

# Breaking the Silence

*By Chris Mann*

*Mail & Guardian, 21 December 2003*

I write to register my outrage as a citizen, an African and an artist at the worsening repression in Zimbabwe. The arrest of journalists, the shutting down of the independent press and the violent intimidation of the judiciary and opposition make a sham of the government's claim to be legitimate.

The increasing starvation of the poor and the disintegration of the health services are humanitarian tragedies that shame all those in power.

What should South African writers and artists do in response to such gross abuses of human rights?

The question opens a complex and perennial debate, the response of writers and artists to injustice in their own and other countries. History provides examples of many different positions.

One position could be called aesthetic witness, where the artists get on with their work aware of but not drawn into the maelstrom of politics. The poet WH Auden typifies this position. After years of anti-fascist commitment as a socialist in Europe he stated wearily that poetry changes nothing and concentrated on his verse.

The painter Chagall's calling was similar. Unwilling to conform to the political funding criteria of the National Arts Council of his day in communist Russia, Chagall chose exile. Many but not all African writers have been constrained to choose this route as well. Confronted by restricted freedoms in their native lands, they live and write in other countries, primarily in the north.

A different position is social witness. Writers of prose fiction dominate this group, from Balzac, Tolstoy and Steinbeck to Naipaul, Achebe and Gordimer. This position led to the imprisonment of Solzhenitsyn, Ngugi Wa-Thiong, and Wole Soyinka. In the case of Madelstam in Russia, numerous artists in Mao's China and Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria, it led to their death.

There are many other responses, ranging from religious witness to the artist as teacher, philosopher and prophet. My preference in the context of the emergent democracies of this region is for the writer and artist to remain open to a range of artistic and other related activities. We need to recall that we have already benefited from the social witness of kindred spirits around the world.

During the struggle against apartheid, writers and artists from different parts of Africa and the world raised their voices against the regime. They sparked international opposition to the

government. Their witness overseas, when reported here, helped strengthen the internal will to resist.

South African writers and artists, both those who stayed and those in exile, told our stories here and abroad. They told the truth that the government was attempting to conceal by banning, censorship and propaganda.

Nearly all supported the international movement to isolate South Africa and to impose various sanctions. None, to my knowledge, has yet to support with equivalent passion the targeted sanctions placed on Zimbabwe's leaders.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu called President Robert Mugabe a caricature of an African dictator.

Zwelinzima Vavi has publicly criticised the treatment of the Zimbabwe trade union movement.

Journalists within Zimbabwe, other African countries and abroad have documented countless examples of repression. Is it not time for South African writers and artists to move on from their comfort zones and break their silence about Zimbabwe?

Some white South African writers are silent because they feel that raising their voice will be dismissed as racism or will paradoxically strengthen black solidarity with the Zanu-PF regime. This shirks engagement with the dated and completely unscientific construct of race used by the political elites in our region to sustain their legitimacy.

It also fails to highlight how much repression in Zimbabwe costs South Africans. A country where industry and agriculture collapse, where inflation runs at 500% a year and most of the people are destitute, pulls down the economy of its neighbours.

Are black South African artists and writers silent about Zimbabwe because the anti-imperialist rhetoric of Mugabe still strikes a chord? Many such intellectuals helped to bring this country's ruling party into power using a similar mind-set. Unlike Soyinka, many have yet to develop post-liberation positions independent of government.

Such independent thinking is urgently needed, not the least because maladministration, corruption and a culture of entitlement are problems that debilitate South Africa's health as well as Zimbabwe's.

A promising example is the recent presidential commission of inquiry into the non-compliance of Eastern Cape civil servants with their terms of employment. Culture, not race, is likely to emerge as a reason, a huge paradigm shift where the insights of writers and artists are sorely needed.

Will they have any effect? I support Seamus Heaney's position, developed in the violent context of the anti-imperial struggle in Ireland. During a recent visit to Grahamstown, the

Nobel Laureate stated that writers help to change attitudes. That, surely, is a simple and strong enough reason for South African writers and artists to take a public position on Zimbabwe.

*Chris Zithulele Mann's most recent book of poems is Heartlands (University of Natal Press)*