

Zimbabwe police ban radios, crack down on NGOs
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HARARE (IRIN) - Police in Zimbabwe have announced a ban on the possession of shortwave radio receivers, saying they are being used to communicate hate speech ahead of next month's constitutional referendum and elections set to be held in July.

Wind-up, solar-powered radios sets have been distributed by some NGOs to rural communities, where villagers have established listening clubs to tune in to popular independent radio stations like Radio Voice of The People, Studio 7 and SW Radio Africa. The broadcasts are produced by exiled Zimbabwean journalists based in Europe and the US.

Zimbabwe has four state-controlled radio stations with a history of supporting President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party. Two recently established independent radio stations are also perceived to be pro-ZANU-PF. There is demand among listeners, especially those supportive of the rival Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), for other viewpoints.

Ban criticized

In the last elections, in 2008, many rural constituencies with access to independent radio broadcasts voted for the MDC formations led by Professor Welshman Ncube and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai.

The Media Alliance of Zimbabwe (MAZ) - a group comprising the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists, the Zimbabwe National Editors Forum, the Federation of African Media Women of Zimbabwe and other groups advocating for freedom of expression - has condemned the ban on radio receivers.

In a statement, MAZ noted that "owning and distributing radio receivers is not illegal and that confiscating them is a gross violation of citizens' rights to receive and impart ideas and information without interference, as enshrined in Section 20 of the Constitution."

Urging the police to reverse the ban, MAZ pointed out that it would deprive people of an important source of information ahead of two critical national events.

Crackdown on NGOs

In recent weeks, police have also been conducting a crackdown on NGOs and human rights groups, raiding offices, confiscating files and arresting employees.

Targeted organizations include Zimbabwe Human Rights, whose executive director was arrested, along with two other employees, on charges of "forging and manufacturing" counterfeit certificates of voter registration. They were later released on bail. Police also raided the offices of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, where they confiscated cell phones and hard drives.

Following the last elections, head of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, Jestina Mukoko, was kidnapped and tortured after it emerged that her organization had damning evidence on the use of rape and torture by security forces to intimidate Tsvangirai supporters.

The offices of the Zimbabwe Election Support Network, an NGO that campaigns for democratic elections, were also searched by police.

The Ministry of Home Affairs, responsible for the police, is headed by two co-ministers, one from ZANU-PF and the other from the MDC.

In a statement, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights criticized the three-party inclusive government, for failing to prevent "a sustained and escalating assault on NGOs involved in civic education, human rights monitoring, public outreach and service provision - all of which are lawful endeavours."

Violence continues

Although President Robert Mugabe has called for peaceful conduct during and after the referendum and national elections, violence continues to be reported across the country.

Over the weekend, a 12-year-old boy died after the shelter he was sleeping in was set on fire during skirmishes between ZANU-PF and MDC supporters in Manicaland, 200km east of the capital.

The house was petrol-bombed by people believing that the boy's father, a candidate for Tsvangirai's party in the up-coming elections, was sleeping inside.

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