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Africa - Malawi

Suspicious death

Journalists must be allowed to investigate the death of activist Robert Chasowa

20 October 2011

Robert Chasowa, a student and political activist, was found dead on the campus of Malawi University Polytechnic on 24 September in circumstances that were far from clear.

Chasowa wrote several campaigning articles, some of which have been posted by political [blogger Bright Baghaya Mhango](#). He published a weekly pro-democracy newsletter *Weekly Political Update* (see below), which was highly critical of President Bingu wa Mutharika. The activist had been the target of threats for several weeks after announcing he would shortly disclose compromising information about the government and the police.

"Reporters Without Borders deplores the death of this activist and is surprised at the pressure being put on journalists investigating the case," the organization said. "We urge the judicial authorities to conduct an impartial investigation into Chasowa's death, which took place in particularly worrying circumstances and in a climate hostile to freedom of expression."

"Several radio journalists, including those of the *Zodiak Broadcasting Station*, have been attacked in their cars, the homes of human rights activists have been burgled and ransacked, and some activists, including **Lawrence Bisika**, have been beaten up", the organisation added.

Police concluded Chasowa committed suicide by jumping from a window, but there were several curious aspects to the story, such as a suicide note found in his apartment which was addressed to his father but referred to him by the name of his late brother. The confusion over the intended recipient puzzled Chasowa's friends.

Charles Dzamalala, the pathologist responsible for the autopsy on Chasowa, said that when the police announced their conclusions, he had not yet examined the body.

Dzamalala subsequently told *Capital Radio* he believed Chasowa had probably been murdered. The body had a severe wound to the back of the head but no broken bones.

The pathologist also noted that Chasowa's back bore signs of a beating, probably inflicted several days before his death.

In his autopsy report, the pathologist added that the place of death had not been officially established since no one had seen the body at the scene and the police had quickly removed it to the mortuary and cleaned up the spot where it was found.

Chasowa headed the anti-government student movement Youth for Democracy (YFD), which was dissolved after his death. He was also a member of the New Vision Youth Organization (NVYO), which tackled social and economic problems in Malawi and advocated dialogue with President Mutharika. Several members of these organizations have said Chasowa was murdered for having shed light on deals between pro-democracy groups and the police.

During political demonstrations in August this year, the police were reported to have proposed making payments to the groups of up to 60,000 dollars if future protests were called off.

After Chasowa's death, several incidents occurred in Malawi that were linked to this affair.

The head of the NVYO, **Duncan Nawazo Phiri**, was taken in for questioning earlier this month after he publicly confirmed the agreement between the police and pro-democracy groups. He was released after three days.

Justice Kangulu, a childhood friend of Chasowa's who was also a member of the NVYO, was also questioned.

Black Alex Moses, who posted some of [Chasowa's writings](#) on the Internet, was accused last month of printing and publishing seditious material. Moses remains in detention for the duration of the investigation. A request by his lawyer, Lusungu Gondwe, for his release on bail was rejected.

The editor of the weekly *Weekend Nation*, **George Kasakula**, was also summoned by the police. He was asked to reveal his sources for a story about Chasowa's death and his links with the police. Officers also requested access to recordings of interviews carried out for the story.

Journalist **Phillip Pemba** of the daily *The Nation* has received death threats after publishing articles about Chasowa's death.

The police have seized the personal computer of Chasowa's flatmate, **Ndagha Mkandawire**, on which the activist often composed his articles. Those close to Chasowa fear the authorities are trying to destroy evidence or delete compromising files.

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- , (JPEG - 943 kb)
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