

My crime was journalism

I remember vividly well when I decided to enrol for a journalism course at Harare Polytechnic College in 2008 and my mother, though she was very keen to see me progressing in the academic field, questioned me whether I thought that was the right decision.

For a moment, I was baffled by her question.

But I told her my heart was with journalism.

IN November 2008, I went for attachment at one of the country's largest Sunday newspapers, The Standard and indeed, my mother, seeing my by-lines in that national paper was proud of me.

But she kept on saying, "Be careful son".

She knew the dangers associated with journalism in Zimbabwe very well and with my little experience, I was beginning to make sense of her concerns. I need to tell that when I decided to enroll for the journalism course, my thinking was that journalism is not a crime. But events that obtained afterwards proved me wrong.

After graduation in 2009, I worked for the private media as a freelance journalist and given the political crisis that was obtaining in Zimbabwe, the journalism fraternity became a minefield.

You had to be careful and keep on praying.

Journalists from the private media became the target of brutal state security agents.

In a nutshell, journalism was criminalized and you could not report on what the authorities did not want to hear as is supposed to be the case with journalism especially in a democratic society.

After receiving numerous threatening calls from anony-



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mous people, I met my fate in January 2016.

<https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/zimbabwe-journalist-political-activists-face-charges-of-photographing-protected-state-property/3153153.html>

On that day, I had gone to cover civic society activists who were visiting a group of incarcerated vendors at Harare Remand Prison.

I was arrested together with two civic society activists on charges of taking pictures. Yes taking pictures.

Gunshots were fired into the air after some civic society activists tried to reason with the Officer in Charge at the Remand Prison that I was someone who was simply doing my work. After the gunshots were fired, the civic society activists had to flee leaving me and the other two activists at the mercy of the prison officers.

I was ordered to unlock my phone that contained several pictures of opposition and civic society activists during rallies and prayer meetings. This according to the prison officers was a serious crime.

Yet it was my job.

The phone was taken away.

After the arrest, I was subjected to torture at the hands of riot

police after which I was detained at Harare Central police station where I spent the night.

I guess my crime was journalism.

But the police tried to come up with all sorts of trumped up charges including that I had defied an order not to take pictures at a protected area of which no order of that sort had been given. At one time, the police tried to charge me with inciting public violence.

And the key state witness in that case was to later tell the courts that I was lucky to be alive.

<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2015/09/cso-leaders-lucky-to-be-alive-prison-boss/>

I remember very well during one of the court sessions when he told me he was frantically working to ensure I am imprisoned so that I get a 'good lesson'.

I learnt from him that all along, I had been under the radar and my crime was that I had been writing what the authorities do not want to hear-which is journalism anyway.

By God's grace I was acquitted with the court ruling that the state had failed to prove a prima facie case against me.

But that was not the end

Myself together with other journalists were arrested in June 2016 at the Rainbow Towers hotel in Harare while covering a group of protestors who were demanding that Zimbabwe's Vice President, Phelekezela Mphoko evacuate the hotel.

<https://www.enca.com/africa/zim-unionist-zvorwadza-activists-journalists-arrested>

VP Mphoko had turned down numerous offers to move into a government house and was instead staying at the hotel with his family and grandchild.

The incident showed me the extent to which journalism had been criminalized in Zimbabwe. At the police station, we were told our crime was that we were seeking to expose Zimbabwe to the whole world, and following intervention by the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) were released as the police failed to come up with a case against us.

But the worse was to come.

Working as a freelance journalist and as an Information officer for Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, a pro-democracy movement, we were labeled as enemies of the state.

There were numerous foiled

attempts to raid our offices and quite often, we found ourselves working from home. And home was not safe either.

Following Zimbabwe's disputed 2018 elections, we issued a statement to the effect that the polls had failed the credibility test and that was enough to attract the wrath of the state.

After the military shot 7 civilians who were protesting against electoral fraud in Harare on 1 August 2018, we had to seek refuge in South Africa for about a month.

When we went back to Zimbabwe, we continued voicing against the crisis bedeviling the country and consequently, Zimbabweans

took to the streets on January 14.

The state responded with brute force and 12 civilians were shot by the military. What followed was a crackdown on civic society and opposition activists.

Again, we had to flee for safety.

<https://www.chronicle.co.zw/manhunt-for-mdc-officials/>

Such is our situation and today we find ourselves in a foreign land not knowing when it will be safe to return home.

Indeed, Journalism can be a crime.

Edgar Gweshe hat als freiberuflicher Journalist in Zimbabwe gearbeitet. Nachdem er wiederholt bedroht wurde, musste er das Land verlassen. JhJ hat Nothilfe geleistet.