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Zambia NGO Bill could severely restrict civil society freedoms

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The Zambian government is seeking to introduce the highly restrictive NGO Bill, 2009 in the upcoming session of Parliament slated for mid-July. If passed, the bill will severely curtail the space for NGOs to operate in the country.

The Bill was first introduced in 2007 leading to widespread criticism which prevented its passage in Parliament. Although, some concerns highlighted by civil society have been addressed in the present version of the Bill, key aspects remain unchanged.

“Any regulatory framework for NGOs must actively preserve the independence of the sector. The Bill in contrast seeks to emasculate the autonomy of NGOs and co-opt them into becoming extensions of the government”, said Ingrid Srinath Secretary General of CIVICUS.

The Bill vests the Government dominated NGO Registration Board with overreaching powers to “approve” the area of work of NGOs; issue policy guidelines on “harmonising” their work with the national development plan; and “advise” on strategies for efficient planning of activities.

The government can ask NGOs to submit important information regarding their activities, accounts and administration within an unspecified time frame. Failure to submit the information can result in suspension or cancellation of registration.

All NGOs including community based organisations are required to submit themselves to compulsory registration which must be renewed every three years. Registration can be denied in the “public interest”, which is not defined in the Bill.

Significantly, the Bill imposes forced self-regulation and peer monitoring by obliging NGOs to adopt a code of conduct and create a Council of NGOs to coordinate the activities of their peers on a number of issues including programmes, fundraising and development of national human resources keeping in mind “national security” and “public interest” needs.

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is a global movement of civil society with members and partners in over a hundred countries. The Civil Society Watch (CSW) programme of CIVICUS tracks threats to civil society freedoms of expression, association and assembly across the world. In 2008, CSW tracked threats in 61 countries across the globe.

For more information, contact:
Jessica Hume (jessica.hume@civicus.org), Communications Officer
or Mandeep S.Tiwana (mandeep.tiwana@civicus.org),
Civil Society Watch Programme Officer
Tel: +27 11 833 5959 mob: +27 71 469 8121
www.civicus.org