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CDSJ CONDEMNS THE ABDUCTION AND TORTURE OF KANANELO BOLOETSE AND CALLS FOR A UNITED NATIONAL RESPONSE TO PROTECT DEMOCRATIC SPACE

The Centre for Development in Social Justice (CDSJ) strongly condemns the reported abduction, assault and torture of journalist, activist and human rights defender **Mr. Kananelo Boloetse** on Saturday, 5 September 2026. According to information presently in the public domain, Mr. Boloetse was reportedly taken from his residence in Maseru by unidentified armed men, subjected to serious physical assault and later abandoned in the Thaba-Bosiu area before receiving medical treatment and reporting the matter to the Lesotho Mounted Police Service.

CDSJ extends its solidarity to Mr. Boloetse, his family, colleagues in the media, fellow human rights defenders and the broader community of people and organisations working to advance democracy, accountability and social justice in Lesotho. An attack of this nature cannot be viewed simply as a private act of violence against one individual. Where a journalist, activist or public-interest advocate is abducted and tortured, the consequences extend beyond the immediate victim because such incidents can create fear among journalists, civil society organisations, researchers, lawyers, activists, whistleblowers and ordinary citizens who rely on democratic freedoms to participate meaningfully in the life of the country.

Mr. Boloetse has been publicly engaged in journalism, advocacy, constitutional litigation and wider debates on governance and accountability. Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with his views, the protection of his right to express himself, investigate matters of public interest, organise, litigate and participate in national debate is ultimately a protection of the democratic rights enjoyed by every Mosotho. A democratic society cannot function effectively where citizens begin to believe that public criticism, journalism, activism or advocacy may expose them to violence, intimidation or retaliation.

CDSJ is therefore deeply concerned about the broader condition of Lesotho's civic and media space and believes that this incident should prompt national reflection on how democratic actors are protected. Lesotho has long benefited from an active civil society, an engaged media, an independent legal profession, community organisations, human rights defenders and citizens willing to question decisions affecting their lives. These actors do not exist outside the democratic system, nor should they be understood as opponents of the State. They are part of the democratic infrastructure of the Kingdom of Lesotho and contribute to transparency, accountability, public participation, development and the strengthening of public institutions.

In this regard, CDSJ believes that the present moment should not be used to deepen divisions between Government, civil society, the media and other democratic actors. It should instead become an opportunity to strengthen the partnership necessary to protect Lesotho's democracy. The protection of civic space is not the responsibility of civil society alone, just as the defence of constitutional democracy cannot rest solely with Government. It requires cooperation between State institutions, Parliament, the judiciary, law-enforcement

agencies, political leaders, civil society organisations, media institutions, professional bodies, communities and citizens.

Government nevertheless carries an important constitutional responsibility to ensure that every person in Lesotho can exercise fundamental freedoms in safety. This responsibility becomes especially important where journalists, activists and human rights defenders face threats, intimidation or violence connected, or perceived to be connected, with their democratic work. The strongest response to the present incident would therefore be a transparent, credible and professional investigation that establishes what happened, identifies those responsible and demonstrates that violence against people exercising legitimate democratic freedoms will not be tolerated, regardless of who the perpetrators may ultimately prove to be.

CDSJ deliberately refrains from drawing conclusions that properly belong to a competent investigation. At the same time, the seriousness of the circumstances means that all credible allegations, possible motives and relevant lines of inquiry should be examined thoroughly and independently. Democratic confidence is strengthened when institutions are willing to follow the evidence wherever it leads, without political favour, institutional protection or predetermined conclusions. It is through such an approach that public confidence can be restored and speculation replaced by facts.

We therefore place our confidence in the ability of the Government of Lesotho, the Lesotho Mounted Police Service and other responsible institutions to exercise the necessary diligence, independence and professionalism required by this matter. We encourage Government to treat this moment not merely as a criminal investigation, but also as an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to an open democratic society in which journalists, activists, human rights defenders and civil society organisations can carry out their work without fear.

CDSJ respectfully calls for a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation into the abduction and torture of Mr. Boloetse, appropriate measures to ensure his continued safety where necessary, and accountability for every person who may ultimately be found to have planned, facilitated, financed or carried out the attack. We further encourage regular and responsible communication with the public on the progress of the investigation, to the extent possible without compromising its integrity, because public confidence will depend not only on the outcome of the investigation but also on confidence in the process through which that outcome is reached.

Beyond the immediate investigation, CDSJ believes that Lesotho should use this moment to strengthen practical mechanisms for protecting journalists, activists and human rights defenders. This should include sustained dialogue between Government, civil society, media organisations, security institutions and other relevant stakeholders on how threats can be reported, assessed and responded to before they escalate into violence. Such engagement should not arise only after serious incidents occur, but should form part of an ongoing national commitment to protecting the democratic space within which citizens participate in public life.

Government and civil society will not always agree, nor should they be expected to. Journalists will sometimes publish uncomfortable information, activists will sometimes challenge public decisions, civil society organisations will sometimes criticise policy, and citizens will sometimes approach the courts to contest actions of public institutions. These are not signs of democratic failure. They are signs that democratic institutions are being used. Likewise, Government has both the right and responsibility to govern, maintain public order, protect national interests and respond to criticism through lawful democratic processes. The strength of a democracy lies in the ability of these different actors to disagree while continuing to recognise one another as legitimate partners in the constitutional life of the country.

This is why CDSJ believes that the response to Mr. Boloetse's case must rise above political camps and institutional defensiveness. The question before Lesotho should not be which side of a political argument Mr. Boloetse belongs to, but whether our democratic system is strong enough to ensure that no one is abducted, assaulted or tortured because of journalism, advocacy, political opinion, public criticism or lawful civic

participation. Protecting that principle protects Government as much as it protects civil society, because stable democratic institutions ultimately strengthen the legitimacy of the State itself.

CDSJ therefore encourages the Government of Lesotho to use this moment to renew its partnership with the media, civil society organisations and human rights defenders and to publicly reaffirm that those who scrutinise Government, challenge decisions or demand accountability remain entitled to the protection of the State. A confident democratic government does not require silence from its citizens. It protects their right to disagree, while ensuring that disagreements remain within the rule of law.

To Ntate Kananelo Boloetse, CDSJ expresses its solidarity and wishes him strength and recovery. His experience should concern every person who values Lesotho's democratic future. No journalist should have to choose between personal safety and reporting the truth as they understand it. No activist should have to choose between safety and advocacy. No civil society organisation should have to calculate whether speaking about injustice may expose its members to violence, and no citizen should be deprived of security because of legitimate participation in public affairs.

The most powerful response Lesotho can give to those who use violence to create fear, whoever they may ultimately be, is to demonstrate that our institutions remain stronger than intimidation and that our democracy remains capable of protecting disagreement. CDSJ remains committed to working with the Government of Lesotho, law-enforcement institutions, the media, civil society organisations, communities, development partners and all democratic stakeholders to protect and strengthen the civic space upon which Lesotho's constitutional democracy depends.

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