As African writers, promoters of literature and advocates for freedom of expression, we are deeply concerned by the continued existence in the majority of African states of colonial-era laws, which continue to treat defamation as a criminal offence. These laws are invariably used to silence writers, journalists and others, and often carry heavy penalties, including imprisonment and political disenfranchisement. This form of state-sanctioned silencing is fundamentally incompatible with freedom of expression and is used deliberately and systematically to crack down on dissident voices and to prevent criticism of those in authority. These laws are a noose around the neck of writers. These laws deprive the public of vital information and cripple our ability to hold the powerful to account.

We welcome the landmark judgment of the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights, which ruled in favour of freedom of expression and in defence of journalist Lohe Issa Konaté in the case against Burkina Faso, by concluding that criminal defamation laws should not include custodial sentences. Building on this ruling and recognising the importance of freedom of expression in national and continental development as well as the responsibility of national leaders to respect the commitments to African and international protocols which uphold freedom of expression, we call for the repeal of criminal defamation laws.

In particular, we call on African states to abolish criminal defamation and “insult” laws as a matter of urgency and call for the immediate release of writers and journalists who have been jailed under such charges.

Freedom of expression is an essential part of a free and fair society. Our shared hope for the continent is of a land where knowledge, necessary toward making informed choices, is abundant and perpetually the birth right of every citizen.

Yours