

'I felt the gun on the back of my head. I had made peace with death'

University student Tawanda Muchehiwa recounts his 3 days of hell at the hands of Mnangagwa's shock troops

ZimLive by Tawanda Muchehiwa

27 August 2020

BULAWAYO – I often wake up in the middle of the night sweating profusely with a pulsating headache. At that moment, I can feel intense pain on the right side of my jaw. I never get back to sleep.

I have two incisions in my chest area, and two pipes – one inlet and an outlet. They are there for my next trip to a dialysis facility, part of the long road to rehabilitate my kidneys which doctors at one time feared had suffered irreversible damage. I will pull through, they now opine.

Just under a month ago, I was a fully fit 22-year-old pursuing my dreams – albeit under a foreboding economic environment, and a political paralysis that has already robbed our parents of their best years, and threatens our own.

Just after midday on July 30, the eve of planned anti-government protests, I was sitting in a vehicle outside a hardware shop in Bulawayo when I was abducted – at gunpoint – by men working for President Emmerson Mnangagwa's regime.

I suffered horrific abuse at the hands of the five agents over the next three days, and then they dumped me near my uncle's house barely able to walk.

I was threatened with death if I recounted that experience to anyone, but evil thrives on fear and my silence at this moment in the troubled life of our nation would be an act of complicity.

Here is my story.

I like to think of myself as an activist for progressive political change in Zimbabwe, in my small way. Watching my parents struggle to send me and my four siblings to school has influenced my worldview. When my mother suffered a stroke last year and had to be taken to South Africa by my uncles to get decent medical care, that stuck on my mind. That she gets her medication from well-wishers I met on Twitter, some that I will never meet in the real world, and not the government in Harare, has made me question the way we are governed.

"It is impossible to be neutral," American social thinker Howard Zinn once said. He explained this indubitable truth thus: "In a world already moving in certain directions, where wealth and power are already distributed in certain ways, neutrality means accepting the way things are now.

"It is a world of clashing interests – war against peace, nationalism against internationalism, equality against greed, and democracy against elitism – and it seems to me both impossible and undesirable to be neutral in those conflicts."

I am only 22, but with my lived experience, I know that my condition will not be improved or assisted by passivity. And so when Transform Zimbabwe leader Jacob Ngarivhume called for peaceful nationwide demonstrations on July 31 against economic mismanagement, corruption and all other grievances, I needed no convincing that I had to take part.

I am not in any political party structure, but I had developed a friendship with some MDC Alliance youth activists, and through them met Tendai Masotsha, the party's women's assembly chairperson in Bulawayo province.

At around mid-morning on July 30, my cousin Advent Mathuthu was driving to a hardware shop on Fife Avenue Extension. I asked to accompany him.

While in town, I received a call from Masotsha, who said she had flyers that could be used in the protests the next day. She parked her vehicle and jumped into our BMW, carrying only a handbag.

I doubt Advent even looked at her twice and could pick her at a parade. The relevance of this will become apparent later. Advent was in a rush and needed us to secure the material at the hardware shop, so he drove off and we agreed we would drop Masotsha by her car on our return.

When we got to the hardware shop, Advent went inside and I remained in the car. I was in the front passenger seat, and Masotsha directly behind me.

We remained inside the vehicle for a while, for over 20 minutes perhaps, waiting for my other cousin Amandlenkosi Mathuthu to arrive with a pick-up truck which would carry the material Advent was buying.

Advent and Amandlenkosi were still inside the shop when I observed a man in a light blue T-Shirt next to my window. He opened the door and shouted "wasungwa" (you are under arrest) before handcuffing me. He forcefully dragged me out of the vehicle. It was then that I realised that we had been surrounded by several vehicles full of armed men.

I was bundled into a white Isuzu and told to keep my head down. One man pointed a gun to my head and threatened that if I scream or raise my head he would pull the trigger. They took my wallet with my national ID, my pre-paid Mastercard and US\$202 cash.

The Isuzu drove for about 400m and turned into a side road where I was ordered out. A white, newish-looking Ford Ranger had parked next to us. I was folded into a small thing on the rear seat. One guy sat on my head and the other on my stomach. When I complained that 'I can't breathe', one of the men punched me hard. "Zimbabwe is not America and you're not George Floyd, after all we don't want you to breathe," he said.

I then felt something being pressed against me. I thought it was an injection, but I never felt the needle. It's amazing what horrific thoughts go through your mind when you are in such an oppressive, involuntary situation.

The Ford Ranger then drove off at breakneck speed. We came to a stop at a certain location but I couldn't tell where we were, from my position. Then suddenly, the sound of gunfire. It appeared to me

at least one of my captors was shooting in the air randomly and without cause. Was he trying to let me know that their guns actually work?

After about 10 minutes of this apparently aimless exercise, they jumped back in the car and we travelled for what felt like a few hours.

Along the way, I was being accused of trying to overthrow President Emmerson Mnangagwa. At one time, something was sprayed in the vehicle. My testicles started heating up and itching. Was it the spray or was my mind playing games with me? I still don't know the answer.

After what felt like a lifetime on the road, not least because of my very uncomfortable position, the vehicle came to a stop. I was told to get out of the car and pace a few meters in a straight line and to not look at their faces. I did as told.

I was ordered to stop and kneel down. Then I felt the gun at the back of my head. They told me to say my last words. I had prayed many times before, but not as genuinely as I pleaded with Jesus Christ to receive me, even against his better judgement for I had sinned. I was convinced I was dying.

I stretched the prayer a bit, reasoning that as I did so I was prolonging my time on earth ever so slightly. Then I said 'Amen', and waited for the man to pull the trigger. I was okay with dying for the first time in my life.

One of them spoke: "If we shoot you right now, you won't feel the pain so we must torture you and shoot you last."

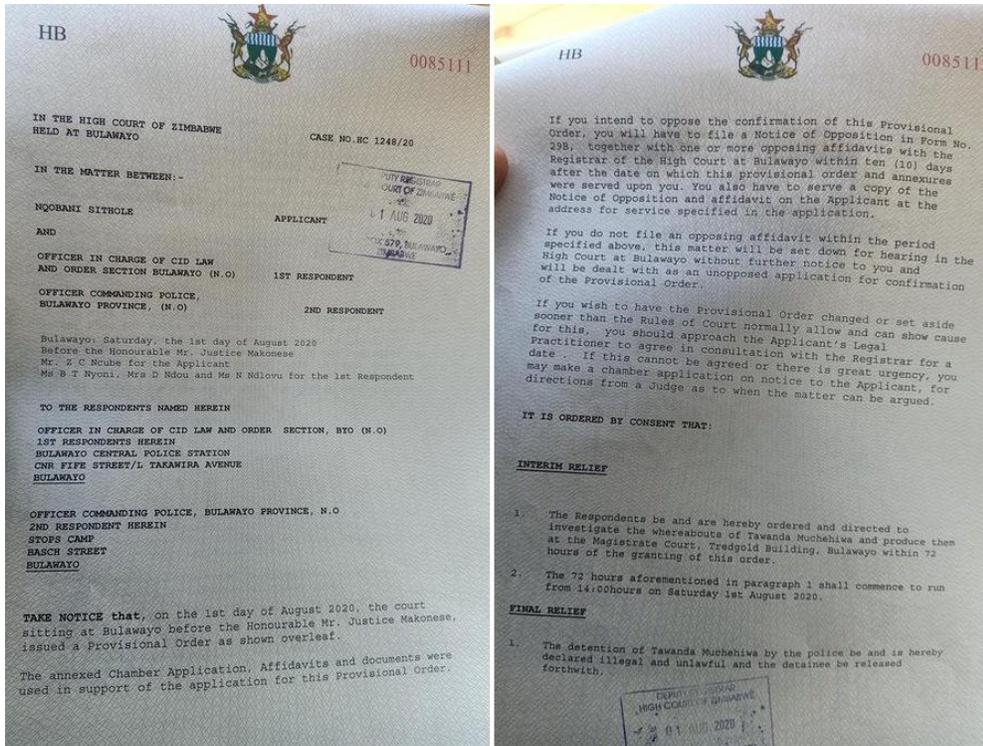
There was a tree nearby with low V-shaped branches. They lifted my feet up and threw them over the V so that I balanced on the ground with my chained hands.

They picked up logs and sticks and started beating me, focusing mainly on my buttocks. The beating went on forever and finally, my knees buckled. I slumped to the ground. Every time I fell down, the beatings intensified and I would be hung up again.

Tired of hoisting me, they changed tact. I had to march up and down singing a popular MDC song, "Ndezve Change Nero." Whenever I slowed down, the beatings would start. The singing and marching lasted for about an hour. They called it "rehearsals" for the demonstrations. My captors appeared under an impression that I was the coordinator for the July 31 demonstrations in Bulawayo, and possibly Matabeleland as a whole.

My captors had a lot of questions about my involvement in the July 31 protests. What's your role in the demonstrations? When MDC gets into power, what would be your position in government? Which bridges are you bombing tomorrow? Who are your friends in government? What of girlfriends? How often do you go to the American and British embassies? Who is your handler there? Where does ZimLive get its funding? Who are their sources in government? What conversations have you been holding with Hopewell Chin'ono, Mduduzi Mathuthu, Thandekile Moyo, Sharon Hoole, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Zenzele Ndebele, Samkeliso Tshuma and others?

They were going through my contacts, after forcing me to give up my password. I had Douglas Mwonzora's number. What do you discuss with him?



Unlawfully detained ... The Bulawayo High Court gave police 72 hours to release Tawanda Muchehiwa, ruling his detention unlawful



Brutalised Tawanda Muchehiwa before and after abduction. He is seen in a wheelchair after police insisted on taking him in their ambulance to present him before a magistrate in order to comply with High Court order

They particularly wanted to know everything about Mathuthu and Moyo. It was Moyo who started the Twitter hashtag #ZanuPFMustGo. Mathuthu has been a thorn in the flesh of officialdom with his investigation into health procurement tenders irregularly awarded to Drax International, a company linked to Mnangagwa's sons, Shaun and Collins.

I told them I live with my parents in Cowdray Park suburb, and visit Mathuthu during semester breaks from university. Then the team they sent to his house interrupted my interrogation to report an interesting find: there was gym equipment at Mathuthu's house. Is your uncle very strong then, one asked?

While the operation at Mathuthu's house was unfolding, they tried to get me to lure Moyo into a trap. I was to tell her that I wanted to show her some material for the protests on July 31. They made one mistake – they called her directly and shoved the phone in my ear. She only ever talks to me on WhatsApp. It went south very quickly, and she hung up.

Then they sent a WhatsApp message to Tshuma, pretending to be me. It read something like, 'You would have heard about the raid on Mathuthu's house. I need a place to hide. Can I come to you?' She too was smart I suppose, because I don't believe she responded to them.

I had one question for my captors. Why was I being treated this way over some flyers that purportedly came into the vehicle with Masotsha? One told me that the MDC Alliance women's chairlady for Bulawayo was "innocent and is sleeping comfortably at her home." [I learnt after my release that when Amandlenkosi and Advent were taken to Central Police Station, Masotsha stayed there a few hours and was let go leaving my two cousins].

I had not had lunch, and it was now early evening. I was given a bottle of water and my first meal was chicken and isitshwala/sadza. The food was dripping of something that I was convinced was paint. There was a 5-litre paint bucket at the back of the truck. The water had a funny taste. I ate selectively to avoid the stuff I thought was paint.

There was something curious about my five captors. Two of them appeared to exercise some restraint. I could sense a degree of humanity in them, and they appeared convinced I was not the big player I had been made out to be. Perhaps it was just a case of good cop, bad cop.

In-between the torture, my captors would be taking calls from their wives, children and relatives. I got a sense that most of them ran some businesses of sorts. During those calls, they sounded and spoke like normal people. I couldn't reconcile the two behaviours.

Then there were calls to their bosses, asking what to do with me. At one point, I could overhear a man at the other end of a call saying, "Tawanda is only 22, imagine if he gets to 30... he will give us problems." If I had any doubts before, I was now convinced that my fate was sealed.

After eating their food, the beatings started on my buttocks and under the feet.

Then it was time to leave. They had a new target, my friend Collen Dlamini, a graphic designer that I have used before for online activism graphics. They sent him a WhatsApp message to come outside his home in Emganwini suburb. Once he did, they took him at gunpoint and threw him in the vehicle.

They drove a short distance to a secluded place. For 30 minutes, they beat him with anything they could lay their hands on. They accused him of designing and printing July 31 flyers. His mother called, perhaps realising he had been gone a bit too long. They told Collen to answer the phone and tell her: "I'm safe, don't worry. I will be coming soon." He could hardly walk when they dumped him near his home. If his mother asked how he picked up the injuries, he was to tell her: "I was beaten by soldiers for breaking lockdown regulations."

Driving through Emganwini on our way out, my captors went on a rampage, randomly stopping the vehicle and beating up anyone moving, accusing them of violating a 6PM Covid-19 curfew, which had no other scientific purpose other than denying government critics free movement ahead of the planned protests.

When one of them chased after an old man and he fell into a gully, they all fell about laughing. They broke the windscreen of one car, and enjoyed to see people scattering in terror. At one time, they came across two soldiers walking in the street and shouted at them to go home. Who were these men who can give orders to soldiers, I wondered?

I was then blindfolded for the long drive to an unknown destination, still curled up with three men sat on top of me. There were long stretches of good road, so I assumed it was one of the major highways out of town. If I were a betting man, I would say Bulawayo-Harare Road. That's what a blindfold does. Just two short turns later, you are completely disoriented and any stop-start will add to your confusion. In the end, you don't know if you are coming or going.

As the journey wore on, my captors were discussing how I was going to die, ways of killing me. One proposed that they hang me and when my neck snaps, they throw me into an unnamed dam at our destination. The other had a Quentin Tarantino-type ending for me: I would be dragged by a moving car until I die, my skin embedded on the tarmac as a warning to other would be traitors.

Finally, we turned into a gravel road, probably a 15-25 minute drive. The vehicle came to a stop and I heard them talk to a man outside.

"Is the old man around?"

"Yes, he is expecting you, let me call him," the man answered.

I thought he was of my age, from his voice.

I was still blindfolded. I would not get the chance to see my host. I was shuffled along into a small room which my host pointed out to them.

Two of my captors, the reasonable duo, enquired if there were blankets. No, came the reply from the man. So they gave me two sacks in place of blankets, and three cardboard boxes to lay on the floor.

Tightly handcuffed and in pain, preparing my bed was a nightmare, including pulling over my "blankets". It was the coldest night I remember, it being in the middle of an extended winter. The light was left on, one of those infrared lights used in fowl runs.

They left me water to drink and told me that I must urinate in the empty containers. I did, and I immediately got a major fright. My urine appeared to be mixed with blood. When they returned the next day, one of them asked if it was Coca-Cola in the bottles.



Brutalised ... Tawanda Muchehiwa in hospital after suffering horrific injuries, mainly on his buttocks and kidneys



Recovering ... Tawanda Muchehiwa this week, and a note sent to court by a doctor detailing his injuries

Early the next morning, a Friday – and the day of the planned protests – I looked out a small window and observed two army trucks which appeared to have been parked there for a long time, perhaps broken down. I did not observe any people walking around.

That day I was not beaten. They sent one of the nicer guys to interview me. He wore a cap and a mask. The questions were the same as yesterday, perhaps trying to see if I answered differently.

After the interview, I was blindfolded again and marched to a different room, slightly bigger. That night I slept on 15 bags of maize packaged in 50kg. They gave me two beds sheets and my two sacks from the previous night. They loosened the handcuffs because one of my wrists was bleeding.



The activist ... Tawanda Muchehiwa, circled, seen with MDC Alliance officials Jacob Mafume and Joana Mamombe (who was abducted and tortured in May 2020) Picture / Facebook

On the third day, they came at around 2PM and left bread and isitshwala/sadza for me. The food looked suspicious. I couldn't eat it.

They interviewed me again. There were more questions about Mathuthu, and at this point I am thinking they got him and he is being tortured somewhere. They ask me about his friends in government, specifically if he is close to George Charamba, the spokesman for the presidency. Have I heard them talk, and what would they be talking about? I knew that Charamba was the reason Mathuthu left Zimpapers where he was editor of The Chronicle and the Southern Times. I had now learned that 'I don't know' is not an acceptable response, so I muttered something to the effect that as spokesman for the presidency Charamba will invariably talk to all journalists – some that he likes, some not so much.



Collateral damage ... Nomagugu Mathuthu and Advent Mathuthu were both arrested during raids on ZimLive editor's family

Who were Mathuthu's friends in the media, was the other question. I could only think of Dumisani Muleya, the former editor of the Zimbabwe Independent, so I volunteered his name. Was Mathuthu part of the White City Stadium bombing in June 2018? Where was he on the day? Does he own any military weapons? The questions were getting weirder and weirder.

After the interview, my captors left me for a few hours and came back later. When they returned, they found me still sleeping, their food not yet eaten. They started complaining that I was wasting their food and the beatings started again. They ordered me to eat both the bread and sadza at the same time. On the count of 50, I should be done eating, one barked. I wanted the beatings to stop, so I ate so fast in the end I felt like vomiting.

One of the men then ordered me to lower my jeans. He said they were going to circumcise me. As he spoke, he pulled out a knife. Then one of the sympathetic ones said "pull it back up", and that's how my foreskin survived.

No sooner had I restored my dignity from being made to undress than the beatings started again. Most of the beatings took place to the soundtrack of a remixed Jah Prayzah song. They would be singing: "Ndirikunzwa kuda kurova munhu/Ndirikunzwa kuda kurova munhu/Rega timbokurova Tawanda."

The beatings on that last day were so intense that I thought that was the day I finally died. They said I must pledge my support for Zanu PF, which I was only too happy to do. I was ordered to march again, this time chanting Zanu PF slogans. Then they said I should do press-ups, but I was exhausted. My body could not take it anymore. When I slacked, the beatings only intensified.

I was also made to sit on an imaginary stool, and when I slumped to the ground, I would be kicked and ordered to get up. "How are you going to rule Zimbabwe when you can't carry it?" More beatings.

In the middle of the beatings, my captors let slip that they had consulted a sangoma who told them that I was a man of dreams "a Joseph of our generation." I had problems with dreams when I was young, and my parents looked for traditional solutions. The dreams troubled me especially when I was young because they sometimes were quite violent experiences. Their story, I thought, was not without foundation.

This particular inquest into what my dreams were telling me about the future of Zimbabwe resulted in some of the most violent beatings during the three days. I did not have the insights they were looking for.

I was ordered to lift and orderly pack the 50kg bags I slept on whilst blind-folded. When I packed wrongly, because I could not see, they would beat me even some more.

They were not done. I had to drink my urine. Then I had to roll on the ground, my body aching from head to toe as I did.

Then the most unexpected announcement. I would be going home, one said. They had a message for my uncle Mathuthu: "He is next."

One of them asked me to repeat the message. "If you don't stop what you are doing, you are going to be next," I said.

"No. He is next, full stop," one said.

There was also a message for Thandekile Moyo*. One of the men said I must tell her that he was fantasising about sleeping with her. Rape, I understood it to mean.

On our way back, I was told I should join Zanu PF as soon as I got home. They said it was undesirable for me to spend too much time around my uncle, he could be a bad influence. After 2023, they said, I will get a powerful job in Zanu PF. That's them thinking they have already won the next election, I thought. I was told that processes would get underway to ensure that I become the president of the Zanu PF-aligned ZICOSU students' union at Midlands State University where I am a second-year journalism student.

Someone – unnamed – would pay my school fees, they said. I won't have to worry about that again.

They demanded that to prove that I am a changed person, I must put out some tweets declaring my support for Zanu PF. The consequences of going against any of these directives, I was reminded, would be dire.

They went further. I was now an informer, they said without actually using that word. Next time we meet, they said, they would drive up next to me, roll down a window and I should be ready to sing like a canary.

They had broken me physically. They thought they had also broken me mentally, and now I was ripe for recruitment. At that moment, I wondered how many activists in the opposition had been brutalised this way and given these options: cooperate with us or die. Indeed, who had put these people on my tail? One of their informers?

As we drove back, I was reminded once again of the power my captors possessed. At tollgates they just said “Ferrets” and the boom gate would be opened. It was the same at police roadblocks, although a couple of times one of them jumped out to talk to the police before we were let on our way.

Who are the Ferrets? Officially, they are combined teams of Central Intelligence Organisation, army, Military Intelligence, ZRP and Police Internal Investigations agents. Every province has them. Each member apparently reports back to their superiors.

Under Mnangagwa, the Ferrets appear to have mutated into a sinister outfit – a Gestapo-type organisation that abducts and tortures opponents and gives the government that element of deniability because of their opaque reporting structure. The government often dismisses their dastardly activities as the work of a “third force” – supposedly a pro-opposition outfit out to give the government a bad name.

Only in May, they walked into Harare Central Police Station and walked out with three [young female] MDC officials including a Member of Parliament**. They were kept in the bush for two days, being tortured. When they were finally released, police arrested them and accused them of staging their abduction.

On the drive back I was allowed to sit up, but my head was covered in the sheets that I slept in. Finally, the vehicle pulled to a stop. They gave me a rather large hat. They said I must wear it and start walking and never look back. If anyone asked, I should tell them I was dumped by a red Honda Fit.

I started walking through the pain coming from the soles of my feet. I didn’t know where I was, but I was determined to keep walking. Finally, I lifted the hat. I was in Mahatshula North, some 2km or so from my uncle’s house.

It was around 10.30PM when I ghosted into the house. Within an hour, lawyer Nqobani Sithole arrived with police officers. It was then that I learnt that they had been given 72 hours by a judge to produce me. The lawyer said I had to go to the police station with him and file an abduction report, and then he would take me to hospital. Is he serious? I thought. What if they come and finish me off? Police say they will investigate, but we know how that story ends.

I discovered that my cousin Advent had been charged with incitement of violence. Ridiculous! [Tendai] Masotsha was never charged. Amandlenkosi had been let go late at night on July 30, but not before his mother Nomagugu was also temporarily arrested and taken to the station to force Mathuthu to turn himself in. I was relieved to hear that they had missed him.

At the hospital, the initial prognosis was not good. Apart from the visible injuries, my kidneys were failing. Toxins from tissue damage and some other physical force – perhaps being sat on – had combined to leave me with “structural damage to the left kidney.” A few dialysis sessions later, and first class care from the doctors, the medical professionals are hopeful I will make a full recovery – but the road will be long.

I have to rest. Another sleepless night ahead.



NOTE: Click on link to watch abduction of Tawanda Muchehiwa caught on camera

<https://www.zimlive.com/2020/08/27/i-felt-the-gun-on-the-back-of-my-head-i-had-made-peace-with-death/>

*Thandekile Moyo is a writer and human rights defender from Zimbabwe. For the past four years, she has been using print, digital and social media (Twitter: @mamoxn) to expose human rights abuses, bad governance and corruption. Moyo holds an Honours degree in Geography and Environmental Studies from the Midlands State University in Zimbabwe.

** Joana Mamombe, (27) MP for Harare West, and two youth leaders, Cecilia Chimhiri (31) and Netsai Marova (25) were abducted on Wednesday 13 May 2020 and brutally tortured.