

How #ThisFlag pastor Evan Mawarire used Facebook to shut down Zimbabwe

by [Brian Pellot](#)

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BULAWAYO, Zimbabwe (RNS) Leaning over his desk in Harare, the Zimbabwe flag's green, red, yellow, and black stripes draped around his neck, Pastor Evan Mawarire looked into the camera and launched an uprising.

"This flag, every day that it flies, is begging for you to get involved, is begging for you to say something, is begging for you to cry out," he told fellow Zimbabweans in the April 20 video.

The raw frustration so evident in Mawarire's poetic lament for his country immediately struck a nerve among long-suffering citizens. What started that day as a social media campaign of flag selfies and hashtags quickly developed into a full-fledged citizen movement with Mawarire—or Captain Zimbabwe as one popular meme has branded him—its charismatic Christian leader.

On July 6, #ThisFlag organized a nationwide "stay-away," a shutdown of schools and businesses, to protest endemic corruption, injustice, and poverty in the country. Cities across Zimbabwe, including the normally bustling capital of Harare where Mawarire leads His Generation Church, ground to a halt.

That's when the government took action.

Mawarire was summoned for police questioning the following week and charged with inciting public violence, disturbing the peace, and treason. Thousands of supporters flocked to the Harare Magistrate's Court, where nearly 200 lawyers volunteered to represent the pastor. After one night in custody, Mawarire was free and charges were dropped.

"You did so well," he told Facebook followers in a video after his dramatic release from custody on July 13. "There was no violence. No one was fighting. No one was

throwing stones. Zimbabweans are peaceful people and we can do this very well with peace. ... Continue to pray for Zimbabwe. God is doing something special and amazing.”

In his dozens of #ThisFlag Facebook videos, most around three minutes long with upward of 100,000 views, Mawarire has been clear to endorse nonviolence, often invoking God or citing the Bible to encourage peaceful resistance.

In a video posted July 5, one day before the national shutdown, he told followers, “Remember, my citizens ... no violence. ... The Bible says in Psalm 27:13: ‘I am still confident of this, that I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.’ This is the land of the living, this country Zimbabwe.”

While some of the biblical verses Mawarire uses aim to empower citizens, others are more overtly critical of the ruling regime.

On July 1, when Zimbabweans burned a warehouse on the South African border to protest new import restrictions that are crippling the country’s informal economy, Mawarire posted a video citing Proverbs 29:18.

“Where there is no vision, the people perish, or where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint,” he said in English, then in Shona, Zimbabwe’s most common first language. “There is no vision right now for people to follow. The village is burning, but the chiefs are huddled in their huts sharing money.”

Once considered Africa’s breadbasket, Zimbabwe has seen its economy sputter during President Robert Mugabe’s 36-year rule. The economy is now on death’s door, according to Finance Minister Patrick Chinamasa, who told French creditors last month that “we literally have nothing.”

The government’s lack of liquidity has meant late paychecks for teachers, doctors, nurses, soldiers and police. Many officers have taken matters into their own hands, setting up roadblocks across the country to flag minor driving infractions that disappear with a bribe of \$10 or \$20. After the annual inflation rate exceeded 89 sextillion percent in 2008 – rendering the Zimbabwe dollar and its 100-trillion-dollar notes worthless – citizens are less than thrilled with the government’s plan to introduce new bond notes.

Mwarire cites these and other economic factors in his persistent demands to the government, shaping #ThisFlag's nonpartisan platform with input from social media users who follow his Facebook page and that of the movement's. He also calls for corrupt ministers to be fired and charged and for police beatings and abductions to stop.

The Mugabe regime and its supporters have a long and bloody history of suppressing opposition and dissent with violence. The disappearance of Itai Dzamara, a pro-democracy journalist and activist who was abducted last year and who remains missing, is still fresh in Zimbabweans' minds. Yet #ThisFlag has emboldened citizens to adopt the spirit of #hatichada #hatichatya, a Shona rallying call that means "we've had enough, we are not afraid."

"It's really given a lot of Zimbabweans hope," Doug Coltart, a Zimbabwean human rights lawyer based in Washington, D.C., told Voice of America on July 5. "It's really given Zimbabweans a voice, and somehow it has been able to break the fear, I think, that has held Zimbabweans captive for such a long time."

Faced with death threats and a reported abduction attempt, #ThisFlag's leader takes strength in his Christian faith and in his determination to build a better Zimbabwe.

"My security is God," Mwarire told the *Zimbabwe Independent* two days after the national shutdown. "I go back to the Bible. It says unless the watchman watches with God, he will watch in vain. The God factor is driving me."

Rather than organizing a massive rally in Harare, which the government would have likely suppressed with force, #ThisFlag shut the country down, sheltering angry civil rights activists in the relative safety of their own homes.

Rather than adopting an opposition symbol, which the government might have banned, Mwarire transformed Zimbabwe's flag into a subversive symbol of resistance, into an ideal to be reclaimed from a government many believe has failed.

The Pentecostal pastor, who now wears the flag like a stole wherever he goes, has the support of fellow faith leaders in predominantly Christian Zimbabwe and beyond.

On July 13, when Mwarire was still in custody, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe issued a biting statement on behalf of its reported 4.5 million members

and eight local church councils condemning specific government failures and the regime's harassment and intimidation of religious leaders.

"These grievances must be viewed as the early warning signs which indicate underlying and simmering tensions that will soon explode into civil unrest if not addressed," the statement read. "The government should ... urgently act and address these genuine concerns of the citizens to avoid total collapse of the State."

Zimbabwe church leaders are not alone in speaking frankly against the Mugabe regime. In 2007, John Sentamu, the Anglican archbishop of York, who is originally from Uganda, took a pair of scissors and cut his clerical collar on live television, saying that Mugabe had "taken people's identity" and "cut it to pieces." He vowed not to replace it until Mugabe is out of office, a promise he has now kept for nine years.

Mwarire traveled to South Africa immediately after his release from police custody last week "to attend a previously arranged engagement" but promised Facebook supporters he would return to Zimbabwe soon. A two-day national shutdown last week was largely ignored, meaning Mwarire may have to change tactics as he determines what's next for #ThisFlag and for Zimbabwe.

"If I have crossed the line then I believe it was long overdue," Mwarire posted below his first #ThisFlag video address back in April. "I'm not a politician, I'm not an activist ... just a citizen."

To his growing base of supporters, Captain Zimbabwe has become a symbol for so much more.

This story is part of a series on religious tolerance and combating hate speech online with support from Google.