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Working for social justice amid Zimbabwe?s election turmoil

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Aug. 16, 2013

The work for social justice in Zimbabwe will continue despite election turmoil, says human rights defender Jenni Williams. Williams is founder and national coordinator of WOZA (Women of Zimbabwe Arise), a nonviolent civic movement that was established in 2003 to empower women to collectively speak out on issues affecting their daily lives. Over the past decade, WOZA, whose membership numbers over 75,000 women and men, has organized hundreds of mass protests to push for better governance. In 2006, it held a countrywide consultation that produced the People?s Charter, a document articulating the political, civic, and economic aspirations of thousands of ordinary Zimbabweans.

Williams describes her movement as ?evolutionary rather than revolutionary,? one that is using strategic nonviolence to build a new democracy in Zimbabwe where ?respect, tolerance, and accountability are key.? Her work has garnered praise from President Obama and numerous awards including the 2009 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, the 2011 French National Order of Merit, and the 2012 Ginetta Sagan Amnesty International USA Award. It has also brought persecution. The 53-year-old mother of three and grandmother has been arrested more than 50 times, beaten, jailed, and threatened with execution.

NCR *spoke with Williams in mid-August, two weeks after Zimbabwe?s national elections resulted in a return to power for incumbent president Robert Mugabe, 89, and his Zanu-PF party. The opposition has contested that outcome, alleging election tampering. Zimbabweans await a ruling from the country?s Supreme Court.* NCR *?s interview with Williams was conducted via Skype.*

***NCR*: What does WOZA mean when it says it is trying to be a movement of strategic nonviolence?**
Jenni Williams: Well, first and foremost, it isn?t only about organizing protests, just protests after protest. This is about creating and inculcating in the hearts and minds of woman an understanding of how to defend human rights and what human rights are. To be able to mobilize them to do an array of different activities around holding the government accountable, holding political leaders accountable, council leaders accountable for a raft of issues that affect people on a day-to-day basis. By that vast mass-based movement to create a new culture where Zimbabweans would look at nonviolent solutions [to their problems] rather than violent solutions. We come from a legacy of liberation war so it has been crucial to show Zimbabweans a different way of doing things, of marching peacefully, of doing deputations, organizing delegations, using street drama, using public prayer, and different forms of protest on different issues. By that work and by making ourselves visible as human rights defenders, we hope that we will rebuild a new culture.

Can you give an example of where you have tried these nonviolent strategies?
For example, electricity is a very big problem for people, especially because the cost of electricity is higher in poorer communities. On top of that high cost, people don?t have electricity for 50 percent of the time. So we first started to document the power outages and document cost. We put that information together and started to do petitions. Once we had gathered enough petitions, we organized marches to the council offices, to the electricity offices at a local level. We strategically escalated that to a regional level, a national level, and we kept moving between the different levels of the electricity company. Once we found the petitions were not being

answered, we escalated by giving a yellow card and a red card much as we use in a football match. We also delivered a symbolic coffin to say that this is the end of an [electricity] monopoly. So these different activities conducted at different levels was a very successful campaign that resulted in a 45 percent reduction in the cost of electricity.

Zimbabwe has just had national elections. African and regional monitors have described the elections as ?free and peaceful, but the U.S. and European states are reluctant to endorse. What is WOZA?s assessment?

Well, I think on the whole WOZA feels the will of the people was totally subverted by the process. Most of our members feel the result does not reflect what they voted for. Most went into the process worried that their vote may not count, and they really are feeling that it didn?t count. Some people felt they had no choice but to vote for Zanu-PF [Mugabe?s political party] because of the amount of intimidation and threats that they were going under. Some of our rural members confirm that they were told, ?You must come and see us before you go to the polling station, and we will tally up our votes to make sure that everyone has voted in a correct manner.? So the amount of intimidation was far too much.

Was this outcome difficult for WOZA? Your organization had encouraged people to participate in the elections.

Yeah. We have done boycotts before, and we really did feel that even though we may not have a proper election process ? because we felt the manner in which it was hurriedly called smacked of political expediency, and we were also concerned that they were no voter rolls supplied -[we should participate]. But it can be very difficult to call the situation because the political parties were participating, and the indications were that if they thought everything was okay, then we should exercise our right to vote and see what happens. I think our reservations were proven correct because even the political parties now are saying that they shouldn?t have gone into it and that the voters rolls were given to them the day before when they couldn?t do anything with it.

Zimbabweans await a ruling from the constitutional court. Meanwhile, Mugabe has just given a very defiant and belligerent speech regarding his win, saying his opponents can ?go hang, even dogs won?t sniff their corpses.? What does this tense interim period mean for WOZA?

We really do feel that this [election] was about establishing a legacy for Robert Mugabe and dealing with succession issues. It wasn?t about the people?s will. So he will be belligerent, and yes, we are concerned. There is this list of 100 opposition people who are due to be arrested. I haven?t yet seen the list, but I would presume that [WOZA members] will be among those on the list because of our peaceful protest mandate. However, we are not planning any protests because the opposition has not been very pro-active in dealing with the [elections] and have not been very democratic about how they work. So for us, we are just watching from the sidelines.

Do you think you are on that list?

Yes, I would think that I am on that list. I will wait to see to confirm, but I would presume I am. There have been many lists over the past 10 years, and I featured in many of them.

What would it mean for you personally to be on that list?

Well, from the orders I am hearing people are due for arrest. Obviously, there will be fixing of charges, charges that are not necessarily sustainable in a court of law, however. It will be about trying to prevent people from doing anything that the State perceives as [threatening]. In some instances, we even find that the State fabricates things just so they have an excuse to crackdown. So this could be the case too.

And WOZA has been impartial? You were not backing one candidate over another.

Absolutely not. That has been our position since we were formed. We were formed to create a democratic dispensation and to allow people to understand what is at stake in a democracy and to find representatives that they *imagine* would fulfill those democratic principles. And for us, it is about empowering people to make their

own decisions, not dictating to them what to decide.

How will WOZA continue this education in democracy in such a messy and threatening political scene? Or is the current situation no different than the environment you have been working under?
It?s much more of the same. We were born in the underground. We have survived, we have lived under repression and that is the way of life that we have become so used to. It would have been nice to find that there was a proper election conducted, and we might have had more time now to focus on development. Instead, we have gone back ten, twenty years, in terms of democracy so we have to start to rebuild. But first we have to let the dust settle and wait for the court to make a ruling. I am praying for justice that perhaps there could be a re-run. And if there is a re-run, we hope and pray that this time around there will be no rigging and that the people?s will could be realized.

Have there been any Catholic voices speaking up for participation in the election, or critical of how they unfolded?
We lost a very important voice in the Catholic archbishop Pius Alick Mvundla Ncube. [Editor?s Note: Ncube was archbishop of Bulawayo and an outspoken opponent of Zimbabwe's political leadership. He resigned in September 2007 after his affair with a woman became public.] Since that time, unfortunately, the Catholics have not been able to rally around a clearly known, heard, and felt form of lobby and advocacy.

Are you afraid for yourself, as someone on the list of the 100?
[W]e have lived these last 10 years always having to be cautious. I think if I were afraid, I wouldn?t still be here doing what I am doing. I put my faith and hope and trust in the Lord. He is the only person who will decide when my day has come, and until that time, I just keep doing what I am supposed to do.

Assuming the elections are resolved within the next month, what is next for WOZA?
Well, we?d have to do the work that we did around the election process: to do our human rights monitoring, to push people out to vote, to get people to feel confident that this time around their vote could count and to deal with some of those issues around participation that may be very crucial . . . Of course, this does depend on the playing field. If hundreds of us have been arrested, we are not able to do this work. Hopefully, nothing will be acted on until the Supreme Court decision.

Will WOZA?s focused efforts on the bread-and-butter issues be diverted because of the current political tumult? Are you now back to educating people about exercising their political will?
In a way, yes. You have got to be able to target your requests to people who are in power. Even if we don?t have counselors, members of parliament, and a president [that represent us], there are still others that we can target for various campaigns. If children are chased from school for lack of payment, in contravention of ministry directives, we can go and meet the headmaster. If the local council employee is not able to fix the sewage, we can target those people . So at a lower level, we can still do that work. But most significant is we need a new government with new policies to see how we can locate our social justice issues around a new dispensation.

So the work of strategic nonviolence will continue regardless of the political environment?
As it has done for the last ten years. No matter who is in power we always have issues, we have lives, we have things we have to do as women on a daily basis. We have children to feed, children to clothe, children to school. There are all sorts of demands that we can create around those day-to-day existences of our members. We have the means, we have the activism, and we have the vast movement of people who can work on those issues.

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