

URGENT ACTION

STUDENTS ARRESTED FOR PEACEFUL PROTEST

On 17 May, six University of Zimbabwe students, Benjamin Watadza, Emmanuel Chitima, Comfort Mpfu, Lionel Madamombe, Gamuchirai Chaburumunda and Darlington Chigwena, were arrested for staging a peaceful protest in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital. The protest aimed to demand an end to the persecution of opposition politicians, including Job Sikhala. Five of the students have been detained since their arrest and have missed exams after being denied bail and their request to sit for "special exams" was rejected by the University of Zimbabwe. Amnesty International calls on the Zimbabwean authorities to grant the students' immediate release.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

His Excellency Emmerson Mnangagwa
President of the Republic of Zimbabwe
Office of the President, Munhumutapa Building
Samora Machel Avenue
Private Bag 7700
Causeway, Harare, Zimbabwe
Email: info@opc.gov.zw
Twitter: @MnangagwaEd

Dear Excellency Emmerson Mnangagwa,

I am concerned about the continued imprisonment of five University of Zimbabwe students **Benjamin Watadza** (24), **Emmanuel Chitima** (24), **Comfort Mpfu** (22), **Lionel Madamombe** (24) and **Darlington Chigwena**. A sixth student, **Gamuchirai Chaburumunda** was granted bail on 4 July by the High Court of Zimbabwe. The six students were arrested separately on 17, 23 May and 8 June following a peaceful protest on 15 May in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, calling for an end to the persecution of opposition leaders and the release of Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) MP, Job Sikhala. The students were charged with "malicious damage to property", only on the basis that the same calls they made during their peaceful protest were found illegally spray painted on government buildings the following day. There is no evidence linking the students to the paintings.

They have been detained in Harare Central prison since their arrest and their request for bail has been refused, with the authorities unreasonably arguing that they are 'capable of causing more trouble for the State'. Their detention has resulted in the students missing their exams as the University of Zimbabwe refused to work with the correctional services to arrange for them to sit for "special exams" citing that these are only allowed in extraordinary circumstances such as illness and bereavement.

The Zimbabwe government has a disturbing history of arresting protestors and violently dispersing peaceful protests, in violation of the right to peaceful protest which is provided for under Section 58 and section 59 of the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe and Article 21 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), of which Zimbabwe is state party.

I urge you to drop all charges against the six students and immediately release Benjamin Watadza, Emmanuel Chitima, Comfort Mpfu, Lionel Madamombe, Gamuchirai Chaburumunda and Darlington Chigwena. I also call on you to stop the clampdown on dissent and respect the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as provided for in the Constitution of Zimbabwe.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Zimbabwe continues its suppression of dissent unabated, escalating the attacks and harassment ahead of the elections that have been scheduled for 23 August 2023. The right to freedom of expression has been severely and almost entirely suppressed, resulting in arrests and/or unnecessary and excessive use of force by security forces. The members of the opposition are not receiving clearance from the police and when they do, they at times end in violent attacks by the members of the ruling Zanu PF.

The six students are not the only ones to be persecuted for protesting in Zimbabwe. The trio, Cecillia Chimhiri, Joanah Mamombe and Netsai Marova, all belonging to the opposition Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC), were arrested in May 2020 at a police roadblock in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, for leading an anti-government protest over the authorities' response to the Covid-19 pandemic and widespread hunger in the country. On the same day, they were forcibly [disappeared](#) from police custody. Cecillia and Joanah were [acquitted](#) for 'publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state' charge after spending over two years in and out of court after the state accused them of faking their abduction.

In 2022, Tsitsi Dangarembga, a Zimbabwean author and activist, and activist Julie Barnes were each [convicted](#) and later won the [appeal](#), for "inciting violence" and handed a six-month suspended sentence for participating in protests on 31 July 2020.

On 5 April 2023, CCC national spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere was convicted and fined US\$ 500 for "publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state" for posting a video on Twitter alleging that a police officer had killed a baby, even though the law under which she was [convicted](#) does not exist.

On 28 April 2023, Jacob Ngarivhume was [convicted and sentenced](#) to 48 months in prison, with 12 months suspended, on charges of inciting violence simply for exercising his right to freedom of expression. He had been arrested, and later charged, after leading and organizing anti-corruption protests on 31 July 2020.

Some of these sentences have been [overturned](#) by the High Court of Zimbabwe., However, the authorities still achieve their goal of delivering a message on what happens to critics of government, activists and the opposition

The students were protesting the prolonged incarceration of Job Sikhala, who was arrested in June 2022, along with Godfrey Sithole and 14 other activists while attending a funeral of a political activist who was killed allegedly by a member of the ruling ZANU PF party. On 3 May 2023, Job Sikhala was convicted on charges of obstruction of justice and sentenced to a wholly suspended six months sentence with an option of paying US\$ 600, almost a year since his arrest. Job Sikhala remains in custody, as he awaits trial for two other charges of incitement to commit violence and disorderly conduct.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 7 September 2023

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Benjamin Watadza (him, he), **Emmanuel Chitima** (him, he), **Comfort Mpofu** (him, he), **Lionel Madamombe** (him, he), **Gamuchirai Chaburumunda** (her, she) and **Darlington Chigwena** (him, he)