

## **Bishops to Zambian government: Stop intimidation, keep tax breaks**

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Zambian Catholic bishops urged the government to stop using state security institutions to intimidate people and warned that changes in tax legislation could lead to severe cutbacks in services that the church offers the poor.

Zambia's political environment "is characterized by manipulation, patronage and intimidation of perceived government opponents," the bishops said in a statement issued at a Jan. 23 news conference at their Lusaka headquarters.

"The police service in particular must be professional and impartial in carrying out their duties of maintaining law and order," the bishops said, noting that much of the country's resources "are wasted on politicking at the expense of real development."

The revocation of the tax exemption for public benefit organizations, including the church, "is seriously ill advised," the bishops said, noting that if this is not reversed, "it will be impossible to offer social services as the church is doing now."

They urged the government to "reinstate the previous procedure, which provided appropriate criteria for clearance."

Without this, "it is regrettable that we may be forced to disengage from offering social services such as health, education, vocational training, home-based care and hospices due to diminished capacity" caused by the change in the law, the bishops said.

"The poor, who are the main beneficiaries of the services of the church, will suffer as they will be deprived of essential social services provided by donations from overseas through local charities," they said.

Approximately 40 percent of social services in Zambia are provided by non-state charities, with the Catholic church dominating the sector.

The government's move has been criticized by rights activists who say the state should prosecute those who abuse the tax break instead of canceling the exemption.

Joseph Silavwe, a parishioner at St. Stella Maritz Church in Mpulungu, said the change will affect the quality of services and eventually force some charities to close.

It is a "deliberate plan by the state to shut down" some Zambian nongovernmental organizations, Silavwe said, noting that the government "is so scared of criticism (by these organizations) that it will do everything possible to disrupt their operations."

Mercy Mulenga, a parishioner St. Theresa Cathedral in Livingstone, Zambia, described the state's decision as "heartless and not in the interests of the poor."

Warning that "many families are seriously struggling to make ends meet," the bishops urged the government to explore ways to mitigate the impact of rising prices of basic foods.

The vast amounts spent on special elections "could have given Zambians many schools and hospitals," they said, noting that "this is worsened by the stalled constitution-making process that could have provided legal limitations" to the number of elections.

The bishops said they "deplore the practice of harassing media personnel by some members of the public" and noted that the integrity of Zambia's media has been undermined by polarization along political lines.

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