

SURVIVING DICTATORSHIP AS A WRITER

Artistic freedom and freedom of speech are heavily under sustained attacks in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, these twin kinds of freedom are a country's yardstick of good governance and political enlightenment.

In this regard the voices of artists become fundamentally valuable in the quest for freedom, self-determination and peace. I write as a victim and survivor of State sanctioned atrocities against an artist.

Daggers were drawn and I became a sworn enemy and a convenient target of the Zimbabwe oppressive regime because, through my poetry I attempt to unmask the diabolical shenanigans of the tyranny rule.

I bore the brute of the cabal's reign of terror simply because I was (and presently) perceived as a dangerous poet and an undesirable political constituency. I resist the rustication of my sovereignty as an artist.

In a country where open discourse and free expression are taboo poetry becomes the only alternative outlet for information dissemination and empowering the citizenry.

For nearly two decades threats, intimidations, physical and political harassments, persecution, arrests, detention, imprisonment and punishment have visited upon me with chilling and harrowing nightmares.

All these heinous crimes and humiliations were meant to suppress, dilute and silence dissenting voices. In a country where the freedom to assemble and gather is practically outlawed, an artist becomes a natural conveyor and agent of change. A written word penetrates stonewalls and reaches the darkest corners in as much a painting narrates a sea of tears!

Tyrants and reclusive regimes regard this as a direct threat and an assault to their very autocratic power and existence.

Because dissidents and progressive critics are the vehicles and messengers for liberty, freedom and self-determination they become convenient natural enemies of autocratic States. The oppressor will try to invent every trick in the book not only to maintain and sustain the hegemonic strangulation but laying landmines in an effort to derail, cripple and render the freedom train redundant.

Resultantly the message and the messenger are exterminated through assassinations, abductions, kidnappings, arrests, prosecutions on trumped up charges or under unconstitutional laws.

My artistic work is a gospel of free speech and free expression and the Zimbabwe dictatorship is abundantly aware of the brewing discontentment and dissent among the disfranchised population. Hence the foolish schemes to embark on scorched earth seismic retributions to retain power through brutality suppression by targeting artists as proponents of liberty.

I am one such victim. In Zimbabwe such diabolical laws like the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) were crafted and used to persecute me and many other dissidents and critics of the regime.

Media houses such as the Daily News were State bombed and forced to shut down.

Although AIPPA was later repealed but ostensibly and Nicodimously smuggled back, resurrected and christened, The Patriotic Act (which punishes anyone who criticizes the Regime on foreign soil). This is another law meant to muzzle and gag critics.

I was jailed for 7 years after undertaking a one man demonstration against the worsening political and economic situation under the geriatric strongman rule of Robert Mugabe. I was subsequently arrested in Harare, detained, tortured under interrogated. My right to legal representation was contemptuously rebuffed. So was my right to inform my next of kin. My only transgressions against the despotic regime were to pen a poem (The Slain Farmer) in dedication to White farmer Martin Olds who was brutally murdered by Mugabe's war vets and his rogue Zanupf youthful militia. My other transgression was the one-man demonstration I undertook in light of the then deteriorating political and economic situation. And the stifling of artistic freedom.

I felt then that, "as a poet I strongly believed that history and posterity would judge us harshly if we did not add at least a word of discontent towards Mugabe's crystal-clear mental diarrhea in trying not only to suppress the will of the people but the outcome of the presidential election". It seemed this was an epitaph to my prison walk!

After two weeks of arrest, detention, torture and blindfolded I was finally availed in court. I could hardly walk due to the physical assault. Still the security details had the audacity to

shackle me in leg irons. The judge released me on bond so that I could have medical attention. I initially went into internal hiding.

Meanwhile the rampaging ruling Zanupf orgy militia descended on my village, torched and razed down the houses. The madness did not end there. High on drugs and alcohol the political vampires were baying for my wife's and my mother's blood. They were rounded up, severely assaulted using logs, boots and fists. It is so disheartening that they both later succumbed and died due to the injuries sustained. This is the most painful and inhuman political reprisals to ever visit my family.

Fearing for my life I skipped the country through Botswana then later sought asylum in neighbouring South Africa.

My asylum request was later turned down by the denialist South African government under her infamous "silent diplomacy". I was literally thrown under the bus. And forcibly removed from the asylum detention center with the explicit and complicity of the SA State in an unholy connivance with the undemocratic Zimbabwe regime. The ambiguity and shocking decision that was a glaring and scandalous violation of all human rights tenets was informed by a defective conclusion that I was "a fugitive on the run". This was a blatant disregard of all human rights tenets and international statutes on political refugees.

The deportation order was a fait accompli to the prison script. At the Beit Bridge border I was handed over to the Zimbabwe security authorities who descended on me like scavengers on a desert carcass .

Upon my arrival in Harare I was arraigned before a kangaroo court which subsequently returned a guilty verdict. And imposed a seven year jail term. My incarceration at Khami Prison was a daily cocktail of unspeakable physical, mental and sexual abuse. The assaults were from both prison wardens and inmates. I was placed in the prison section that housed hardcore criminals such as murderers, armed robbers and rapists. Resultantly I contracted infections, physical damage to the body, nerves, sight and I am now partially blind. Prison was harsh with hunger, filthy cells, without access to medication and no time for physical exercises apart from the punitive physical tasks assigned by the prison guards.

Poetry made me survive prison horrors. Writing was outlawed. I had to devise how to write and survive prison. My mind became a library and sanctuary server of poems of lament and

solitude. I learnt to write and recite poems by heart. This was a useful ammunition to combat solitude and desolation. And I triumphed!

I came out of prison physically, mentally and economically disabled. I was homeless.

My post prison was a continuation without prison walls. The harangues, arrests, censorship continued unabated and with profound impunity.

Dehumanized and ostracized I now live in exile in Germany. I am abundantly indebted to PEN Germany through their Writers-In-Exile program, for a lifetime opportunity to taste and enjoy sumptuous freedom of speech and freedom of expression.

Deutschland beckons, pregnant with rebirth of artistic freedom. I walk, eat and sleep Berlin. I left homeland, going forward to reflect on and relive the past like a hospitalized victim revisiting the horrific accident scene!

In the difficult life I have lived, it is of course difficult to imagine a life of freedom, without fear, despondency and what living in a Democratic society really means.

I dream of being able to express myself freely and at the same time it is still difficult to believe that this has finally happened. That I now live in Germany and away from the evil clutches of the regime which has killed people I dearly loved and made mine and my daughter's life so difficult to live.

I am indescribably grateful for this opportunity PEN Germany and the German community have heartily offered me and my daughter.