

Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono back behind bars and in danger

Daily Maverick By Thandekile Moyo

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Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono appears at the Harare Magistrates Courts in handcuffs, Zimbabwe, 22 July 2020. (Photo: EPA-EFE/AARON UFUMELI)

Hopewell Chin'ono was arrested for the third time on Friday after spending many months in jail in 2020. It seems that despite court orders and wide international condemnation of the attacks on freedom of media and expression, the Zimbabwean government is intent on silencing journalists.

On the 4th of January, a video did the rounds on Twitter of a woman carrying a limp-looking baby in one hand and with her other hand grabbing a police officer by the collar. She was crying and a mob had gathered around them. Some in the group could be heard shouting “wauraya mwana! Wauraya mwana.” Shona for “you have killed the baby. You have killed the baby!”

Dozens of people circulated the video with the caption that a policeman had hit a lady with a baton stick, instantly killing the baby she was carrying on her back. Zimbabweans were aghast. They condemned the alleged police brutality and demanded a statement from Zimbabwe Police.

On the 6th of January, Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) released a statement denying that a baby had been killed. Their version of the story was that the policeman did not hit the mother and baby with his baton stick but had instead smashed the windscreen of a kombi (taxi) with passengers inside, and the fragments had hit the mother and the baby. They claimed that both mother and child were fine. “There were no life threatening injuries to the two”, they wrote in the statement.

People flooded the Twitter page of the ZRP and demanded proof that the baby and the mother were indeed fine. Many accused the police of lying and covering up a crime of police brutality.

This was not the first time the war between police and public transport operators had endangered the lives of innocent passengers.

In September 2020, police opened fire at a kombi after the driver refused to stop at a vehicle checkpoint near the Shamva tollgate. They shot and killed 37-year old Linda Zimbite and also shot 21-year old Jeremiah Chidzuka who sustained serious injuries. These were just innocent passengers.

In October 2020, police officers threw a teargas canister into a bus packed with passengers. Several people were injured.

On the 28th of December 2020, police allegedly shot and injured Sithembile Moyo, a pregnant woman, during a high-speed chase in Lupane. The woman had boarded the kombi with her two children not knowing it was a suspected stolen kombi. She was shot in the left shoulder as she was shoving her children under the seats to hide from the bullets.

Moyo was taken to Mpilo hospital in Bulawayo after the shooting but was apparently discharged after a few days as there were no specialists to assist her. She is reported to be in excruciating pain and cannot afford to get the treatment and medicines she requires.

These are just a few of the cases of police brutality that have been whitewashed, swept under the carpet and/or seemingly ignored by ZRP.

It is because of this history, that the majority of Zimbabweans on social media believed and shared the story that a baby had been murdered by the police.

One of the many Zimbabweans who tweeted about the incident was Hopewell Chin'ono. He was one of the journalists who exposed a 60 million dollar Covid-19 funds looting scandal which directly implicated President Emmerson Mnangagwa, his wife and sons. He was imprisoned twice in 2020 since the [Drax scandal](#), both times on trumped-up charges. It was apparent he was being persecuted for reporting about the corruption scandals.

On the 8th of January, at 15:49 Hopewell posted this tweet:

“The police have come to arrest me! Let everyone know!”

At 15:58 he posted a follow-up tweet saying:

“They say they are charging me with communicating falsehoods for tweeting that a child had been beaten up and died by a police officer! They are taking me to the Law and order section at Harare Central Police station.”

At 17:16, Roselyn Hanzi of [Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights](#) tweeted this:

“Lawyers have not yet been granted to [@daddyhope](#) despite repeated requests. Sec 50(1)(b)(ii) of the Const is very clear on the right to access legal representation at own cost upon arrest. [@CPJAfrica](#) [@misazimbabwe](#)”

Only at 19: 42 did she tweet again, to let us know that Hopewell had finally been given access to his lawyers:

“@daddyhope has been granted access to his lawyer. The allegation is that he contravened section 31(a)(iii) of the Criminal Code – Publishing of communicating statements prejudicial to the state – (undermining confidence in law enforcement agency)”

It is no secret that the government of Zimbabwe has been after Chin’ono for months. It is revealing that they have arrested him, and him alone, for an allegation that was raised and shared by many Zimbabweans on Twitter.

Arresting a journalist for doing his job, sharing an authentic video and sharing allegations raised by the public against police is intolerable, and one cannot help but fear that Chin’ono ‘s life is in danger. Our country is in the hands of criminals. They have captured all state institutions – the police, the army, the Judiciary, prisons, the Reserve Bank, state media and the Electoral Commission. There is no hope for justice for any dissenting voice. All avenues for justice, protection of citizens and rule of law, are in the firm control of ZANU-PF. **DM/MC**

Thandekile Moyo is a Zimbabwean writer and activist.

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