour. Uchawa may become routine when it is embedded in meetings, reporting practices, ceremonial events, and social media communication and promotion cultures. Once normalized, individuals may reproduce the behaviour without receiving an explicit reward. Conversely, professional norms, performance standards and credible supervisory systems can constrain such conduct. The 2025 warning by Tanzania's Deputy Minister that leaders should not entertain "bootlickers" is illustrative: the stated concern was that excessive praise prevents leaders from receiving sincere criticism and constructive feedback. This indicates that the organisational effect of uchawa may depend on whether institutions reward information quality or conformity.
Evidence from Kenya also suggests that sycophancy can involve legislators and other political actors who publicly defend government positions, demonstrating that the behaviour is not unique to Tanzania. Nevertheless, the East African cases differ in institutional arrangements and political incentives. The organisational perspective therefore cautions against assuming that the same behaviour has identical consequences across countries. Uchawa should be investigated empirically through patterns of recruitment, promotion, reporting, communication and dissent rather than inferred solely from visible praise.

Democratic Accountability and Deliberative Norms in the Context of *Uchawa*

Democratic accountability literature provides a necessary counterpoint by asking whether practices associated with uchawa improve communication or weaken scrutiny. Dahl (1971) and Fishkin (1991) give an emphasis that participation, contestation, public reasoning and institutional responsiveness, while Danziger (2020) highlights the institutional conditions under which political authority can be constrained. From this

perspective, excessive deference can reduce the space for criticism, particularly where public officials depend on political approval for career security.

However, a balanced review should not assume that public support for leaders is inherently undemocratic. Political mobilisation requires advocacy, persuasion and expressions of confidence, and supporters can legitimately defend policies or leaders. Uchawa becomes analytically problematic when praise substitutes for evidence, suppresses disagreement, or converts public institutions into instruments for affirming individuals. The distinction between ordinary political support and sycophancy is therefore central. Nyonzo's (2024) distinction between networking and uchawa is useful precisely because it locates the difference in the relationship between merit, access and personal favour.
The democratic consequences are consequently conditional. On one side, repeated leader-centred communication may narrow deliberation, discourage dissent and make policy evaluation less candid. Studies associated with patronage and personal rule raise similar concerns about accountability and institutional autonomy (van de Walle, 2001; Miguel, 2004; Mwinuka et al., 2024). On the other side, political loyalty can mobilise citizens, transmit policy messages and strengthen coalition cohesion. Regional evidence demonstrates that political followers may act as organizers and communicators rather than merely beneficiaries of patronage. Tanzanian commentary similarly notes that groups labeled chawa can promote parties, leaders and political agendas, while debate continues over whether such networks strengthen or weaken political systems.

The central issue, therefore, is not the existence of loyalty but the institutional conditions under which loyalty operates. Where criticism remains protected, appointments are merit-based, information is independently assessed and legislative or administrative oversight is effective, political support need not undermine accountability. Where these safeguards are weak, uchawa may contribute to informational distortion and reduced scrutiny. This conditional interpretation also avoids the deterministic tendency sometimes associated with neo-patrimonial explanations (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; van de Walle, 2001).

Overall, the literature such as Kasera and Juma (2025); Paget and Hudson (2023); and Paget (2017) suggests that uchawa is best

conceptualised as a relational and organisational practice located at the intersection of political symbolism, personalisation, incentives and accountability. Neo-patrimonial scholarship further explains the institutional environment in which personal relationships can influence access; personalisation literature explains why political authority becomes attached to individuals; organisational scholarship explains how actors learn and reproduce expected behaviours; and democratic theory clarifies the conditions under which such practices may either support mobilisation or weaken scrutiny. The major gap is the limited systematic empirical research that examines uchawa itself across institutional settings and comparatively across East Africa. Existing Tanzanian discussions establish the term's growing political salience, while Kenyan and Ugandan evidence shows that comparable forms of political sycophancy and leader-centred mobilisation occur elsewhere but are shaped by different institutional conditions. Future research should therefore examine who engages in uchawa, what motivates it, how it is rewarded or sanctioned, and when it affects deliberation, accountability and institutional performance.

Theoretical Review in the Context of *Uchawa*

The article utilizes a multi theoretical framework due the empirical evidence that uchawa involves symbolic performance, organizational incentives and relational exchange. This reality cannot be captured adequately through a single theoretical lens. The review portrays Neo-Patrimonial Theory, Symbolic Interactionism and Institutional Theory addressed as complementary dimensions of political practices.

The Neo-patrimonial perspective elaborates the rlational foundations of uchawa by showing the extent to which client networks, personalized authority and reciprocal obligations shape political survival and political behavior. In Tanzania for example, formal institutions co-exist with informal hierarchies where loyalty facilitates access to resources, development of career and political protection (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; van de Walle, 2001; Danziger, 2020). Its strength is therefore explaining the power and resource dimension of uchawa, whereas alternative theories of rational choice alone may understate the historical and relational structures within which strategic behaviour occurs.

In another case, Symbolic Interactionism complements the Neo-patrimonial perspective by explaining how uchawa acquires meaning through interaction, language, and performance. Speeches, official

communications, and public displays construct understandings of authority, legitimacy, and loyalty (Blumer, 1969; Edelman, 1988; Buur et al., 2024). Its comparative strength lies in capturing the symbolic and performative dimension that neo-patrimonialism may treat as secondary. Broader cultural theories were not adopted because they may explain norms generally without sufficiently revealing how meanings are actively produced through political interaction.

Institutional perspective explains how formal and informal organisational norms sustain uchawa beyond individual intentions (Scott, 2003; Sesay and Momoh 2025; Kasera and Juma 2025). Its strength is identifying the organisational dimension: reports, meetings, and communications can institutionalise loyalty performances. It complements rather than duplicates the other theories by explaining why such practices become routinised. Alternatives such as structural-functionalism were not adopted because they provide less analytical attention to informal incentives and symbolic practices.

Conceptually, the three theories operate sequentially and interactively: neo-patrimonial networks create relational incentives; symbolic interaction transforms those incentives into visible performances; and institutional structures routinize and reproduce them. Together, they explain uchawa as a strategic practice through which actors signal loyalty, negotiate influence, secure benefits, and reinforce hierarchical authority within Tanzania's governance landscape. This integration clarifies the relationship among agency, meaning, and structure: actors respond to relational dependence, express positioning through recognized symbols, and reproduce institutional expectations through repeated practice. The framework therefore links individual conduct with wider patterns of political authority and legitimacy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multi-method design to examine uchawa in the Tanzanian political context. Fieldwork was conducted in Dar es Salaam and Dodoma, with selected observations in regional political settings. A multi-method approach was appropriate because uchawa is simultaneously expressed through institutional discourse, interpersonal accounts, and observable political performances. Document analysis captured public representations but not participants' interpretations; interviews elicited perceptions but could not fully capture observable conduct; while participant observation captured performances

but could not independently establish their institutional and historical meanings. Combining the three methods therefore provided contextual depth, complementarity, and triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Busetto et al., 2020; Lim, 2024).

Document analysis constituted the first source of data. Thirty-two documents published between 2022 and 2026 were purposively selected, including parliamentary Hansards, presidential and ministerial speeches, political-party statements, official communications, and newspaper reports. Documents containing evidence of praise, symbolic loyalty, personal glorification, or politically significant relational practices were included, while inaccessible or substantively unrelated materials were excluded.

Semi-structured interviews involved forty participants: ten politicians, ten civil servants, ten journalists, and ten political analysts. Interviews were conducted in Dar es Salaam and Dodoma between March 2022 and April 2026 and lasted approximately 25–50 minutes. Participants comprised twenty-four males and sixteen females, distributed across four age categories: 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, and 55 years and above. The political participants represented major political formations, including CCM, CHADEMA, CHAUMA, and ACT Wazalendo, while participants from the other professional groups were included irrespective of party affiliation. Participants were selected purposively through professional networks, institutional contacts, and snowball referrals. Inclusion required adulthood and direct professional experience with Tanzanian political institutions or political communication; informed consent was obtained from all participants (Bryman, 2016).

Participant observation comprised fifteen sessions conducted during political rallies, parliamentary sessions, party events, and public ceremonies. A semi-structured observation guide focused on verbal praise, gestures, ceremonial practices, audience responses, and hierarchical interactions. Field notes were produced immediately after each session.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and production of the interpretive account. Interview transcripts, documents, and field notes were manually coded initially, after which related codes were grouped into categories

and broader themes. Microsoft Excel and SPSS were used to organise the dataset, manage participant characteristics, generate descriptive frequencies and percentages, and support systematic comparison of coded categories. Thematic interpretation remained recursive, allowing themes to be refined as analysis progressed.

Triangulation compared evidence across interviews, documents, and observations. Convergence strengthened credibility, while discrepancies were retained for interpretation. Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data handling. Researcher positionality was addressed through reflexive field notes and continuous consideration of the researcher's academic and professional location, assumptions, and relationship with participants, thereby minimizing undue influence on data interpretation. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from relevant authorities before data collection commenced. Study participants were informed before and anonymity was ensured for study participants particularly given the politically sensitive nature of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Uchawa as a Mechanism of Political Navigation

Among the forty interviewees, twenty-nine participants explicitly described *uchawa* as a means of navigating political relationships, signaling loyalty, and maintaining proximity to centres of power. One participant explained, *"Those who want to survive politically pay attention to the mood at the top,"* suggesting that praise can operate as a calculated strategy for demonstrating political reliability. Another observed that *"The way leaders are praised mirrors the governing style of the time,"* indicating that praise is adapted to prevailing political expectations. These findings extend neo-patrimonial scholarship by demonstrating that patronage operates not only through material exchanges but also through symbolic performances that make loyalty publicly visible. In Tanzania, where political mobility may be associated with party endorsement, executive favour, and reputational standing, visible loyalty can therefore function as a strategic marker within elite networks (Hyden, 2006; Paget & Walecki, 2023).

Participant observations further reinforce this interpretation. Across twenty-seven observations made during political rallies, national commemorations, and party congresses, sixteen observations contained identifiable instances in which praise was used to signal political

alignment, reinforce hierarchy, or demonstrate loyalty. Documentary analysis provided additional evidence. Specifically, the Parliamentary Hansards example is the contribution of Kangi A. Lugola on 29 January 2026. In his parliamentary speech, Lugola thanked President Samia Suluhu Hassan and the ruling party for supporting his return to Parliament, before describing the President's November 2025 parliamentary address as a speech *"iliyojaa maono"* and *"ya uthubutu"* that demonstrated that *"Tanzania mpya inakuja."* He subsequently invited fellow Members of Parliament to collectively repeat the President's political message, prompting the parliamentary response: "Tanzania mpya inakuja." He then framed his subsequent contribution as advice to *"Serikali ya Mheshimiwa Rais Mama Samia Suluhu Hassan."* Later in the same speech, Lugola explicitly referred to *uchawa*, arguing that some individuals *"wamejificha kwenye uchawa"* while concealing alleged economic misconduct, before concluding with a call to *"tumsaidie Mheshimiwa Rais."*

This episode illustrates *uchawa* as a mechanism of political navigation because praise operates simultaneously as political communication, public alignment, and a demonstration of loyalty within a hierarchical institutional setting. Importantly, the evidence does not demonstrate that Lugola's praise was necessarily insincere or opportunistic. Rather, it shows that parliamentary actors themselves recognize *uchawa* as a category through which political loyalty and praise can be interpreted and contested. The Hansard therefore suggests that *uchawa* is not simply an interpersonal form of flattery but part of a broader repertoire through which political actors negotiate recognition, loyalty, hierarchy, and proximity to political authority.

These accounts extend existing scholarship by demonstrating that political praise is context-sensitive rather than uniformly reproduced. Uchawa therefore appears less as a fixed cultural trait than as an adaptive repertoire through which actors read changing political signals and adjust their public conduct. This finding complicates interpretations that treat informal political practices primarily as inherited norms or stable patron-client relationships (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

Interview accounts further reveal that uchawa may operate defensively as well as proactively. Participants described settings in which silence or neutrality could be interpreted as hesitation, ambiguity, or dissent. Public affirmation consequently becomes a form of political risk management.

As political analyst Said Miraji stated during UCHANGANUZI on Azam Media:

> *"Uchawa therefore functions not only as a proactive strategy for advancement but also as a defensive mechanism for risk management. By publicly affirming leadership decisions and policy directions, actors insulate themselves from perceptions of disloyalty."* (Said Miraji, 2025)

This dynamic aligns closely with neo - patrimonial interpretations of political behavior, in which loyalty signals are exchanged for political security, resource access, and career continuity (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). Within relational hierarchies, symbolic praise becomes a visible currency that sustains patron-client linkages. Interview respondents described how public recognition of leadership initiatives may enhance access to party structures, appointment opportunities, or informal networks of influence. While such outcomes are not formally codified, they are widely perceived as embedded within the political incentive structure. These adaptive rhetorical shifts demonstrate that uchawa is responsive to political context, reinforcing its character as a strategic performance embedded within institutional survival mechanisms. Analysis of forty in-depth interviews revealed divergent interpretations of uchawa. Twelve participants viewed ceremonial praise as legitimate respect for authority, hierarchy, national unity, and collective identity, while twenty participants linked it to political loyalty. Observations and documentary evidence similarly reflected these competing meanings, indicating that uchawa was not uniformly perceived as harmful or manipulative. From this perspective, public commendation can facilitate cohesion rather than merely serve individual advancement. Nevertheless, even participants who accepted ceremonial praise acknowledged the importance of tone, timing, and context. The findings therefore challenge a purely cynical interpretation of uchawa: its meaning depends partly on whether praise is understood as respectful political communication or strategic self-positioning.

Overall, the evidence suggests that uchawa is a structured form of political navigation shaped by institutional incentives, relational expectations, and changing leadership signals. It converts alignment into publicly observable behaviour, reducing uncertainty about loyalty while simultaneously reproducing hierarchical relationships. The contribution of this finding is therefore to connect informal political performance with institutional governance: rather than operating outside institutions, uchawa can influence how actors interpret authority, manage reputational

risk, and pursue political continuity within them. In this sense, it complements rather than simply repeats scholarship on patronage, showing how symbolic practices help sustain political order even where formal rules remain institutionally intact. This also suggests that institutional behaviour cannot be explained solely by formal rules. Where actors anticipate that symbolic alignment affects recognition or protection, informal expectations become consequential governance mechanisms. Consequently, the study locates uchawa at the intersection of communication, elite coordination, and institutional power, showing how authority is reproduced through everyday conduct.

Symbolic Elevation and the Consolidation of Political Royalty

Analysis of 40 in-depth interviews, participant observations of political rallies, commemorations, and party congresses, and documents including parliamentary transcripts, speeches, party communications, and selected media reports revealed recurring patterns of ceremonial praise and leader-centred recognition. Interview participants described praise as signaling loyalty, political alignment, and proximity to leadership. Observations showed praise embedded in speeches, introductions, chants, and ceremonial expressions that elevated leaders beyond formal institutional positions. Documentary evidence similarly linked institutional achievements to individual leadership through personalised narratives.

The convergence of these findings indicates that uchawa extends beyond admiration, normalizing leader-centred authority and symbolically elevating leaders into what this study terms "political royalty." Operationally, political royalty refers not to hereditary rule or a formal constitutional status, but to a condition in which political leaders are discursively constructed as exceptionally authoritative, indispensable, and central to national stability, development, and collective identity. This process does not formally alter constitutional arrangements; rather, it operates through repeated symbolic performances that personalize authority and make leadership appear naturally deserving of deference. The finding extends scholarship on symbolic politics by demonstrating how ritualized representation can transform ordinary executive authority into a culturally reinforced form of political centrality (Danziger, 2021; Dodworth, 2022).

Participant observation at political rallies during the 2025 general elections, national commemorations, and party congresses revealed patterned rituals that elevated executive authority beyond routine

institutional acknowledgment. Public events frequently began with extended introductions highlighting personal sacrifice, visionary leadership, and historical mission. Speeches were often preceded or followed by synchronized chants, prolonged applause, and collective affirmations invoking unity under a single guiding figure. Visual symbolism, including prominently displayed portraits, coordinated attire bearing leadership slogans, and repeated slogan recitations, reinforced political identity by associating collective belonging with the leader and governing political project. In several observed instances, policy achievements were framed as direct outcomes of executive will, despite implementation involving multiple institutional actors. These performances reinforced legitimacy by publicly displaying consensus, authority by dramatizing command, and political identity by linking national and party aspirations to personalised leadership. Thus, the findings extend Dodworth's (2022) and Osei and Bruhn's (2023) conception of political theatre by showing how performance operates not merely as representation but as a mechanism through which *uchawa* normalizes personalised legitimacy.

Document analysis of parliamentary transcripts, party communications, and media reports corroborates these observations. Parliamentary debates frequently opened with commendations to the head of state before substantive policy engagement. Official communications and budget speeches often attributed sectoral successes, from infrastructure expansion to social service delivery, to executive initiative. Media headlines similarly personalised development outcomes, foregrounding individual leadership rather than institutional processes. Over time, such discursive repetition constructs a narrative of singular capability and indispensability. Honorifics, superlatives, and references to historical destiny shift political discourse from institutional performance toward leader-centred accomplishment. This finding supports, but also nuances, scholarship on dominant-party systems, where executive prominence coexists with formally intact institutions (Paget & Walecki, 2023; Msagalla, 2024). Rather than suggesting that institutional structures have disappeared, the evidence indicates that uchawa can operate within them by reshaping how institutional authority is publicly interpreted.

Interview evidence further reveals both strategic and affirmative interpretations of ceremonial praise. Several political actors described praise as expected and advantageous because visible acknowledgment of executive leadership signals ideological alignment, unity, and reliability

within party and state structures. Some participants did not regard such practices as inherently problematic, arguing that public recognition can legitimately acknowledge achievements, motivate officials, strengthen cohesion, and communicate confidence in national leadership. Others, however, expressed concern that continuous praise narrows the discursive space for criticism. As one senior civil servant explained:

> *"Critique must be carefully phrased; otherwise, it can appear as opposition to leadership rather than constructive input"* (Interview, Senior Civil Servant, 2026).

These contrasting views suggest that uchawa cannot be understood exclusively as manipulation or institutional pathology. Consistent with Edelman's (1988) argument, symbolic affirmation can shape political perception and behaviour, but participants also interpreted it as a functional resource for cohesion and recognition. The critical issue, therefore, is not praise itself but its cumulative capacity to make loyalty more politically valuable than substantive evaluation.

Historical patterns within Tanzania's dominant-party system further contextualize these findings. Although constitutional structures, parliamentary procedures, and judicial frameworks remain operational, political legitimacy is frequently centralized around executive officeholders (van de Walle, 2001; Tambe & Kopacheva, 2024). This coexistence of institutional formalism and symbolic personalisation reflects broader neo-patrimonial tendencies, in which authority is embedded in relational and performative hierarchies rather than solely in impersonal rules (Kitoka, 2024). Respondents acknowledged that personalisation may facilitate policy coherence by aligning administrative actors around a clear focal authority. Nevertheless, when leaders are repeatedly portrayed as indispensable, parliamentary and administrative evaluation may increasingly become framed through loyalty. The findings therefore extend Paget and Walecki (2023) by showing that symbolic personalisation can simultaneously stabilize coordination and recalibrate the boundaries of institutional critique.

Overall, triangulated evidence indicates that political royalty emerges cumulatively rather than through a single directive. Participant observation reveals ritualized enactment; document analysis demonstrates discursive repetition; and interviews clarify both strategic motivations and divergent interpretations. *Uchawa* consequently contributes to the symbolic centralisation of authority by making leadership a focal point of

legitimacy, institutional coordination, and political identity, while leaving formal constitutional arrangements substantially intact.

Bureaucratic Internalisation

Within the broader theme of *Singing the King's Song*, the findings demonstrate that *uchawa* extends beyond public rallies, partisan mobilisation, and ceremonial praise into the everyday practices of bureaucracy. Whereas the preceding sections show how praise facilitates political navigation and symbolically elevates leaders, this section demonstrates how such practices become internalized within administrative institutions. Civil servants reported adopting deferential language in official communications to avoid appearing disloyal, suggesting that symbolic praise becomes embedded in routine bureaucratic conduct. Evidence from participant observation, document analysis, and interviews indicates that this internalization occurs less through explicit directives than through tone, attribution, framing, and anticipatory self-regulation.

Semi-structured interviews with civil servants at ministerial, regional, and district levels revealed a shared perception that official communication requires careful alignment with executive authority. Participants described a tacit expectation that memoranda, policy briefs, and progress reports should acknowledge presidential vision, government directives, or ruling-party priorities. One mid-level bureaucrat explained:

> *"A report can be technically sound, but if it does not reflect the leadership's direction, it may raise questions*" (Interview, Policy Analyst, 2026).

Similarly, a senior official observed:

> *"Critical recommendations are often 'wrapped in affirmations' to signal loyalty before presenting alternative options"* (Interview, Senior Administrator, 2025).

These accounts extend the preceding findings on *uchawa* by demonstrating that the practice is not restricted to visible political performance. Rather, the same logic of loyalty signaling identified in political navigation and symbolic elevation is reproduced within ostensibly professional and technocratic spaces. This finding also qualifies conventional interpretations of bureaucratic conformity that emphasize formal rules or direct political intervention. Participants did not describe overt censorship or written instructions mandating praise. Instead, they described anticipatory self-regulation, captured in the

expression "knowing the environment." Thus, *uchawa* appears to operate as an internalized institutional norm through which bureaucratic actors anticipate how their communication may be interpreted.

This finding supports but also extends neo-patrimonial interpretations of political behaviour. In dominant-party settings, where executive authority remains symbolically central, professional advancement may be perceived as connected to demonstrated alignment with leadership priorities (Msigalla, 2024). Yet the evidence suggests that bureaucratic adaptation cannot be reduced simply to patron-client dependence. Officials may reproduce deferential discourse even without direct personal benefits or explicit demands from political superiors. *Uchawa*, therefore, operates through reputational calculation and institutional socialization as much as through material patronage. Deferential language becomes a form of professional risk management.

Document analysis of ministerial reports, parliamentary submissions, strategic plans, and public speeches further substantiates these interview accounts. Across sectors, policy achievements were frequently framed as outcomes of executive guidance rather than solely as products of institutional or bureaucratic effort. Technical documents commonly began with references to presidential leadership or national vision statements before presenting sector-specific evidence. Even where evidence-based evaluation was provided, attribution often emphasized central authority. Implementation reports similarly contained formulaic acknowledgements of leadership commitment, sometimes preceding statistical findings.

These patterns provide important evidence of the institutionalisation of symbolic authority. They extend the argument developed in the preceding section on political royalty by showing that symbolic elevation is not confined to ceremonial spaces; it is reproduced through administrative texts. Repeated attribution can gradually personalize institutional achievement and make executive leadership the dominant interpretive frame through which policy success is communicated. This observation is consistent with Kassimba and Britto (2026), who highlight the significance of symbolic centralisation, but the present findings add a micro-level dimension by showing how centralisation is reproduced through routine bureaucratic writing rather than solely through formal institutional arrangements.

The findings also resonate with Mendelberg (2022) and Rak (2023), who emphasize the symbolic function of political language in structuring perceptions of authority and legitimacy. However, the Tanzanian evidence extends this scholarship by demonstrating that symbolic language operates not merely as public political rhetoric but as an administrative practice. Through repeated references to leadership, bureaucratic discourse can transform political loyalty into an apparently routine feature of professional communication. In this respect, *uchawa* becomes institutionalised without necessarily being formally codified.

Participant observation during administrative meetings, public briefings, and interdepartmental workshops provided further evidence. Officials frequently prefaced technical presentations with acknowledgements of national leadership or references to overarching governmental directives. Such statements were often delivered almost ritualistically before substantive discussion began. Observation also revealed that overt disagreement with policies associated with executive priorities was uncommon. Instead, concerns were frequently presented as implementation challenges rather than direct critiques of policy direction. This pattern suggests that internalized deference shapes not only written communication but also the boundaries of permissible deliberation.

Such behaviour can be interpreted through institutional isomorphism, whereby organisations adapt to dominant political norms in order to maintain legitimacy (Mendelberg, 2022). However, the findings complicate a purely structural interpretation because conformity appears to be reproduced through individual calculations of professional caution. Bureaucratic actors "sing the king's song" not necessarily because they possess ideological commitment, but because symbolic conformity is understood as a safer professional strategy. The finding therefore bridges institutional and actor-centred explanations of bureaucratic behaviour.

Implications for Policy Deliberation

The internalization of *uchawa* has ambivalent consequences for policy deliberation. On one hand, rhetorical alignment can enhance administrative cohesion by producing consistency in policy messaging. In centralised governance systems, shared framing may reduce institutional friction and facilitate coordinated implementation (Baturo & Elkink, 2024). Public affirmation of executive priorities can signal unity and contribute to administrative predictability, particularly during periods of political uncertainty or institutional transition.

On the other hand, the findings reveal significant epistemic and democratic costs. When officials anticipate that criticism may be interpreted as disloyalty, policy deliberation can shift from substantive evaluation towards symbolic affirmation. Technical scrutiny, alternative interpretations, and evidence-based dissent may consequently be softened or excluded. This challenges the deliberative ideal in which legitimacy is strengthened through open argumentation and reasoned justification (Edelman, 2020; Mendelberg, 2022). The problem is therefore not simply that officials praise leaders, but that repeated loyalty signaling can alter the conditions under which disagreement is expressed.

This finding also extends scholarship on hybrid and competitive authoritarian systems. Levitsky and Way (2010), Bermeo (2016), and Danziger (2021) emphasize institutional constraints, executive dominance, and mechanisms through which political competition may be narrowed. The present evidence adds a less visible mechanism: bureaucratic actors may themselves reproduce political asymmetry through anticipatory linguistic conformity. Thus, executive centrality can be sustained not only through formal authority or coercive instruments but also through everyday communicative practices.

Overall, bureaucratic internalization represents a quiet but consequential dimension of *uchawa*. It demonstrates that symbolic politics penetrates administrative conduct, drafting practices, and deliberative routines. Loyalty becomes embedded in memoranda, policy briefs, and parliamentary submissions, contributing to a hierarchy of voice in which affirmation may outweigh critique. This finding reinforces the broader argument that symbolic authority can simultaneously integrate political actors and constrain institutional pluralism (Dodworth, 2022; Paget & Walecki, 2023; Msagalla, 2024; Mdukula, 2025). Accordingly, "singing the king's song" extends from public ceremonies into everyday governance: its significance lies less in overt coercion than in the routinization of deference, which may promote administrative unity while quietly narrowing the depth and plurality of policy deliberation.

Media Amplification

Within the broader argument of this article, media amplification emerges as a crucial mechanism through which leader-centric narratives are normalised and reproduced. While *uchawa* is often discussed as a cultural or interpersonal practice of exaggerated praise, findings from participant observation, document analysis, and interviews demonstrate that media

institutions both state-affiliated and private play a central role in extending such praise into the public sphere. Through repetitive personalisation of policy achievements, media discourse reinforces executive centrality and contributes to the consolidation of symbolic authority.

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A review of seventeen newspapers, including *The Citizen*, *Daily News* and *The Guardian*, together with televised news transcripts and online news portals such as *Tanzania Times* and *Guardian Online*, covered the period 2023 – 2026. Across the sample, policy initiatives and development projects were frequently framed around the president rather than the institutions responsible for implementation. Headlines often attributed infrastructural expansion, social service delivery, or diplomatic engagement directly to presidential action, even when projects involved multiple bureaucratic actors. Phrases such as "under the leadership of…" or "the President has delivered…" were common narrative anchors.

This personalisation was evident across transport, education, health, and energy, suggesting a routinised editorial style rather than isolated instances of praise. Even in analytically oriented articles, references to executive vision frequently preceded discussion of technical details. This reflects what Dodworth (2022) and Mdukula (2025) describe as the symbolic construction of political spectacle, where language shapes perceptions of agency and legitimacy, while extending this scholarship by showing that spectacle is also reproduced through ordinary editorial attribution. Repetition of leader-centred attribution therefore contributes to what respondents described as "political royalty," embedding the leader as the primary driver of national progress.

Notably, critical or investigative pieces were less likely to attribute systemic shortcomings directly to executive leadership. Instead, responsibility was often diffused toward local administrators or technical agencies. This asymmetry between centralized credit and decentralized blame reinforces executive prominence while shielding the symbolic core of authority.

Interviews with journalists, editors, and media analysts provide further insight into the dynamics underlying this amplification. Several respondents acknowledged structural and professional pressures influencing editorial decisions. One journalist observed that:

> *"Stories highlighting presidential initiatives attract more visibility and are considered safer editorial choices"* (Interview, Senior Reporter, 2024).

Another editor noted that:

> *"Aligning coverage with national leadership narratives is often perceived as consistent with promoting unity and stability"* (Interview, Newspaper Editor, 2026).

Importantly, media practitioners did not uniformly characterize this pattern as coercive. Rather, they described it as embedded within professional routines and audience expectations. In dominant-party contexts, the presidency often symbolizes the state, making leader-focused reporting appear synonymous with national reporting (Paget & Walecki, 2023). The findings therefore challenge explanations centred primarily on direct political control, indicating that normative alignment and market incentives can reproduce leader-centred narratives.

Interviews with civil society actors further suggested that repetitive praise narrows discursive space. Respondents indicated that alternative interpretations of policy outcomes struggle to gain equal prominence. As one media analyst explained:

> *"When every achievement is personalised, it becomes difficult to discuss institutional performance independently"* (Interview, Media Researcher, 2026).

This observation aligns with the broader theme of *uchawa* as a communicative environment where symbolic loyalty shapes narrative boundaries.

Participant observation in press briefings, political rallies, and newsroom discussions provided contextual depth. During press conferences, official spokespersons frequently framed updates within narratives of executive initiative. Journalists' follow-up questions often mirrored this framing, reinforcing personalisation. In newsroom settings, observed editorial meetings revealed prioritization of stories connected to presidential appearances or directives, particularly when accompanied by visual symbolism.

At political rallies covered by national broadcasters, live commentary emphasized the leader's presence and audience adulation, sometimes overshadowing substantive policy discussion. The performative dimension of coverage, focusing on applause, repetition of slogans, and highlighting honorific titles, illustrates how media practices can transform political communication into symbolic spectacle. These observations add an institutional dimension: amplification occurs through selection, framing, and visual emphasis, not merely overt praise.

Media Amplification and the Logic of *Uchawa*

Media amplification and the logic of *uchawa* function as mutually reinforcing processes in contemporary political communication. In contexts where media systems are pervasive, repetitive leader-centred narratives do more than inform; they transform political figures into symbolic anchors of collective meaning, shaping perceptions of legitimacy and indispensability (Angulo Moncayo et al., 2025). Research on digital political communication highlights personalisation and emotional appeal as strategies through which executives frame their actions as central to national progress, extending beyond policy to embodied symbolic authority (Angulo Moncayo et al., 2025; Decker & Krämer, 2025).

In hybrid media environments combining legacy broadcasting with algorithmically mediated platforms, incumbent leaders often emphasise affirmative, personalised discourse that solidifies their symbolic position in public consciousness (Raihan, 2025). Likewise, studies of political narrative construction indicate that repetitive circulation of symbolic imagery and emotionally charged storytelling enhances leadership visibility and resonance, consolidating authority through mediated repetition (Devia Acevedo, 2023; Angulo Moncayo et al., 2025). The present findings extend these insights to Tanzania by linking mediated repetition explicitly to *uchawa* as an informal political practice.

However, this amplification also reflects structural factors. In dominant-party systems like Tanzania's, the historical intertwining of state identity with executive institutions may predispose public discourse to valorize central figures as foundational to development narratives. While personalisation can foster social cohesion and shared purpose, it also risks narrowing critical pluralism by overshadowing institutional accountability with leader-centric symbolism (Angulo Moncayo et al., 2025; Decker & Krämer, 2025). Thus, media amplification operates as a central conduit through which *uchawa* moves from interpersonal flattery to systemic discourse, normalizing leader-centred narratives through headlines, broadcasts, and symbolic imagery that repeatedly link executive agency to national destiny.

Consequences for Governance

Within Singing the King's Song? Re-examining *Uchawa* in Tanzanian Politics, the consolidation of leader-centric praise is not treated merely as a cultural artefact but as a governance dynamic with tangible institutional consequences. Drawing on participant observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews, this article finds that uchawa operates through loyalty signaling, leader-centred praise, bureaucratic deference, and media amplification, reshaping deliberation, career incentives, innovation, and perceptions of institutional authority. At the same time, some respondents emphasise its integrative potential, arguing that visible unity reinforces political stability.

Reduced Deliberative Debate

Evidence from participant observation in parliamentary sessions and public forums indicates that deliberative debate is often framed within boundaries of symbolic loyalty. Discussions rarely directly challenge executive direction; instead, disagreements than as critiques of policy design. In several observed settings, participants prefaced remarks with affirmations of leadership before raising concerns, signalling alignment before deliberation.

Interviews with civil servants and legislators reinforce this pattern. Respondents described an environment in which overt disagreement with executive-linked initiatives may be interpreted as disloyalty. One interviewee noted that:

> *"Debate exists, but it is cautious and carefully worded"* (Interview, Former Member of Parliament, 2026*).*

Such findings align with Edelman (2020)'s argument that symbolic political language structures the limits of acceptable discourse. While formal institutions remain intact, the discursive space for robust critique may narrow under sustained praise practices.

Document analysis of parliamentary records and policy reports further supports this observation. Speeches frequently include extended commendations of leadership achievements before substantive discussion, reinforcing personalisation. This rhetorical structure may indirectly discourage adversarial debate by embedding critique within praise.

Meritocracy and Loyalty-Based Advancement

Interview data suggest that perceptions of career advancement are influenced by visible demonstrations of loyalty. Several mid-level administrators indicated that alignment with executive priorities is viewed as advantageous for promotion. Although formal civil service procedures emphasise merit, informal reputational dynamics appear to shape advancement opportunities.

Document analysis of appointment announcements and official biographies often highlights loyalty, dedication, and commitment to leadership vision as defining attributes. While professional qualifications are also noted, the prominence of loyalty language suggests its symbolic value within governance structures. In dominant-party systems, patronage networks and relational authority can intersect with bureaucratic processes, influencing career trajectories (Mendelberg, 2022).

Participant observation in administrative workshops further revealed subtle peer signalling: officials who publicly aligned themselves with executive narratives were often positively acknowledged. Over time, such patterns may weaken perceptions of meritocracy, even if formal criteria remain unchanged.

Citizen Perceptions and Institutional Distance

Interviews with civil society actors and local stakeholders indicate that citizens increasingly interpret development outcomes through the lens of individual leadership rather than institutional capacity. Document analysis of media narratives supports this trend, as achievements are frequently personalised. While such personalisation can strengthen leader legitimacy, it may simultaneously create a perceived gap between institutions and individuals. Citizens may attribute successes to a single figure while associating institutional shortcomings with bureaucratic

inefficiency. This perception dynamic reflects Danziger's (2021) observation that Tanzania's nation-building history has intertwined state identity with centralised authority. However, sustained personalisation may complicate long-term institutionalisation by overshadowing collective governance mechanisms.

Stability and Cohesion: A Countervailing View

Despite concerns about personalization and constrained pluralism, participants argued that visible unity expressed through praise and coordinated messaging, can foster social cohesion and political stability. Senior officials in interviews frequently suggested that when political elites and state media articulate a consistent narrative of collective purpose, it reduces informational fragmentation and diminishes the uncertainty that often accompanies rapid social change (Decker & Krämer, 2025; Frontiers in Political Science, 2026). Participant observation at public ceremonies revealed that collective affirmations of leadership, whether in speeches, ritualised applause, or symbolic imagery, provide audiences with coherent frames for interpreting national challenges. Scholars of political communication emphasise that in contexts of economic or political volatility, stable narratives and shared symbols serve cognitive and emotional functions, helping citizens make sense of complexity and reinforcing trust in institutional direction (Devia Acevedo, 2023; Angulo Moncayo et al., 2025).

From this vantage point, the symbolic dimension of *uchawa* is not merely an artefact of media repetition but a functional narrative resource that can integrate diverse constituencies around common referents. Classic work on symbolic politics shows that shared representations of authority, including rituals, metaphors, and leader-anchored stories, can generate durable psychological commitments that transcend specific policy disagreements (Edelman, 1988; Pfau et al., 2021). More recent research further argues that in hybrid media environments, coordinated symbolic narratives can reduce affective polarisation by offering inclusive frames that resonate across social groups, particularly when anchored in themes of national unity and collective progress (Pfau et al., 2021). In this way, the repetition of affirming discourse, while it may personalise politics, also contributes to a sense of normative stability and continuity that many interviewees considered essential for sustaining public confidence during periods of uncertainty. highlight limitations and future research directions more explicitly.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *uchawa* in Tanzanian political practice is neither a trivial cultural expression nor merely spontaneous flattery; rather, it is a structured political practice through which informal incentives intersect with formal institutional administration. The study advances understanding of formal and informal institutions by showing that such practices do not simply operate alongside formal institutions but can shape how institutional authority is interpreted, exercised, and reproduced. Across media discourse, bureaucratic communication, political rallies, and administrative deliberations, praise functions as political currency which finally signals loyalty and reputation. Thus, informal political behaviour can affect institutional processes without requiring formal changes to institutional setting.

The findings further reveal that *uchawa* contributes to the personalisation of administration by concentrating symbolic recognition around executive leadership. Repeated leader-centred narratives can re-attribute institutional achievements to individual agency which in turm appear as strengthening perceptions of indispensable leadership. The internalization of deferential language and loyalty signaling also creates reputational incentives that influence how officials communicate, evaluate policy choices, and navigate political relationships. Consequently, formally autonomous institutions may retain their legal authority while experiencing subtle informal pressures that narrow deliberative space and privilege political alignment over independent expertise. *Uchawa* therefore operates as a mechanism linking symbolic performance to institutional behaviour, reproducing power relations from within existing institutional structures.

Nevertheless, the study's qualitative and interpretive design limits statistical generalisation, as the evidence was drawn from selected political, bureaucratic, media, and civil society settings. Social desirability may also have shaped participants' accounts, particularly where discussions of loyalty and executive authority were sensitive. Furthermore, the study was temporally bounded around the 2020 and 2025 electoral periods, while limited access to highly sensitive institutional spaces constrained direct observation of elite deliberations. These limitations indicate the need for cautious interpretation of the findings.

Future research could address these limitations through mixed-method and survey designs capable of examining the prevalence of *uchawa* across regions and institutions. Comparative research could investigate similar practices in other dominant-party or hybrid political systems, while longitudinal studies could examine how *uchawa* changes across leadership transitions. Further research should also explore citizen interpretations and resistance, as well as employ digital ethnography and computational text analysis to examine the circulation, amplification, and contestation of *uchawa* across contemporary digital platforms

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