



The UIA Institute for the Rule of Law

STATEMENT

Paris, June 15, 2020

Tanzania: Halt Crackdown on Lawyers and Civil Society Activists Reporting on COVID-19
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UIA-IROL has consistently denounced the increasing restrictions on basic rights imposed through repressive laws and decrees in Tanzania. As we have noted previously:

“It is a fact that Tanzania’s human rights record continues to deteriorate. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the Government had severely restricted media and critics of the authorities; deregistered civil society groups; arrested human rights defenders and journalists; and undermined the rights of women and of children”¹.

Today, the crackdown on individuals reporting on COVID-19 is yet another avenue of repression imposed by the Tanzanian government, as journalists critical of the government, opposition politicians, and outspoken civil society activists face threats, arbitrary detention, and criminal charges intended to harass them.

UIA-IROL notes with extreme concern the apparent statements by the Tanzanian government that only weak people have died from the illness. Such misinformation has shamed many to hide their infected status, creating a dangerous and potentially disastrous situation in the country.

In an effort to correct such misinformation, Advocate Albert Msando appeared in a video in which he encouraged the media to provide truthful information about the dangerous reality of the COVID-19 situation. Msando also apparently distributed face masks to journalists to help them protect themselves against COVID-19 infections. Thereafter, on April 29, 2020, Advocate Msando was arrested and questioned on suspicion of alleged sedition. He was released on bail with the obligation to report to the Arusha Central Police Station.

Fatma Karume, a human rights activist and former president of the Tanganyika Law Society, strongly denounced Msando’s arrest. Karume also criticized the failure of the Tanzanian authorities to provide adequate and honest information about COVID-19.

The right to access to, and dissemination of, accurate information about the pandemic must be protected, and COVID-19 must not be used as a pretext for prosecuting or harassing activists based on arbitrary and capricious charges.

As a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Tanzania must abide by Article 15 of the ICESCR, which guarantees to all the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications. Combined with Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) - which guarantees the right to freedom of expression - the right of all to access, and to share access to, scientific developments related to the fight against COVID-19, must be ensured. Moreover, signatories to the ICESCR and the ICCPR, including Tanzania, have committed to allow and protect the dissemination of such information.

¹ <https://www.uanet.org/en/actions/uia-irol-expresses-concern-about-situation-lawyers-and-human-rights-defenders-tanzania>

Therefore, UIA-IROL requests that the Tanzanian government immediately cease all threats against and harassment and persecution of those who speak out about the realities of COVID-19. UIA-IROL also respectfully requests that the Tanzanian authorities cease the propagation of inaccurate COVID-19 information and encourage the freedom of expression surrounding the coronavirus.

More about UIA-IROL

The Institute for the Rule of Law of the International Association of Lawyers (UIA-IROL) promotes the Rule of Law and supports and defends, in particular, (1) lawyers, judges and human rights defenders who are harassed, threatened and/or persecuted in the exercise of their professions, (2) the independence of the legal and judicial professions, and (3) the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, especially in defense of human rights.

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