



Statement on Tanzania's Violent Crackdown on Peaceful Assembly, Malicious Arrest, and Treason and Publication of False Information Charges against Human Rights Lawyer and Opposition Leader Tundu Lissu

We, the undersigned organisations, law societies, bar associations, and members of the legal profession, express our grave concern following the violent crackdown on peaceful assembly and malicious arrest of prominent Tanzanian human rights lawyer, opposition leader, former Member of Parliament, and former President of the Tanganyika Law Society (TLS), Honourable Tundu Antipas Lissu, in the evening of 9 April 2025.

Mr Lissu was forcefully arrested after addressing a crowd of members and supporters of the opposition party Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA, meaning 'Party for Democracy and Development') at a peaceful rally in Mbinga, Southern Tanzania. The rally was part of CHADEMA's national "No Reforms, No Election" campaign calling for electoral reforms ahead of the 2025 General Elections. The police force violently dispersed the rally, firing teargas canisters on unarmed citizens. They demanded that Hon. Lissu report to the Mbinga District Police Station, but the reasons for this demand were not provided. He was then forced into a police vehicle, but was not informed of the reason for his arrest or the charges against him, as required by both Tanzanian law and international treaties to which the country is a party.

Following his arrest, Hon. Lissu was held incommunicado for almost 24 hours. The Tanzanian police made no statement about his whereabouts or the reasons for his arrest, contrary to Tanzania's criminal procedural law. He was reportedly driven over 1,150km from Mbinga to Dar es Salaam. The following day, Thursday 10th April, Hon. Lissu was presented before the Kisutu Resident Magistrate's Court. He was charged with treason as well as three charges of publication of false information contrary to section 16 of the Cyber Crimes Act, No. 14 of 2015. The Treason Charge Sheet alleges that on 3 April he made a public statement that, "They said this campaign amounts to rebellion. It is true we say we will prevent the election. We will inspire rebellion. That is the way to get change." "So we are going to spoil this election. We are going to really disrupt. ... We are going to spoil it very badly." The three 'publication of false information' charges allege that Hon. Lissu stated in a YouTube video on 3 April that, "CHADEMA candidates were disqualified from the 2024 local government elections on the instructions of the President..."; that "Police officers are being used to steal votes with backpacks"; and that "Judges are CCM loyalists; they cannot deliver justice because they are eager to receive appointments and be nominated to serve as judges of the Court of Appeal."

Upon appearance in court, Hon. Lissu was not given the opportunity to plead to the treason charge, only to the publication of false information charges, and no justification was provided for the irregular processing of his arrest and eventual charging. The treason matter was postponed indefinitely, pending the prosecution's completion of its investigations, in disregard of Tanzania's Criminal Procedure Code. He pleaded not guilty to the charges of publication of false information,

and is due to appear in court in relation to these charges on 24 April 2025. Hon. Lissu's denial of bail and continued detention under section 148(5) of the Criminal Code - which enables arbitrary and indefinite detention of critics charged with non-bailable offences such as treason - is contrary to a judgment of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights that deemed the provision discriminatory and contrary to the presumption of innocence.

Hon. Lissu has a long history of political persecution and judicial harassment dating back to the administration of President Mkapa in the 1990s, when he represented communities affected by large scale mining activities in the country. In 2017, while serving as President of the Tanganyika Law Society, he survived an assassination attempt when armed gunmen shot him, with 16 bullets hitting his body, which he is still recovering from. During President Magufuli's tenure, Hon Lissu was arrested and charged at least eight times for his political activities.

The recent violent crackdowns and irregular arrests of Hon. Lissu and other human rights defenders, lawyers, and opposition leaders, are a grave concern and worrying affront to the country's constitutional order ahead of the 2025 General Elections. Tanzania's Constitution protects the rights to free and fair elections, to peaceful assembly and association, and to a multi-party democracy, rights which President Samia Suluhu Hassan's administration had reaffirmed their commitment to.

We call upon the authorities in Tanzania to cease any further erosion of the rule of law, to respect the rights of political parties to organize and agitate for their causes, and to respect the rights of the people of Tanzania to freely associate and peacefully assemble, as provided by national, regional and international law. We call upon President Samia Suluhu Hassan to demonstrate leadership and renew the commitments she made at her inauguration to lead the country back towards democratic progress. Finally, we call for Hon. Lissu's urgent release from detention following his unlawful and arbitrary arrest, and the withdrawal of the charges brought against him improperly without adherence to fair trial standards.

Signed by:

East African Law Society
International Commission of Jurists - Kenya
International Commission of Jurists
Law Association of Zambia
Law Society of Kenya
Pan African Lawyers Union
SADC Lawyers Association
Tanganyika Law Society
Uganda Law Society