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Zimbabwe: Leading activist detained in ongoing crackdown on dissent

A leading human rights activist in Zimbabwe was denied bail today following his arrest earlier this week as part of what Amnesty International said is an ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression in the country ahead of this year's presidential, parliamentary and local government elections.

Okay Machisa, who was remanded in custody until 30 January, is the director of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights). He was arrested on Monday in the capital city Harare and charged with publishing falsehoods, fraud and forgery after allegedly conducting illegal voter registration.

Another ZimRights official, Leo Chamahwinya, was arrested on 13 December 2012, and remains in detention. He faces the same charges.

"This case appears to have the hallmarks of politically motivated prosecutions calculated to instill fear among human rights defenders as the country prepares for elections some time in the year," said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International's southern Africa director.

"Many other human rights workers and NGO staff have been harassed, intimidated and arbitrarily detained by police as part of the ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression in the country ahead of the elections.

"The authorities must act to halt such rights abuses and release all those detained as part of this crackdown. These cases cast doubt on whether the country is ready to hold a violence free election."

Both ZimRights officials are charged with contravening Section 31, 136 and 137 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act for allegedly attempting to defraud the Registrar General's Office by forging and manufacturing counterfeit copies of voter registration.

Others recently arrested and detained as part of the crackdown include Fidelis Mudimu, Zachariah Godi and Tafadzwa Geza, senior staff members of the Counselling Services Unit (CSU) a registered medical clinic treating victims of organized violence and torture.

All three were arbitrarily arrested after police raided their offices in Harare in November 2012. They were unlawfully detained and illegally transferred from Harare and Bulawayo.

They were released after four days in custody and charged with "causing malicious damage to property". The charges against Fidelis Mudimu were later dropped for lack of evidence as he was out of the country at the time the crimes were allegedly committed.