



Press Release

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Civil society urges Presidency to act against unconstitutional ministerial overreach in Venice Biennale dispute

The Campaign for Free Expression, together with a broad coalition of civil-society organisations, has today written to the President calling for urgent Cabinet intervention in response to the Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture’s cancellation of South Africa’s officially selected pavilion for the 61st Venice Biennale.

While the Minister’s decision has immediate and far-reaching consequences for freedom of artistic creativity, the letter makes clear that the matter raises a deeper constitutional concern: the abuse of executive authority and the failure of collective Cabinet responsibility to restrain it.

The Minister terminated an open, independent, expert-led curatorial process after its conclusion and explicitly because of disagreement with the content of the selected work. The duly appointed selection committee has since issued an extraordinary public statement warning of political pressure and attempts to silence free expression. Despite this, the Minister has persisted in asserting a unilateral discretion to override independent processes on ideological grounds.

“The Constitution does not permit Ministers to dismantle independent processes on personal whim,” said Nicole Fritz, Executive Director of the Campaign for Free Expression. “This is not only about the arts. It is about whether executive power remains subject to constitutional limits, and whether Cabinet will exercise its collective responsibility to enforce those limits when they are breached.”

The letter also situates the Venice Biennale controversy within a wider pattern of unchecked ministerial conduct, noting that earlier publicly criticised threats made by the Minister to entities under his Department attracted no visible corrective action from Cabinet. Civil society warns that such inaction emboldens further abuses of power.

The coalition has called on the Presidency and Cabinet to intervene decisively to reaffirm the constitutional protection of artistic freedom, to correct the Minister’s unlawful exercise of authority, and to ensure that Gabrielle Goliath’s work *Elegy* – unanimously selected through an independent process to represent South Africa at the Biennale – is restored and exhibited as originally determined.

Ends

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