



Document #2094411

Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2023 - Zimbabwe

NOT FREE

28

/ 100

Political Rights 11 / 40

Civil Liberties 17 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

28 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

The Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) has dominated Zimbabwean politics since independence in 1980, partly by carrying out severe crackdowns on the political opposition, critical media, and other sources of dissent. President Emmerson Mnangagwa took power in 2017 after the military intervened to remove longtime president Robert Mugabe amid factional divisions within the ruling party. Mnangagwa has largely retained the legal, administrative, and security architecture of the Mugabe era, and has consolidated his authority through repression. Endemic corruption, weak rule of law, and poor protections for workers and land rights remain critical challenges.

Key Developments in 2022

- The Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), led by former Movement for Democratic Change–Alliance (MDC-A) leader Nelson Chamisa, won most of the parliamentary by-elections and local contests held in late March. The electoral period was marred by allegations of intimidation, electoral irregularities, and violence.

- In June, two CCC lawmakers were arrested and accused of inciting violence after attending the funeral of a party activist who was found dead earlier that month. Job Sikhala, one of the arrestees, remained in detention and was awaiting trial at year's end.
- In September, Chamisa was targeted in an apparent assassination attempt when a device exploded near his convoy in the town of Chinhoyi. The CCC blamed ZANU-PF supporters and state agents.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

After Robert Mugabe was forced to resign as president after 37 years in power, ZANU-PF selected Emmerson Mnangagwa, whom Mugabe had dismissed as vice president, to succeed him. A presidential election was held as planned in July 2018. Mnangagwa was credited with 50.8 percent of the vote, followed by MDC-A candidate Nelson Chamisa with 44.3 percent and Movement for Democratic Change–Tsvangirai (MDC-T) candidate Thokozani Khupe with 0.9 percent.

International and local observers reported a peaceful campaign but raised concerns about the election's overall conduct and integrity. Southern African Development Community and European Union observers noted challenges including parties having difficulty accessing voter rolls, progovernment bias by state media, contested postal voting, the denial of the diaspora's right to vote, reports of assisted voting, and intimidation meant to aid ZANU-PF.

Vote-tallying irregularities and delays led to postelection tensions. The MDC-A leadership declared victory before the official results were released and accused ZANU-PF of attempting to rig the vote. Postelection opposition protests erupted in Harare and the military was deployed to disperse them, leading to several deaths. The ZEC ultimately declared Mnangagwa the winner, but the MDC refused to recognize the legitimacy of Mnangagwa's victory.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

Zimbabwe has a bicameral Parliament with a 270-seat lower house, the National Assembly, and an 80-seat upper house, the Senate. In the National Assembly, 210 members are elected through a first-past-the-post system to hold single-member constituencies and 60 women are elected by proportional representation. The Senate includes six members from each of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces who are elected through proportional

representation. Sixteen are indirectly elected by regional councils, two seats are reserved for people with disabilities, and two are reserved for tribal chiefs. Members in both houses serve five-year terms.

ZANU-PF won 180 National Assembly seats in the July 2018 parliamentary elections, held concurrently with the presidential and local polls. The MDC-A won 87 and the MDC-T won 1 via proportional representation. An independent former ZANU-PF member and the National Patriotic Front, a ZANU-PF splinter faction, each took one seat. In the Senate, ZANU-PF secured 34 elected seats, the MDC-A took 25, and the MDC-T took 1. Bureaucratic irregularities and media bias marred the parliamentary elections. Traditional leaders ignored the constitutional ban on their participation in partisan politics.

In March 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that Chamisa was not the legitimate opposition leader, replacing him with Khupe, who was then the MDC-T leader. Khupe recalled 31 MDC-A legislators of both houses later that year, forcing them to surrender their seats. Another 15 MDC-A members defected to the MDC-T to retain their seats.

The CCC won 19 of the 28 parliamentary seats decided in the March 2023 by-elections and won most local offices decided in concurrent contests. The campaign period was marred by accusations of intimidation, electoral irregularities, and violence.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4

The ZEC is responsible for election management and oversight, but its independence from ZANU-PF is questionable. International election monitors criticized its management of the 2018 polls, noting issues with vote-count stewardship, opaque procurement processes, and the irregular arrangement of the ballots themselves. Political parties and civil society had difficulty accessing voter rolls, affecting audit and verification processes envisioned by the Electoral Act.

The introduction of biometric voter registration in 2017 remains problematic, and on election day in 2018 there was no biometric voter authentication. Weeks ahead of the 2018 elections, the Constitutional Court ruled that Zimbabweans abroad must return to the country to register to vote, effectively contravening constitutional provisions guaranteeing every citizen the right to vote. Voter-registration rates for 18-to-35-year-old Zimbabweans are considerably lower than those of their older peers according to a survey released by Afrobarometer in September 2022.

No law explicitly prohibits former military personnel from holding positions at the ZEC; 15 percent of the body's staff previously served in the armed forces as of 2018. In 2019, the ZEC appointed a former military figure as its chief elections officer despite his history of overseeing flawed elections in 2018, when he held that role in an acting capacity. The ZEC's independence was further eroded in July 2022, when individuals with ties to ZANU-PF were appointed to the body.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, 2 / and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of 4 these competing parties or groupings?

Political parties generally form without interference. However, state media tend not to cover opposition parties, impacting their competitiveness. Authorities often suppress opposition gatherings. While opposition groups were able to hold most meetings with limited disruption in the run-up to the 2018 elections, the MDC and its supporters faced postelection raids, arrests, and prosecutions.

CCC officials and supporters faced intimidation and violence in 2022, including ahead of the March elections. In June, CCC activist Moreblessing Ali was found dead in a section of the town of Chitungwiza; Ali had gone missing in May, with witnesses saying she was abducted by ZANU-PF supporters. CCC lawmakers Job Sikhala and Godfrey Sithole were charged with inciting violence after attending Ali's funeral. Sithole was bailed in November but Sikhala remained in detention and was awaiting trial at year's end.

Chamisa of the CCC voiced concerns that he would be harmed during the year. In March, he claimed that government agents were plotting to assassinate him. In September, a device exploded near his convoy in Chinhoyi. The CCC blamed ZANU-PF supporters and state agents for that incident.

Groups such as Mthwakazi Liberation Front (MLF) are blocked from conducting memorial meetings for victims of the 1980s Gukurahundi massacres. The MLF is regarded by the government as a secessionist political party, and its leaders have faced persecution.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its 1 / support or gain power through elections? 4

ZANU-PF has dominated the government since independence, though the MDC held the premiership as part of a power-sharing deal with Mugabe

between 2009 and 2013.

While MDC enjoyed considerable public support in the 2010s, postelection violence limited the opposition's ability to operate. The opposition has also been weakened by factional infighting, which ZANU-PF reportedly fostered. By the end of 2020, Douglas Mwonzora had replaced Khupe as MDC-T leader. His faction benefits from government funding. The January 2022 formation of the CCC further fragmented the opposition; Khupe and other key leaders joined it in April. However, the new grouping has garnered strong public interest.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 1 / 4

The military continues to play a critical role in political affairs since Mugabe's ouster in 2017. Many senior military officials hold leadership positions in ZANU-PF and the government.

Traditional leaders, who wield influence over public resources such as food aid, have intimidated villagers, restricted opposition access to their areas, and issued political statements in support of the ruling party, despite constitutional provisions and court orders requiring them to abstain from partisan politics. The government has been known to threaten or intimidate traditional leaders. In late 2021, for example, the government warned chiefs against criticizing the Mnangagwa administration after a one did so while addressing a funeral.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Zimbabwe's ethnic Shona majority dominates ZANU-PF, and members of the Ndebele minority have at times expressed frustration about political marginalization by both ZANU-PF and the MDC.

Women and their interests are underrepresented in the political system. The 2018 elections resulted in a decline in the number of women elected outside proportional representation. Women held 30.6 percent of lower-house seats as of December 2021, though they hold 44.2 percent of the Senate. Four of 23 presidential candidates in 2018, or 17 percent, were women.

LGBT+ advocacy groups exist, but severe discrimination limits their ability to advance their interests in the political sphere.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 1 / 4

The president and Parliament generally determine policies and legislation, but they lack strong electoral legitimacy. Parliament does not serve as an effective check on executive power.

The military continues to interfere in civilian governance. Some officers received cabinet appointments following the 2017 coup, and senior commanders were rewarded with ambassadorships in 2019. ZANU-PF has also relied on veterans as a source of political support, with the party forming a league for veterans of the war for independence in 2017. That league held its first conference in September 2022.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Corruption is endemic, and past revelations of large-scale graft did not lead to successful prosecutions. In early 2019, President Mnangagwa dismissed the existing Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) board and appointed the wife of a former general, a retired major, former opposition politicians, and civil society leaders to the body. Though ZACC continues to refer corruption cases to prosecutors, opposition leaders have called for it to be disbanded, accusing it of lacking the independence, capacity, and will to fulfill its mandate.

Corruption features heavily in the government's tender system. A waste-management agreement between the Harare city government and Geogenix, a firm owned by Albanian businessman Mirel Mërtiri, was awarded by the national government without a tender process. Transparency International criticized the deal in June 2022, saying its terms unfairly benefited Geogenix. While the municipal government attempted to suspend the deal, a government minister told it to abide by its terms in July.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Government processes are generally opaque. Access to information is constitutionally protected, but restrictive laws limit the ability of media outlets and ordinary citizens to obtain government information.

In 2020, new freedom-of-information legislation, which aimed to make some information freely available by replacing the restrictive Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), was enacted. The Freedom of Information Bill, one of the acts meant to replace the AIPPA, was criticized for being as restrictive as the old law when it was first gazetted in 2019. The Zimbabwe chapter of the Media Institute of

Southern Africa also noted that data-disclosure mechanisms for public bodies was voluntary under the bill.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

The constitution protects media freedom, but restrictive laws undermine this guarantee. Harsh penalties, including prison sentences, for violations of laws like the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (CLCRA) contribute to self-censorship among journalists.

The state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) has historically dominated broadcast media. Many Zimbabweans rely on radio, but media diversity is limited by sustained refusals to grant licenses to community radio stations. Commercial radio licenses usually go to state-controlled companies or individuals connected to ZANU-PF. The government controls the two main daily newspapers, though there are several independent print outlets. In 2020, the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe broke the ZBC's monopoly by issuing new television broadcasting licenses. All six awardees were connected to the government, owned by the government, or otherwise connected to ZANU-PF.

Violence against journalists continues. Several journalists were physically attacked by the authorities or ruling party supporters in separate incidents in October 2022, for example.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

Freedom of religion is generally respected in Zimbabwe. However, congregations perceived to be critical of the government have faced harassment.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

The Ministry of Higher Education supervises education policy at universities, and the president serves as chancellor of all eight state-run universities. The government has the authority to enforce discipline at state-run universities. Students face violent police responses to campus protests.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or 1 / other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

Zimbabweans have enjoyed some freedom and openness in private discussion, but official surveillance of political activity is a deterrent to unfettered speech. Individuals have been arrested for critical posts on social media, prompting self-censorship online.

In 2021, Parliament passed and Mnangagwa signed the Cyber Security and Data Protection bill, which several NGOs criticized for infringing on online expression and effectively allowing authorities to monitor private communication and target opposition figures.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed but poorly upheld in practice. The Maintenance of Peace and Order Act of 2019 includes heavy assembly restrictions.

Opposition groups continue to organize meetings, but their efforts are routinely frustrated by authorities. The Zimbabwe Peace Project recorded widespread event disruption, harassment, and intimidation efforts targeting opposition groups and leaders in 2022.

In September 2022, author Tsitsi Dangarembga and codefendant Julie Barnes were convicted of inciting violence for participating in a protest in 2020. The two received suspended prison sentences.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly 1 / those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related 4 work?

NGOs face restrictions under laws including the CLCRA and the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Act, despite rights stated in the constitution. Organizations that engage in charitable or humanitarian work are required to register as PVOs. Disruption of PVO and NGO activity by the authorities is common. NGO leaders faced detentions, abductions, and continued scrutiny in 2022.

The National Assembly considered the PVO Amendment Bill in 2022 and ultimately passed it in December. The bill was originally gazetted in 2021; its June 2022 amendments were criticized by Amnesty International for making it more restrictive. Its provisions give the government unchecked power to designate any PVO as “high-risk” or “vulnerable” to misuse by terrorist groups, revoke a PVO’s registration, and remove or replace its leadership.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Under the Labour Act, the government can veto collective bargaining agreements it deems economically harmful. Strikes are banned in "essential" industries and subject to procedural restrictions. Due to high unemployment and heightened informal employment that have accompanied Zimbabwe's economic crisis, unions are grossly underfunded. Strikes are sometimes tolerated, though union leaders are often charged with subversion for such activity.

In January 2022, teachers striking in front of the National Social Security Authority building were physically attacked by police. Sixteen members of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe were arrested, including its president. Teachers at state schools went on strike over pay in February; the government threatened to dismiss teachers who continued to strike or otherwise remained absent. In June, health-care workers launched a strike, calling for their pay to be issued in US dollars.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Pressure on the courts to endorse executive actions and protect ZANU-PF's interests has eroded the judiciary's independence. Judges occasionally rule against the government in sensitive cases, and such rulings are not always respected.

Individual judges faced a further loss in independence when Chief Justice Luke Malaba issued a directive instructing them to clear rulings with superiors in 2020. Malaba rescinded his directive after fierce criticism later that month.

Under a 2021 constitutional amendment, Constitutional Court and Supreme Court judges will retire at 75 instead of at 70, allowing the president to extend Malaba's contested position. Senior judges joining the bench for the first time are now appointed by the president in consultation with the Judicial Service Commission instead of being subjected to public interviews. The introduction of the amendment contravened the constitution, as it did not follow procedures requiring a 90-day notice period to allow for public input.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4

Constitutionally stipulated due process protections are not enforced. Security personnel frequently ignore basic rights regarding detention, searches, and seizures. Accused persons are often held and interrogated

without legal counsel or explanation of the reason for arrest. Lawyers also face detention and arrest on spurious charges. Perceived opponents of the regime faced arrest and detention throughout 2022.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

Security forces backed by ZANU-PF have long engaged in acts of extralegal violence with impunity. Opposition party members, detainees, and protesters often face police brutality, sometimes resulting in death. Overcrowded prisons are unsanitary, food shortages are rampant, and prisoners risk contracting illnesses.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

While discrimination is prohibited under the 2013 constitution, it is not expressly prohibited on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Sex between men is a criminal offense and can be punished with a fine and up to a year in prison. Land and indigenization policies have previously been criticized for discriminating against white Zimbabweans. Despite legal protections against gender discrimination, women continue to face significant disadvantages.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

Movement is restricted by the extensive use of police roadblocks, which are used to impede protests and opposition rallies.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

Land rights are poorly protected, and in rural areas, the nationalization of land has left both commercial farmers and smallholders with limited security of tenure. Women face discrimination in terms of access to and ownership of land, particularly communal or family land controlled by traditional leaders or male relatives.

In 2021, the government began the process of seizing a privately owned farm belonging to three Black Zimbabweans, including Siphosami Malunga, a well-known human rights activist and critic of the government. A trial against the three, who were accused of illegally occupying the farm, was due to begin in November 2022.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

Laws on personal status matters such as marriage and divorce are generally equitable, but customary practices put women at a disadvantage. Domestic violence is a problem, and sexual abuse is widespread, especially against girls.

Child marriages were banned in 2016, but factors including poverty, certain religious views, and lack of enforcement have sustained the practice; a third of girls are married by age 18.

The Termination of Pregnancy Act makes abortion illegal except in very limited circumstances. Same-sex marriages are constitutionally prohibited.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Due to the ongoing economic crisis, many workers are not adequately compensated and are often unpaid for months. The International Trade Union Confederation categorized Zimbabwe as one of the worst countries to work in its 2022 Global Rights Index.

The government has attempted to combat the problem of human trafficking. Vulnerable adults and children can be forced to work in the agricultural sector, begging, and domestic work. Women and girls remain particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking.

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2022

Country:

Zimbabwe

Source:

[Freedom House](#) (Author)

Original link:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-world/2023>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

2023

Available on ecoi.net since:

6 July 2023

Document ID:

2094411

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Documentation
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