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DR Congo's arrest of activists invokes déjà vu of growing repression

By Sarah Jackson

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)'s president, Felix Tshisekedi, is only two weeks into his second term. Yet, Congolese security services are increasingly cracking down on peaceful activists in a manner reminiscent of President Kabila's government, which Tshisekedi, then an opponent, vehemently denounced.

On 3 February 2024, four activists from Lutte pour le Changement (LUCHA) and three other people were arrested in the capital, Kinshasa. Bundled into unidentified cars by security agents in civilian clothes, their arrest resembled an abduction. Several other activists reportedly on a "wanted" list went into hiding and some were forced to flee.

Two LUCHA activists, a driver, a photographer and a student, were released the next day. But the prominent LUCHA activists, Fred Bauma and Bienvenu Matumo, remained detained. Their fate and whereabouts were unknown, as were the reasons for their arrest. The National Intelligence Agency (ANR) denied detaining them. After informally learning that they were at the ANR's notorious 3Z facility in downtown Kinshasa, lawyers and relatives attempted to visit with clothes, medicine and food. But ANR officials again denied holding them.

As pressure for their release grew, relatives were invited to 3Z on 5 February. Fred Bauma and Bienvenu Matumo were released, but only after being forced to make a statement justifying their arbitrary detention. Subsequently, Fred Bauma issued a [statement](#) describing how he had been forced to undress and was subjected to physical violence and death threats during his detention. This constitutes torture and other ill-treatment and must not go unpunished.

The activists had been arrested while peacefully protesting the [Rwandan-backed M23](#) armed group's occupation of Bunagana – the first major town to fall into M23's hands 600 days ago – in eastern DRC's North Kivu province. This is ironic as criticizing M23's presence in the east was central to [Tshisekedi's campaign rhetoric](#) before the December 2023 presidential election.

During their detention, they were reportedly interrogated about meetings in January which civil society participated in alongside opposition representatives to discuss the aftermath of the presidential elections. This falls under the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

A worrying sense of déjà vu

It is not the first time activists have been detained in recent years. Dozens of LUCHA activists have faced arbitrary arrests, with some [convicted on trumped-up charges](#), following the imposition of the "state of siege" in North Kivu and Ituri provinces since May 2021. Like in a state of emergency, the "state of siege" has given security services overly broad powers to [suppress criticism](#), including of the state of siege itself, in these provinces as demonstrated by Amnesty International.

Fred Bauma and Bienvenu Matumo have been arrested before. And for Congolese activists and their allies in the international human rights community, their latest arrests invoke a worrying sense of déjà vu.

Alongside other pro-democracy activists, [Fred Bauma was detained from March 2015 to August 2016](#) for peacefully expressing his rights. He was interrogated at a secret location for 50 days and denied access to family and lawyers. In August 2015, Bienvenu Matumo was detained by

Congolese intelligence for [four days](#) without explanation and spent [six months](#) in prison in 2016 on politically motivated charges for his activism.

The context and manner of these latest detentions are a signal that Congolese authorities do not intend to uphold the country's international human rights obligations and open civic space any time soon.

Sarah Jackson, Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director for East and Southern Africa

LUCHA is a grassroots movement that came to prominence a decade ago, in a security and political context that has not changed much since. During M23's 2012 – 2013 resurgence in North Kivu, they were at the forefront of demanding that the government and the UN peacekeeping mission protect civilians. When the former president Joseph Kabila clung to power by suppressing dissent, LUCHA was on the front line. It carried Congolese people's aspirations for an accountable rights-respecting government. LUCHA represents a generation of activists that resists being silenced and has inspired an upswing of pro-democracy and human rights activism. In 2016, it was awarded [Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award](#) – a prestigious award for people or organizations who inspire others to stand up for human rights.

Potential for increased repression

When President Tshisekedi took office in January 2019, he [promised](#) to “guarantee [...] fundamental rights” and prioritize “an effective and determined fight against [...] impunity”. In the first year of his presidency, he took some [positive steps](#), including releasing prisoners arbitrarily detained and allowing others to return from exile. But this was short-lived. His government has failed to tackle systemic impunity and [backslid](#) on human rights including the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. Civil society activists and opposition members are increasingly targeted with impunity and many journalists imprisoned for their work. The most emblematic is [Stanis Bujakera](#), the Reuters and Jeune Afrique correspondent who has been detained since September 2023.

Tshisekedi's second term may be more repressive than the first.

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Coming so soon after Tshisekedi's inauguration, the context and manner of these latest detentions are a signal that Congolese authorities do not intend to uphold the country's international human rights obligations and open civic space any time soon. In fact, Tshisekedi's second term may be more repressive than the first.

If it was not for enormous pressure and their high profiles, these activists would likely still be detained. DRC's partners must send a strong message to the Congolese authorities that such acts come at a cost. Unless those suspected to be responsible are held to account, and the government lives up to its human rights obligations, nothing stops ANR agents from doing this again.

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