

Courage in Zimbabwe: Christians resisting nonviolently

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The activities of courageous Christians in Zimbabwe could be chapters in a new, politicized version of the book of Acts. Christians have long been in the forefront of challenging the brutal autocratic rule of Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe, and in January eight church leaders were arrested by security forces as they and hundreds of supporters opened a new office of the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance. The interdenominational ZCA coordinates nonviolent resistance to Mugabe's rule and seeks to serve the country's increasing number of destitute people.

More than 60 Christians visited the ZCA leaders in prison and brought them food. One supporter waved a banner that read, "Raise the flag of Zimbabwe in prayer. Justice. Truth. Freedom. Peace." One of the eight men detained, pastor Ray Motsi, told supporters through the prison fence that "the arrest of Christian, peaceful pastors is indicative of the situation we face in Zimbabwe."

Motsi said the pastors spent the night in prison in "praise and worship." Pius Wakatama, another arrested ZCA leader, told the police that he needed to be taken to a new cell because "all those in my present cell have become Christians and now support the Alliance. I need a new congregation to work with."

The pastors were soon released, but their detention is representative of the tactics that Mugabe's government has used to bolster its rule. Mugabe, a leader in the fight for independence from Britain and against apartheid (in the country then known as Rhodesia), has rigged elections, doled out farmland to political supporters, destroyed homes and businesses of political opponents and harassed police, judges and journalists who oppose his rule. His policies have brought economic ruin to a country that at independence was one of the most prosperous and promising countries in Africa. Today, unemployment is at 80 percent and inflation over 1,700 percent. More than three-quarters of the people live in poverty, and millions have fled to South Africa.

Mugabe, who considers himself a devout Catholic, has intimidated some clergy and sown division among the Catholic bishops—some of whom have supported the president while others have been carefully neutral. Mugabe has not, however, stifled the voice of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, which has repeatedly spoken out against government atrocities and called for compensation to victims.

Mugabe has also not been able to silence Pius Ncube, the Catholic archbishop of Bulawayo, the country's second largest city. Perhaps Zimbabwe's most outspoken critic of Mugabe, Ncube calls the government "demonic" and says "it will do anything to cling to power, even at the expense of the people." Ncube has also assailed South African president Thabo Mbeki for giving tacit approval to Mugabe.

Urging South Africa and other countries in the region to put pressure on Mugabe is one thing Western countries can do. Anglicans, Lutherans and United Methodists are among the mainline groups with partners working on relief and development in the country. The Tearfund agency in Britain (tearfund.org) also has partners there and is an important source of news and contacts with the ZCA.