

## Mozambique celebrates International Human Rights Day amid deteriorating civic space and repression of fundamental freedoms

- In its latest report, CIVICUS Monitor, a global research collaboration that assesses and tracks fundamental freedoms in 196 countries, finds that civic space in Mozambique has moved from “obstructed” to “repressive”, the second worst rating a State can have. This classification shows that fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, are systematically violated in the country.





The report was issued this week as part of the International Human Rights Day, which is celebrated today, Friday 10 December. As if confirming the findings of CIVICUS Monitor, the Mozambican police forcefully prevented a peaceful demonstration by a group of women human rights activists. The march had been called to demand justice for all women victims of femicide, as part of the United Nations international campaign called “16 days of activism to end gender-based violence”.

When they were approached by the police, the activists explained that they were peacefully marching against gender-based violence and that the initiative had been communicated to the municipal authorities of Maputo City, as required by law. Nevertheless, they were assaulted and forced to interrupt the demonstration, and then taken to the 18th Police Station of the PRM (National Mozambican Police) in Maputo City. Here, the human rights activists were detained for a few hours, and were released when the police realized the presence of the press and representatives of civil society organizations.

As usual, the PRM justified its action by claiming that the activists did not have authorization to organize the demonstration. However, the exercise of the right of assembly and peaceful demonstration does not require authorization from any authority,

under the terms of Article 52 of the Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique (CRM), combined with Article 3 of the Law of Demonstrations.

The prohibition of the peaceful demonstration in the framework of the international campaign “16 days of activism for the end of gender-based violence” is only the most recent case of unjustified and illegal restrictions to the exercise of the constitutional rights to freedom of assembly and demonstration in Mozambique. For example, on 3 November, the Police tried to prevent a bicycle march in Quelimane municipality, led by the respective Mayor, Manuel de Araújo, and with the participation of diplomats accredited in Mozambique (Ambassadors of Sweden, Finland and Canada), United Nations officials and local citizens.

The symbolic march was organised in the context of the Climate Summit taking place in Glasgow (Scotland) and aimed at drawing attention to the importance that the bicycle, an accessible and environmentally friendly means of transport, can play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions responsible for the increase in global warming. The attempt to ban a democratically elected Mayor from marching with his guests and fellow citizens in his own municipality represented a serious attack on the democratic rule of law.

On 16 October, the police aborted a peaceful demonstration by doctors protest-

ing against the wave of kidnappings that had hit that professional class. The demonstration against the kidnappings had been communicated in advance to the Maputo Municipal Council, but the organizers only received the order from the capital’s Mayor, Eneas Comiche, refusing to allow the peaceful march to take place, five minutes before the march was due to begin.

And the argument used to prohibit the exercise of a right that does not require authorization was that the demonstration represented a risk for the rapid spread of COVID-19. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic was and continues to be used to justify unjustified restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms and human rights abuses in Mozambique.

Still in Maputo City, last May, the police repressed a peaceful march of university students who were protesting against the approval by Parliament of a new package of rights and benefits for parliamentary officials and agents. In addition to violently aborting a peaceful demonstration, the Police arrested a young man named Valdo José Cuambe, who was participating peacefully in the protests, and released him five (5) hours later.

With the false argument of preventing the spread of COVID-19, the municipal authorities and the PRM have repressed and continue to violently repress thousands of young



people and women who try to support their families by selling various products on the streets of Mozambican cities. This phenomenon is of greatest concern in Maputo City, where the Municipal Police, accompanied by PRM officers, assault informal vendors and illegally take over their products.

The theft of goods from informal vendors is a practice institutionalized by the Maputo municipal authorities, whose governance is essentially aimed at combating the poor who have no other sources of survival than informal trade. Despite several complaints and denunciations against this practice, the truth is that the Municipal Police continue to assault and seize the products of informal vendors.

CIVICUS Monitor is also concerned about the deterioration of press freedom in Mozambique, with reports of harassment of journalists and attempts to stifle independent voices. For example, on 9 September 2021, PRM agents assaulted and detained at least six (6) journalists in Nampula City who were covering popular protests against

suspected embezzlement and delays in the payment of the COVID-19 crisis relief grant to vulnerable families. The equipment of some of the journalists was confiscated and returned when they were released without charge an hour later.

The report notes that unjustified restrictions on civil liberties and deterioration of the environment in which human rights defenders and civil society operate have led to Mozambique's downgrading to the category of "repressive." "Physical attacks, intimidation and harassment of journalists and activists are becoming increasingly common," the report reads. The draft Press and Broadcasting Laws are further cause for concern for CIVICUS Monitor, "as they contain several restrictions, including a ban on retransmission of news and political programmes from international channels and the establishment of a government-controlled media regulatory body."

In Cabo Delgado, where violent extremism has killed nearly three thousand people and forced displacement of more than 800,000,

access to information remains extremely limited, with journalists and media outlets experiencing restrictions to report on the conflict, including human rights violations attributed to government forces. The whereabouts of journalist Ibraimo Abu Mbaruco are still unknown, since his disappearance in April 2020 in Palma, Cabo Delgado.

The agents of the State Intelligence and Security Service (SISE) and the National Criminal Investigation Service (SERNIC) even prohibited the presence of media professionals on Paquitequete Beach, a landing place for displaced people seeking refuge in Pemba City. In fact, with the intensification of violent extremism, Cabo Delgado has become a hostile territory for the exercise of free and critical journalism. In addition to obstructing the work of the press and seizure of work equipment, illegal detentions of journalists have been recorded.

On 17 June, PRM agents armed with AK47 machine guns, a shock brigade of the Rapid Intervention Unit (UIR) and plain-clothes agents tried to prevent CDD from submit-

ting, in the Administrative Court, a popular action against the construction of tolls on the Maputo Ring Road. The agents surrounded the front of the Administrative Court and prevented the press from capturing images at the entrance of the building. The Director of the CDD, Adriano Nuvunga, was prevented from speaking to the press in *Praça da In-*

*dependência* and was escorted to where his car was parked on Avenida Samora Machel, with clear orders to leave the scene.

Over 20 organizations collaborated with CIVICUS Monitor, providing evidence and research that helped identify countries where civic freedom is at risk. CIVICUS Monitor published over 550 updates on civic space


last year, which were analyzed in the People Power Under Attack 2021 report. Civil liberties in 196 countries and territories are categorized as closed, repressed, obstructed, restricted or open, based on a methodology that combines multiple sources of data on the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.



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