



Civil society groups must speak up against the shrinking civic space in Nigeria after National Assembly invasion.

The time has come for the civil society community in Nigeria and the world over to speak up against the shrinking civic space in Nigeria, Spaces for Change [S4C] and Nigeria Network of NGOs (NNNGO) said today, after the National Assembly invasion. Heavily-armed security operatives of Nigeria's Department of State Security Services (DSS) barricaded the entrance of the Nigerian federal parliament on Tuesday, August 7, 2018, preventing federal lawmakers from accessing their offices to carry out their lawful legislative duties.

"The civil society community must strongly resist these undemocratic tendencies. Nigerian authorities must end this trend of shrinking civic space and weakening of democratic institutions in the country", said Ms. Yemisi Ramsome-Kuti, Nigeria Network of NGOs Trustee.

DSS' Tuesday invasion of the National Assembly is the height of closing civic space any country could witness in a democracy, said Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, Executive Director at Spaces for Change.

Nigeria's Vice-President ordered the sack of the Director General of the DSS following the intense public outrage that greeted the invasion. While we applaud and welcome the sack of the Director General of the DSS, it must be noted that there are several cases of attacks by the DSS on civil society activists, journalists and human rights defenders in the country. Spaces for Change has tracked 103 incidents of governmental restrictions on free speech, association, religious and assembly rights that occurred between May 2015 - May 2017. See www.closingspaces.org.

In its March 2018 United Nations Universal Periodic Review Report submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council, the NNNGO and Civicus are "alarmed by attacks on and intimidation of human right defenders, civil society activists and journalists in Nigeria, predominantly carried out by operatives of the Department of State Security".

The civil society community cannot continue to look the other way as DSS' role in the closing of civic space in the country continues. With the invasion of the National Assembly, Spaces for Change and the NNNGO are concerned that the attack and intimidation by the DSS on citizens will worsen if not properly checked.

We are very alarmed that a revered institution such as the National Assembly can be invaded by the DSS in a democracy. Spaces for Change and the Nigeria Network of NGOs stand together with the National Assembly in this difficult time and are calling for the protection of civic space by all democratic associations, movements and institutions in the country.

The DSS reports directly to the Presidency. Accordingly, President Muhammadu Buhari must make good his commitment to the rule of law by not only ordering all security forces in the country to respect the rights of citizens to freedom of assembly, speech and association, but also by restraining the DSS from continuing its vicious campaign of intimidation and suppression of the rights of citizens under the guise of state security.

The new DSS boss must show true leadership and heed the demands of citizens and citizen organisations to release citizens detained by DSS for exercising their rights to the freedom of peaceful assembly, speech and association and review their cases to prevent continued harassment.

"Nothing can ever wipe out the unimaginable trauma our democracy and civic space witnessed yesterday in the hands of the DSS. The minimum the government of Nigeria can do at this time is to provide restorative measures capable of reassuring the National Assembly and the over 170 million Nigerians who elected them that their rights to freedom of association, speech and assembly is guaranteed.

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About Spaces for Change

Established in May 2011, Spaces for Change (S4C) is a research and advocacy organization working to infuse human rights into social and economic decision-making processes in Nigeria. The organization works to increase the participation of Nigerian youth, women and communities in the development of social and economic policy, and also help public authorities and corporate entities to put a human rights approach at the heart of their decision-making. (www.spacesforchange.org)

About Nigeria Network of NGOs

The Nigeria Network of NGOs (NNNGO) is the first generic membership body for civil society organizations in Nigeria that facilitates effective advocacy on issues of poverty and other developmental issues. Established in 1992, NNNGO represents over 2,400 organizations ranging from small groups working at the local level, to larger networks working at the national level. Read more at www.nnngo.org