

Commonwealth Lawyers Association Alarmed by Assault and Intimidation of Human Rights Lawyer in Zimbabwe

The Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA) expresses its grave concern at the intimidation, harassment and reported physical assault of Mr Douglas Coltart, a practising human rights lawyer in Zimbabwe, who was seeking to exercise his constitutional right to freedom of expression in the context of public consultations on the proposed Constitutional Amendment Bill.

The Constitutional Amendment Bill is being presented through a series of public meetings across Zimbabwe. It has been widely reported that the Bill proposes, inter alia: the abolition of direct presidential elections and their replacement with election by Parliament; the extension of the terms of office of the President and Parliament, with the present office-holders benefiting from those changes; a significant expansion of presidential control over judicial appointments; the transfer of key electoral functions away from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission; and the abolition of independent constitutional commissions that play a central role in sustaining democratic governance.

These proposals are deeply controversial and raise profound constitutional and rule-of-law concerns.

At a public meeting in Harare on 31 March 2026, Mr Coltart was reportedly denied the opportunity to speak on the proposals, forcibly removed from the venue, and subsequently assaulted. Disturbingly, reports suggest that police officers present failed to protect Mr Coltart and may themselves have been complicit in his mistreatment.

The CLA is perturbed that individuals seeking to express legitimate concerns or opposition to the Constitution Bill were prevented from doing so, indicating an apparent suppression of lawful public participation and discourse.

The substantive constitutional issues raised by the Bill merit detailed and mature consideration, particularly the proposed erosion of judicial independence and the removal of direct presidential elections. However, the CLA concerns are directed specifically to the denial of open, lawful dialogue and to the targeting of a lawyer for seeking to participate in public debate on a matter of fundamental constitutional importance.

The Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe guarantees, among other rights, freedom of assembly and association (section 58), freedom to demonstrate and petition (section 59), freedom of conscience (section 60), and freedom of expression (section 61). The reported mistreatment of Mr Coltart — denying him the right to speak and removing him by force — constitutes a serious infringement of those constitutional protections. Such conduct has an inevitable chilling effect, stifling public debate and creating fear among those who might otherwise seek to exercise their lawful right to speak on issues of public importance.

Lawyers play a critical role in upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and facilitating informed public discourse. Their right — and, at times, their professional duty — to speak out on matters affecting the rule of law, constitutionalism and the administration of justice is protected under regional and international instruments, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, and the UN Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary. The CLA further recalls its own Goa Declaration on the Independence of the Legal Profession and the Judiciary, which affirms the necessity of an environment in which lawyers may discharge their functions freely and without fear. The Luxembourg Convention 2025 also promotes the independence of the legal profession and preserves the right of lawyers to speak on matters of public interest

The events reportedly experienced by Mr Coltart, who sought peacefully and lawfully to exercise his constitutional rights, are indicative of a repressive approach to public discourse, that is inimical to democratic participation and antithetical to the rule of law. The intimidation of lawyers who voice dissenting views also undermines confidence in constitutional processes and threatens the integrity of the legal profession itself.

The CLA condemns the silencing of lawyer Douglas Coltart at public constitutional hearings and warns of a chilling attack on the rule of law.

The CLA therefore calls upon the authorities in Zimbabwe to:

- Ensure that lawyers are able to discharge their professional duties without intimidation, harassment or violence;
- Guarantee the freedom of expression of lawyers, particularly in relation to matters concerning the rule of law, constitutionalism, human rights and the administration of justice.;
- Ensure an environment conducive to open, inclusive and meaningful public dialogue on constitutional and legal reform; and
- Uphold the rule of law, including Zimbabwe's own constitutional and international legal obligations.

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