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(Author)

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The right to freedom of expression was threatened with the cybercrimes law used to arrest journalists. Meanwhile the Private Voluntary Organization Amendment Bill would undermine the right to freedom of association if adopted. Members and supporters of the main opposition party were violently attacked at political rallies, leading to at least two deaths. Students were arrested for protesting against high fee increases and the government weaponized the law to persecute political opposition members. Two young men were unlawfully killed by law enforcement officers in August in separate incidents. The authorities took measures to control the spread of a measles outbreak that led to the deaths of hundreds of children. Legislation outlawing early and child marriage was introduced.

Freedom of expression, association and assembly

The rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly were increasingly threatened. Journalists were arrested under the cybercrimes law; the Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) Amendment Bill was introduced to parliament; and members and supporters of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), the main opposition party, were intimidated, harassed, attacked and assaulted during parliamentary and local government by-elections which took place in March.

Between August and September, three journalists became the first people to be arrested under the new Cyber and Data Protection Act, which had been enacted in December 2021. Wisdom Mdzungairi, the editor-in-chief for Alpha Media Holdings and editor of NewsDay newspaper, and Desmond Chingarande, a senior reporter at NewsDay, were summoned to Harare Central Police Station. They were questioned in connection with a

story they had published on a private business enterprise believed to be run by individuals with connections to the government. They were charged with transmitting “false data intending to cause harm” and released three hours later after their lawyer assured officers that they would be available for further questioning when needed.

On 29 September, freelance sports journalist Hope Chizuzu was arrested on the same charges after board members of the Dynamos Football Club filed a complaint against him. Hope Chizuzu’s mobile phone and iPad were confiscated and kept by the police for “further investigations”. He was released the same day after police issued him with a warning and told him that he would soon be summoned to appear in court.

In June, the minister of public service, labour and social welfare introduced the PVO amendment bill in parliament. Its provisions threatened the right to freedom of association and the very existence of civil society organizations and their operations. Clause 2 gives the minister discretionary and overly broad powers to designate organizations as being at “high risk of, or vulnerable to misuse by terrorist organizations”. However, PVOs and their representatives would not have a say in the assessment of their vulnerability to risk. Clause 5 provides for the cancellation of a PVO’s registration if it is found to be engaged in political activities. This provision would pose a particular threat to organizations working in defence of human rights.

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly was continuously violated and undermined as police and supporters of the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF), disrupted the CCC party’s political rallies and attacked its members. On 27 February, a gang of Zanu-PF youths allegedly armed with machetes, beer bottles, iron bars, spears and bricks, disrupted a CCC rally in Kwekwe and tried to stop people from attending. Mboneni Ncube, a 30-year-old CCC supporter, died after he was stabbed and at least 17 others were seriously injured in the attack. Speaking at a Zanu-PF rally in Mbizo Stadium in Kwekwe the day before, Zimbabwe’s vice-president, Constantino Chiwenga, sent a chilling warning that Zanu-PF would “crush the [CCC] party like lice”.

On 17 March, Godfrey Karemba, a CCC supporter, was assaulted by members of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) in the capital, Harare, ahead of the parliamentary by-elections. The ZRP justified the assault in a statement that said he was “engaging in unsanctioned political activities in the Harare Central District”.

On 12 September, police arrested 14 students at the University of Zimbabwe after they embarked on peaceful #FeesMustFall demonstrations against the university’s steep tuition fee increases. Twelve of them were released late on 13 September after paying fines equivalent to USD 3.31. The remaining two appeared in court on 14 September and

were released on bail. Five more students were arrested on 14 September, taken to Avondale police station and charged with “disorderly conduct”.

Arbitrary detention

Authorities weaponized the law to persecute CCC members and supporters by subjecting them to arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention and unfair trials. On 6 February, police arrested 10 party supporters in Mkoba, Gweru, during a roadshow to canvass for votes ahead of the by-elections. They were released without charge two days later.

On 14 June, two CCC MPs Job Sikhala (also the party chairman) and Godfrey Sithole (MP for Chitungwiza North) were arrested and charged with inciting violence at the wake of Moreblessing Ali in Nyatsime, Chitungwiza. Moreblessing Ali was a party activist who was abducted in Nyatsime on 24 May, allegedly by a Zanu-PF supporter. In June her body was found dumped in a well. The police accused Job Sikhala of inciting party supporters to violence at the wake to avenge her death, after he read out the family’s statement about the circumstances of her death. Fourteen other CCC members attending the wake were also arrested. The “Nyatsime 16”, as they became known, were all denied bail when they appeared at the magistrate’s court and subsequently denied access to their lawyers while on remand. After several appeals at the lower and higher courts, Godfrey Sithole was granted bail equivalent to USD 470 on 10 November by a Harare magistrate; 14 others were also granted bail equivalent to USD 78 each by the High Court on 15 November after spending more than 150 days in detention. However, Job Sikhala remained in detention and his trial was ongoing at the end of the year.

Members of civil society groups were also subjected to arbitrary arrests. On 8 February, police arrested 10 members of the Zimbabwe Election Support Network in Mbare, Harare. They were detained at Mbare police station for providing voter education without official clearance and later released without charge. On 8 July, Obert Masaraure, the president of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ), was arrested by ZRP officers and charged with incitement to cause public violence after publishing a tweet demanding the release of his ARTUZ colleague, Robson Chere. Robson Chere had been arrested on 5 July and charged with the murder of a fellow ARTUZ member in 2016, a charge on which Obert Masaraure himself had previously been arrested, and for which charges against him remained outstanding. In connection with the charges related to his tweet, Obert Masaraure was released on bail equivalent to USD 107 on 4 August by the High Court in Harare after being denied bail by a magistrate’s court.

Unlawful killings

On 17 August, Tawanda Zvinowanda was killed by ZRP officers in custody after being arrested that morning on robbery allegations. He was arrested at his home in Chitungwiza, Mashonaland East province, by three plain-clothes Criminal Investigation Department police officers. According to his wife's witness account he was brutally beaten by the three officers prior to his arrest; he was then handcuffed and thrown into the boot of a vehicle. The police officers did not inform him or his family of the reasons for his arrest. When his family looked for him at the local police station in Makoni, officers said they had no record of him. His family were informed on the morning of 18 August that he had died on 17 August at Unit L Cemetery in Chitungwiza, where he had been taken by police officers to reveal an alleged weapon stash. Although he was handcuffed at the time, the police claimed that at the cemetery he had tried to strike an officer with a machete, and that the officer shot him.

On 20 August, Levy Musendo, a mental health patient, was killed by members of the Presidential Guard (a military unit) after he was accused of attempting to break into State House, the president's official residence, in Harare. Levy Musendo left home in Mufakose on 19 August and when he failed to return, his family filed a missing person's report. The next morning, an unidentified police officer contacted the family and told them that Levy Musendo had been arrested and was at Harare Central Police Station. However, when they went to the police station that morning, they were unable to locate him for several hours. Eventually, officers informed them that he had been taken to Parirenyatwa Hospital "with severe injuries and was bleeding profusely from the nose and mouth." Nurses at the hospital allegedly told his family that Levy Musendo's body was brought in by uniformed military personnel who warned them against disclosing that he was dead on his arrival there. His parents accused the police and Presidential Guard officers of trying to cover up their son's murder. On 25 August, the police announced that it was investigating the death.

Right to health

In April, the Ministry of Health and Child Care declared a measles outbreak in Mutasa District in Manicaland province. The virus spread to other areas and killed more than 750 children under the age of five. The government and its partners UNICEF and WHO responded to the outbreak by instituting the Social and Behaviour Change Communication model within Apostolic religious communities to promote understanding of and improve access to modern health services and treatments. The authorities also initiated emergency measles vaccination and re-vaccination programmes for more than 2 million children under the age of five.

Children's rights

In March, the Marriage Amendment Act, which outlaws early and child marriage, was passed in parliament. According to Zimstat, the national statistics agency, 33.7% of girls under the age of 18 were married, while only 2% of boys were married before reaching 18.

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for
Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and
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(ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße
32, 1041 Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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