

“He Has Helped Us Not To Be Afraid Anymore”

BY ANCILLAR MANGENA

Three thousand people camped outside a courthouse for a man they didn't know until the day before.

He arrived at court at 11:20AM in a white Toyota Corolla with tinted windows. At 1PM, the investigating officer said he forgot to bring the affidavit for the case and had to fetch it. This delayed arguments.

Crowds covered all three exits of the court, vowing to stop their man from being taken away. They even stopped police, who appeared unusually tame, to search cars to check whether their man was inside.

Inside the court, was Evan Mawarire, a pastor first charged with incitement of violence and then for trying to overthrow the government. This, after months of posting social media videos criticizing the Zimbabwean government. The videos tapped into mounting anger over high unemployment and corruption which sparked rare peaceful protests against President Robert Mugabe.

Mawarire appeared in a packed Harare Magistrates' Court, also known as Rotten Row, draped in the Zimbabwean flag after spending the night in police cells as officers searched his house, church and office. Scores of lawyers in court waved their qualifications in the air when Mawarire was asked who would be representing him.

Outside, it was like church. Pastors from different dominations led the crowd in prayer every 30 minutes as the judge heard arguments.

“All we want is Mawarire back with no scratch. Zimbabwe shall never be a colony again. He has helped us not to be afraid anymore,” says one of Mawarire's supporters, Kenneth Handina.

People sang and danced to gospel songs, even likening Mawarire to Jesus on the cross. They also sang struggle songs such as “Senzeni na?” – “What



Evan Mawarire

Photo by Thabani Maphosa

have we done?” in isiNdebele – an anti-apartheid song.

“This is what this government does and has been known to do. They always want to make sure we live in fear and when they say jump we follow,” says jobless graduate, Vimbai Moyo.

As the sun went down, the crowd grew. Some brought food and candles.

“We have been here since morning. Even if they delay, we won't go. If we have to sleep here we will. We are all in this together,” says another Mawarire supporter, Allan Hunter.

The lawyers argued, successfully, that the charge of subversion had been added at the last minute, denying him a fair trial.

At about 7PM, Magistrate Vakai Chikwekwe ruled that the state had broken its own law and Mawarire was free to go. The crowd erupted. There was a surge towards the main entrance of the court with the crowd singing “Ichokwadi Mwari Varipo” – “It is true, God is there” in chiShona, the tongue of Harare.

As the pastor emerged, people waved their hands in the air and jumped in celebration. They hugged, ululated and

pushed towards him. Many sat around him as a sign of respect as he addressed the crowd amid flickering camera flashes. A handful climbed trees for a clearer view.

“I want to thank you, all Zimbabweans, because we are now united. May the Lord bless you all because the country you are building is for your children; let's continue building, don't stop. God bless you all,” says Mawarire.

As he left, people danced on the street, hooted car horns and sang. Many cursed the police for the arrest and vowed to speak up against Mugabe's regime.

“We don't want politicians trying to capitalize on this. It is up to us as citizens to reclaim our country from this government so we can have a better life. If the government of Zimbabwe was not threatened before, maybe now it's time to be,” says Tinashe Gambuza.

Zimbabwe had not seen anything like this in over a decade. As we left, a group of guys danced on top of a car singing yet another struggle song, – “Get ready mama and prepare for your freedom; freedom is coming tomorrow”. With that, everybody disappeared into the cold night. 