

Zimbabwe church leaders seek peaceful resolution to political turmoil

Evan Mawarire, a pastor and pro-democracy activist, was arrested in a crackdown on peaceful protesters. The following month, churches convened a dialogue with the president's administration and others.

by [Frank Chikowore](#) with added information in the [March 27, 2019](#) issue

A pastor in Zimbabwe who helped mobilize the movement that ousted longtime dictator Robert Mugabe in late 2017 is now facing 20 years in prison for opposing the new regime he helped usher in.

Evan Mawarire, 41, of His Generation Church faces charges of incitement to violence and subverting the government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa—the same charges Mawarire faced under Mugabe before the president was deposed.

“We thought that things would change after Mugabe, but we replaced Mugabe with another Mugabe,” Mawarire said. “It breaks my heart . . . but we will fight on.”

In 2017, he was charged with subversion after he and other pro-democracy activists called for [a two-day national shutdown that paralyzed the transport sector and brought business to a halt in the country](#). He was acquitted after Mnangagwa took over.

The new charges arose after the pastor and labor leader Peter Mutasa, president of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, jointly posted a video on social networking sites in January calling on Zimbabweans to stay at home in a peaceful protest of Mnangagwa’s planned fuel price hike of more than 150 percent.

The price increase comes at a time when the country’s economy is collapsing and the majority of Zimbabweans are jobless and living far below the poverty line.

After that call for a protest, some Zimbabweans took to the streets. Authorities responded by shutting down the Internet and firing on protesters, killing more than a dozen people, the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights reported.

Hundreds of people were wounded and some women were raped, while more than 1,000 people were arrested, according to civil rights groups and the main opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change, led by [Nelson Chamisa, also 41 and previously a pastor](#).

Douglas Nyikayaramba, a top military chief, suggested that offenses during the protests “could have been committed by rogue elements or army deserters.” He appealed to Zimbabweans to report to the police any member of the army whom they suspected to have acted outside his or her constitutional mandate so that investigations can be conducted.

Meanwhile, Mawarire was arrested January 16 and jailed in the country’s maximum-security prison until the nation’s high court released him on bail two weeks later.

“I was locked up with more than 300 men whose limbs were broken after being beaten by police and soldiers—I never saw those kinds of injuries before,” he said. “It was worse than under Mugabe. It’s a tragedy.”

Mawarire’s attorney, Beatrice Mtetwa, said it’s clear that the government has an ulterior motive beyond keeping peace in the country.

“There is nothing subversive in the video, which the state alleges constitutes the offense,” she said. “Pastor Mawarire was calling for Zimbabweans to be peaceful. . . . This is clear persecution.”

Church leaders have met with civil society groups to call for stabilizing the economy and respecting human rights, the World Council of Churches wrote. Chamisa, who ran against Mnangagwa for president last July and believes the election was stolen, wrote on social media February 27 that “only genuine dialogue will save Zimbabwe.”

Denominational heads convened a dialogue in February, including a representative of the Mnangagwa administration, United Methodist News Service reported. Chamisa also attended, calling the meeting “God-sent.”

“We need an independent, credible, respectable mediator and convener,” he said. “The church, in this case, is appropriate.”

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