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African people's protests socio-economic hardship and quest for good governance: concerns about growing clampdowns on Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), activists and journalists in Africa

The African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa www.ituc-africa.org) notes with nostalgia and appreciation the contributions of African nations' founders' mass-based organisations and movements (trade unions, community associations, farmers' groups, students' associations, etc.), politicians, activists, journalists, women and young people's towards the decolonisation of the continent. We recall that the defeat of colonialism and apartheid was won through sweat, tears and blood, including several of our martyrs making the supreme sacrifice of death. The contributions and sacrifices for liberation were made so that Africa could chart its destiny towards political, cultural, environmental and socioeconomic freedom, ensuring peace, progress, shared prosperity and social justice for all Africans.

For various reasons, Africa has yet to realise the above-stated decolonisation and post-colonial aspirations. Nevertheless, Africa's organised labour urges its members and people not to despair nor lament but to continue to make the necessary contributions towards advancing the struggle in collaboration with other progressive state actors and non-state actors for an Africa that works for all. We are happy that our people, non-state actors and their organisations have remained resilient and continue to make demands on societies and systems through various means. We salute their dogged spirit and solidarity.

However, ITUC-Africa is concerned that the abilities and possibilities of non-state actors and human rights defenders to contribute towards attaining the continent's aspirations are coming under renewed attacks by some African governments. The recent case of the Kenyan government that has labelled and accused some civil society organisations of sponsoring the recent Gen Z movement protest to destabilise the government is problematic. In Nigeria, government agencies confiscated some bank accounts and labelled some persons persona non grata on allegations of funding the August 1-10 #EndBadGovernance protest. The government of Zimbabwe rounded up CSOs and trade union leaders on the pretext that it wanted to prevent alleged planned protests during the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Heads of States Summit in Harare.

Journalists, especially investigative journalists, activists and protesters, were not spared. Several journalists were rounded up, abducted and arrested in a Gestapo manner from their homes in the wee hours, staked and taken to unknown destinations and denied legal rights and representation. Criminalising citizen activism by these African governments and others is alarming and unacceptable.

ITUC-Africa sees these accusations and actions against CSOs, journalists, activists and citizens as weighty, sweeping, and dangerous. We reject them and call on the Kenyan, Nigerian, Zimbabwean, and other African governments to rethink and retrace their approaches

and actions to dealing with internal governance issues rather than seek scapegoats. We also wish to reiterate that protests are tools for ensuring citizens' participation in democracy and securing accountability. We affirm that supporting citizens to ensure their active participation in governance, including supporting the organisation of protests, is not criminal and should not be criminalised. Governments must hand off CSOs, journalists and activists. We demand that governments must release unconditionally those arrested (journalists, activists and protesters) and genuine and transparent legal processes initiated against persons governments claim to have cases against.

Further, ITUC-Africa has maintained that regime change in a democracy should only happen via the constitutionally and legally prescribed instruments within the continent's different democracies. We shall continue to oppose undemocratic changes in power on the continent. We shall remain a critical and robust voice for participatory democracy and good governance. ITUC-Africa affirms that it will not condole internal and external political mercenaries, agent provocateurs, propagandists, and manipulators. We shall remain unapologetic that Africa works for all Africans and those who call it home and contribute to its prosperity.

Nevertheless, ITUC-Africa frowns at and cautions against labelling citizens' opposition to governments' harmful policies and actions as sponsored. In any case, the citizens, especially the youth (in the cases of Kenya and Nigeria), expressed their opposition to the policies that sparked the protests and gave sufficient notice to their governments of their intention to protest the harmful and hurting policies and actions of their governments. The youth would have shelved the protests if their governments had listened and acted accordingly. The case of Zimbabwe demonstrates a growing and dangerous state of paranoia. We reject it.

ITUC-Africa is aware of the danger of convenient silence when pro-democracy and pro-good governance individuals, activists and organisations are negatively labelled ostensibly with the motive to hang them, and no one speaks up in defence of the targeted victim. We know that tomorrow, our organisation may be labelled as an enemy of the state due to our desire to ensure accountability from our African governments and contribute to the continent's shared transformation. It is our stance that Africa's democracy and governance can only advance and deliver on our decolonisation, liberation and anti-apartheid struggles' aspirations when civil liberty spaces are not shackled, undermined, criminalised and destroyed.

To the Kenyan, Nigerian and Zimbabwean governments and any other African governments that focus on punitive measures against CSOs, we urge such administrations to desist from such a path. Instead, we encourage such governments to listen to their people and take steps that demonstrate attentive and effective listening. Addressing the underlying socioeconomic challenges that prompted the protests, such as tempering and reversing the rising cost of living, excess and inhuman tax policies, and austerity measures, would be a more practical approach to ensuring long-term stability, peace and progress.

ITUC-Africa stands in solidarity with the Kenyan, Nigerian, and Zimbabwean people and other Africans, journalists, activists, and the CSOs, advocating for inclusive and shared good governance. We call on our governments to respect the fundamental freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, as enshrined in national Constitutions and relevant continental and international human rights instruments to which Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and other African countries are signatory parties. Africa shall succeed.

This statement was signed by Akhator Joel ODIGIE, General Secretary, ITUC-Africa, and issued on August 21st, 2024, in Lome, Togo.