



Z A P U
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PRESS STATEMENT

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ZAPU roundly condemns the arrest and subsequent pretrial detention of Blessed Mhlanga. The outlandish claim that releasing the eminent journalist on bail will disrupt peace and security in Zimbabwe would be laughable if it were not so tragic. On the contrary, it is actually Mhlanga's continued detention that is causing unrest among all peace loving and law abiding citizens in Zimbabwe.

As ZAPU we have noted with concern state-sponsored attacks on media practitioners and in some cases independent media houses themselves. The bombing of a gallery next to the *Daily News* editorial office in June 2000 and the predawn bombing of the newspaper's printing press on 28 January 2001 remain as stark reminders of Zimbabwe's media-suppressing environment.

Over the years we have witnessed the persecution of media practitioners for simply doing their work. In 1999, Mark Chavhunduka and Ray Choto, both journalists with *The Standard* newspaper were arrested and tortured in detention after they published a story claiming that 23 army officers had been arrested for attempting to stage a coup against the late dictator Robert Mugabe. Government agents reportedly beat the journalists, applied electric shocks to their hands, feet, and genitals, and submerged their heads in drums of water.

Ironically, the two journalists were charged under the Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA) of 1960, a widely discredited piece of legislation that Zimbabwe's pre-independence colonial government used to suppress black nationalism. The use of Rhodesian inspired scare tactics has remained the bedrock of state-sponsored lawfare against media freedoms in Zimbabwe. Besides weaponizing the law against dissenting voices, the rogue regime in Harare has employed barbarian methods to silence media practitioners and pro-democracy activists.

The brazen abduction of eminent journalist Itai Dzamara comes to mind. Dzamara was abducted on 9 March 2015 by five men while he was at a barber shop in Harare's Glen View suburb. His abductors are said to have accused him of stealing cattle before

handcuffing him, forcing him into a white truck with concealed number plates, and driving off. He has not been seen since then.

Itai Dzamara was senselessly eliminated, yet the calls he made for President Robert Mugabe to step down were implemented by members of the dictator's own political party and security establishment. After the dramatic coup that ended Robert Mugabe's autocratic rule in November 2017, the so-called new dispensation that emerged, pinned every form of repression on the despotism of Robert Mugabe's First Republic. Claiming to be as soft as wool, the recycled leadership of the Second Republic made lofty promises of a new dawn of freedom in Zimbabwe. The lie barely lasted a year before default settings kicked back in.

Repression reared its ugly head as early as 2020 when an independent investigative journalist began to unmask the wolves in sheep's clothing. The harassment, arbitrary arrests and pretrial detention of prominent journalist, Mr Hopewell Chin'ono reincarnated the horrors of former President Mugabe's iron fist attitudes towards critics, real or perceived. To his sole credit, Mr Robert Gabriel Mugabe was said to be anything but a common thief.

Today, as Blessed Mhlanga sits alone in remand prison, our spirits are shackled with him. Our central guiding philosophy is based on the belief that an injury to one is an injury to all of us. We appeal to the church in Zimbabwe to lead in prayers for Blessed Mhlanga. He has broken no laws and remains an upright citizen in good standing. We stand with Blessed Mhlanga knowing that the light he emits will never be conquered by the forces of darkness surrounding him.

To Chris Mhike, Doug Coltart and everyone assisting with Blessed's legal counsel, we stand in solidarity with your efforts to secure his freedom. May God grant you the wisdom and strength to wage a spirited legal battle to extricate Blessed from the punishment wrongly apportioned to him.

To the rest of the media fraternity in Zimbabwe we say do not lose heart. Remain firm in your normative watchdog role and continue to hold public officials accountable. The ZANU PF-led government's frivolous case against Blessed Mhlanga is not an attack on just one journalist but an attempt to muzzle your entire fourth estate as a whole. There should be resistance and contempt for such backward attacks on media practice.

To the state actors involved in these image-denting blunders, we encourage you to be guided by the constitution of Zimbabwe which clearly defines the legal limits within which journalists do their work. You should not expend all your energy crucifying the messenger instead of grappling with the clear message delivered to you and your principals. Free Blessed Mhlanga unconditionally to salvage our country's battered image.

Issued by:

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