

Terrorism charges for Parliament fire suspect

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11 Jan 2022

The suspect in a fire that gutted parts of South Africa's 138-year-old parliament building this month was charged with terrorism on Tuesday, 11 January 2022, appearing in court for a case officials have described as an attack on the country's democracy.



Zandile Christmas Mafe, a suspect accused of breaking into Parliament when the fire started, appears in the Cape Town Magistrate Court, in Cape Town, South Africa, 4 January 2022. Reuters/Sumaya Hsham

Zandile Mafe, 49, had already been charged with arson in connection with the fire that started on Jan. 2, but the additional charge of terrorism was added because he had also been caught with an explosive device, the prosecution said.

The blaze caused the roof of the newer part of the building to collapse, and also damaged the Old Wing dating back to 1884, when the Cape was under British colonial rule.

Built in the ornate Victorian neo-classical style, against the backdrop of Table Mountain, the stately red-and-white parliament building is also one of Cape Town's tourist draws.

Some sections containing important heritage, like a museum with artworks, were saved, however.

The case was adjourned until Feb. 11 and Mafe ordered to be detained in a psychiatric institute, after pleas from his defence council that he suffers from mental illness. Dozens of protesters gathered outside the court building in central Cape Town, saying Mafe was innocent.

South Africa's parliament has played a crucial role in South Africa's transition over the past three decades from undemocratic white minority rule to a place where highly progressive legislation has been passed, helping roll back repressive apartheid-era policies.

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