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Zimbabwe: Rising from the Ruins?

By Gift Konjana, MP

My name is Gift Machoka Konjana from Chegutu in the middle of Zimbabwe. I am passionate about justice in my country. My dream and prayer is that one day we shall enjoy justice, a price which I am prepared to pay with my life.

I want you to understand what it has been like to stand for justice under dictatorship. The cost is very high. I have been arrested forty six times now. Each time I have emerged from jail through the courts, innocent. At one time I spent over six months in prison, only to be released without charge.

Zimbabwe jails are like hell on earth. The cells are tiny and filthy. The stench chokes you at first. There is only the cold concrete floor to sleep on. Blankets, if there are any, are filthy and infested with lice. There is no running water. Food is very short. In the corner is a hole in the crowded cell, usually overflowing with human excreta. That is the toilet. There is no privacy at all when you go to the toilet. The cells are so crowded. Often the floor space is so short that we can only turn over when everyone turns over.

On entering the jail on one occasion I was asked to remove all my clothes and, stark naked, told to jump up and down. I had to sleep on the cold concrete, without clothes. At first I avoided those blankets, but as it got cold, I crept in. Our nights go to zero degrees centigrade. During the night we would be woken up. They would make us get into a line and call out prison numbers. I have had many numbers.

Outside jail the system isolates us. It intimidates friends who then shun us. It poisons the community against us. I lost my job with the post office. It was my only income. When I was desperate they came to buy me out. I was offered a farm and a house. I was offered a job in the government. I was promised cars and tractors. When I did not yield, I was subjected to further torture, intimidation and incarceration. My house with my wife and young children was bombed

when I was in prison, because it was a safe house for almost 30 people running away from the ruling party brutality. No arrests were made, even though the perpetrators were known.

Tens of thousands of people were tortured ahead of the worst election in 2008. At one point, three friends were abducted and tortured. I discovered their location and though I was afraid, I knew I had to rescue them. They had been badly tortured. I got them onto my truck and managed to get them to hospital in Harare without being caught. For almost two weeks they were in hospital. Shortly afterwards I got a distress message that they had been killed and that Tonderai Ndira's body was missing. Later, Tonderai's body was found at a hospital mortuary with some missing body parts.

They were tortured and murdered as a deterrent to others. So many people have had similar things happen to them. We have lived in constant fear. I have often been forced to leave my family and live elsewhere for the sake of my life.

A little later my Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) driver, Joshua Bakacheza, was asked by Tonderai's widow to help move her belongings in Harare. Our truck, laden with furniture, was on the second trip when they were cornered gangster-style by three cars: one in front, another behind and the third beside. Some of the assailants quickly jumped off and, armed with guns, they asked Tonderai's widow and child to get out. Joshua was asked to get in the passenger seat, with a revolver pointed at his forehead. Tendai Chidzawo, his assistant, was told to jump out and get into another car. They then sped off.

It wasn't easy to search for Joshua. We got word that Tendai had been shot and left for dead and was in hospital, but when we went there he was unconscious. The activists who had got him to hospital had fled the country so all we knew was that Joshua had been taken to Beatrice, a small farming town south west of Harare. We searched hospitals and mortuaries and jails. Bodies were decomposing in the mortuaries at that time. It was traumatic looking and trying to identify a decomposing body with that strong smell.

In desperation, believing him to be alive, I decided to go to a torture camp very close to Beatrice police station. I bought food and learnt the ZANU slogans and got a ZANU T-shirt. I drove in late at night and started immediately shouting slogans and denouncing the opposition MDC. There was a thunderous response from the people running the torture camp.

I repeated the slogans many times. I then started to make a speech. I continued to denounce the "sell-outs". Then I asked what they were doing with the "sell-outs". Five MDC activists were bought before me. Joshua was not there. I don't know what possessed me. I was fighting for their lives - and mine. I started to slap them. I asked the leader of the camp to tell us how they had identified them and what their individual roles were. He cooperated. I then ordered him to get some food from my truck. I started to sing some ZANU songs. They danced and beat the drums. I stopped them and told them that I was taking these "sell-outs" away and if anyone had relatives they must say goodbye as they wouldn't see them again. I asked for them to be blindfolded and tied together and put into my truck. I drove off. It was only when I was almost in Harare that I stopped the truck, took some more food and water and gave this to the guys. I apologized for hitting them and explained that that was the only way I could have helped them. It was a privilege to have saved them.

Eventually, after two weeks, Tendai woke up in the hospital. He said that after being shot he played dead. Later he dragged himself to the road and was taken to hospital. He was now able to direct us to where we were able to recover Joshua's body. When we discovered his rotting remains, we made a police report at the nearby Beatrice police station. I then started to get calls from the police homicide department and they revealed that they wished to arrest me for Joshua's murder!

At that, I changed my mobile phones and escaped to South Africa. I stayed there with thousands of other activists until the advent of the unity government [in February 2009], which declared an amnesty for us.

Since the MDC opposition party was formed in 1999, every election has meant killing and maiming of opposition and human rights activists. Despite police reports, medical reports, affidavits and incriminating evidence, nothing ever happens to the perpetrators. They remain untouchable. Many of them are senior officials in the government today.

International institutions have been weak, not standing for the principles of justice, human rights and the rule of law.

After the coup in November last year, we have had a new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who has been with Mugabe as his key enforcer for almost his entire life.

We continue to witness abductions, persecution, arrests and killings. The current harassment of vendors, the ban on political gatherings all show a government afraid of its people.

Para-military groups continue to spread fear: there's a group called Border Gezi, disguised as a national service. Then there are the war veterans. In Harare there is Chipangano. In Kwekwe in the Midlands they have Al'shabbab, while in the Mashonaland provinces they have the TopSix. Institutions like the Chiefs, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, the Zimbabwe Republic Police, the Central Intelligence Organisation, the Judiciary, the Land Commission are captured and compromised.

I am an elected member of parliament, but the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission announced another person instead of me as winner. They said they would change that and announce me as winner, but then they told us we had to go to court. All the information has been provided to the courts but after numerous days in court over the last two months with vast expense and a few thousand kilometres travelling back and forth they still frustrate us.*

It is therefore at forums like these where ordinary people speak about personal, brushed-over experiences at the hands of the authorities, that the world can know the truth of what has been going on.

My dream and prayer is that one day we shall enjoy justice.

Thank you

GIFT M. KONJANA

***Update:** On 20 October 2018, NewsDay reported that Zanu PF Chegutu West MP, Dexter Nduna, who was erroneously declared winner by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission instead of MDC Alliance candidate Gift Konjana in the July 30 polls, had been confirmed as the holder of the seat by the High Court despite the mistake.

This was yet another case of justice denied in Zimbabwe. To read the article:

<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/10/nduna-wins-chegutu-west-seat-on-a-technicality/>

