

Lawyer Arrests in Zimbabwe Worry Rights Groups



Tapiwa Muchineripi (holding shoes) and Douglas Coltart (holding book) of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights arrive at Harare Magistrates Court on Sept. 5, 2023, to face charges of obstructing or defeating the course of justice. (Columbus Mavhunga/VOA)

HARARE, ZIMBABWE —

Rights groups in Zimbabwe say they are concerned about the arrests of two human rights lawyers Monday night.

Police arrested Douglas Coltart and Tapiwa Muchineripi of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights after they asked police not to interview two of their clients who were hospitalized.

The clients, opposition activists Womberaishe Nhende and Sonele Mukhuhani of Citizens Coalition for Change, said that they were abducted, tortured and drugged on Saturday by people they suspected were state agents.

“Their arrest amounts to criminalization of their profession,” said Jeremiah Bamu of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights. “All they did was to convey advice that they had received from medical personnel about the medical condition of their clients and their ability to withstand police interviews. And because of that simple conveyance of information and representation of their clients, they have been arrested, and they are now placed on remand.

“That is a direct attack on the independence of the profession and is a move that is calculated at making lawyers fail to exercise their functions,” he said.



Jeremiah Bamu of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights talks to reporters outside Harare Magistrates Court on Sept. 5, 2023. He said the arrest of his colleagues “amounts to criminalization of their profession.” (Columbus Mavhunga/VOA)

Coltart and Muchineripi, who were released on \$100 bail each, are expected back in court on October 20 to determine the legality of the charges against them — obstructing or defeating the course of justice, Bamu said.

Lucia Masuka, the executive director of Amnesty International in Zimbabwe, said no one should be prosecuted simply for exercising their human rights, including the right to represent those who have been the arrested.

“Everyone, regardless of their political affiliation, should be able to freely participate in peaceful activism without fear of abduction or harm,” Masuka said. “The Zimbabwean authorities must immediately stop issuing inflammatory statements that could incite attacks against political activists, human rights defenders and other people.”

Masuka also said that authorities must ensure a peaceful post-election environment by “fully respecting, protecting and ensuring the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression.”

Repeated efforts to reach Kazembe Kazembe, Zimbabwe’s home affairs minister, for comment were fruitless Tuesday.

The arrest of the lawyers happened the day President Emmerson Mnangagwa was sworn in for his second term and vowed to respect the constitution.

“Under my leadership and the new Zanu PF government,” Mnangagwa said, “democracy, good governance, the rule of law and the politics of tolerance will be entrenched, in line with the spirit and letter of our sacred national constitution and laws.”

The Zimbabwean government has frequently been accused of intolerance and not observing the rule of law since the country got its independence in 1980.