



Press Statement

3 May 2023

ZLHR STATEMENT ON WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

ON World Press Freedom Day, **Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights** (ZLHR) notes with concern the backsliding and erosion of the enjoyment of freedom of expression and freedom of the media. ZLHR implores government to cease the relentless onslaught against dissenting voices.

This year, World Press Freedom Day, which is commemorated annually on 3 May, is being marked at a momentous time when the United Nations marks the 30th anniversary of the special day for media freedom.

ZLHR pays tribute to all media practitioners who are persevering in reporting the truth and working to make an impact and positive changes in their communities.

The theme for World Press Freedom Day in 2023, “Shaping a future of rights: freedom of expression as a driver for all other human rights” as promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, signifies the enabling element of freedom of expression to enjoy and protect all other human rights.

Having independent media and a media-literate public is essential to tackling disinformation, lies and hate speech. Regrettably, ZLHR deplores the fact that freedom of expression is far from acting as a driver for the enjoyment of other human rights and that media freedom is evidently taking a step backwards.

Despite Zimbabwe’s obligations under international human rights law and its commitment to implement recommendations from the previous reviews of the United Nations Human Rights Council-led Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Mechanism, there still exists several repressive laws, impediments, policies and practices which unjustifiably limit the right to freedom of expression.

The effect of all this, including digital surveillance and prosecution of human rights defenders, opposition politicians and ordinary citizens, has been to curb free speech and to censor media practitioners.

The fragile media economy has curtailed people's access to and consumption of information products and has resulted in the loss of jobs for media practitioners.

Regrettably, this is all taking place at a time when the government accepted recommendations calling for the implementation of measures guaranteeing the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, during the UPR session held in January 2022 in Switzerland.

In recent times, ZLHR has observed the increased targeting through arrests and prosecution of ordinary citizens on flimsy charges of undermining the authority of or insulting the President and the outrageous convictions and sanctioning of perceived government opponents.

As this is taking place in the run-up to general elections, ZLHR is convinced that the law is increasingly being weaponised to silence dissenting voices and perceived opponents of the government, as confirmed by the recent unprecedented bullying and intimidation of journalists by senior government officials.

It becomes germane at this juncture for ZLHR to emphasise that freedom of expression is sacrosanct as it is the fundamental bedrock of democracy, which plays a critical role in enabling the meaningful participation of citizens in governance.

Freedom of expression is also vital to an individual's personal development, political consciousness and enables one to participate in public affairs.

Because freedom of expression is a prerequisite and a driver to the enjoyment of all other human rights, ZLHR therefore implores the government to;

- Repeal all legislation criminalising freedom of expression in Zimbabwe, including section 33 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, and ensure a free operating environment for media practitioners, human rights defenders and ordinary citizens;
- Cease the criminalisation of free speech and stop the persecution, prosecution and imprisonment of human rights defenders, perceived government opponents and ordinary citizens;
- Guarantee the safety of journalists and strengthen media freedom and freedom of expression by investigating and holding those responsible for the shameless bullying, intimidation and censoring of media practitioners and ensure that all journalists can do their jobs without fear of reprisals.
- Stop the enactment of retrogressive amendments to the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act by introducing the so-called patriotism provisions amendments in the Act.

ENDS

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