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## Zimbabwe: Elections in the context of systematic human rights violations and criminalization of state critics

Zimbabwe's upcoming general election will take place in the context of five years of systematic, brutal [crackdowns](#) on human rights, including recent restrictions on political opposition gatherings, the violent suppression of protests and the criminalization of state critics, Amnesty International said today, ahead of the vote on 23 August.

Over the past five years, the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly have been relentlessly suppressed. Amid a sustained crackdown against those who have demanded accountability from the government or organized protests against allegations of corruption, journalists, members of the political opposition and human rights activists have all been targeted for criticizing the government. Almost a fortnight ago, President Emmerson Mnangagwa [signed](#) into law the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Amendment Bill, 2022, commonly referred to as the "Patriotic Bill", further criminalizing dissent for among others, "upsetting" a constitutionally elected government. Health workers who protested poor working conditions and salaries have also not been spared either. They were criminalized for demanding their rights. For example, the then acting president of the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association (ZHDA), Peter Magombeyi was [abducted and tortured](#) in September 2019 for being vocal about health workers' plights. He was [freed](#) after few days of his ordeal.

"What we have seen in Zimbabwe over the past five years amounts to a brutal crackdown on human rights, especially the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. Respect for socio-economic rights has also declined dramatically, leaving many people in

abject poverty with no means to put food on the table,” said Khanyo Farisè, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Southern Africa.

“The Zimbabwean authorities have revealed their brazen contempt for basic freedoms and shown that there is no space for dissent in the so-called ‘second republic’. The police have also repeatedly resorted to excessive use of force to suppress human rights, including the right to peaceful assembly.”

### **Criminalizing political opposition**

The Zimbabwean authorities have increasingly targeted leaders of the political opposition, journalists and activists by weaponizing the law against them for exposing allegations of corruption or demanding accountability. Hopewell Chin’ono, a prominent journalist who exposed a multimillion-dollar Covid-19-related corruption case, and Jacob Ngarivhume, a political activist who called for a nationwide protest against allegations of corruption on 31 July 2020, were [arrested and detained](#) in July 2020 to stifle their criticism.

Chin’ono and Ngarivhume later faced various trumped-up charges for being vocal critics of allegations of corruption. [Chin’ono was jailed](#) in November 2020 in part for exposing a woman who tried to smuggle undeclared gold through the Robert Mugabe International Airport, and the alleged looting of government funds by individuals with political connections during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As punishment for exposing allegations of corruption and doing his investigative journalistic work, Chin’ono was arrested several times and detained for about 94 days between 2020 and 2021 at Chikurubi Maximum Prison. In a clear attack on Chin’ono, the court also barred his lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa from representing him. After appeals, the High Court has acquitted Hopewell Chin’ono three times over trumped-up charges. Ngarivhume, meanwhile, is serving a four-year jail sentence after he was [convicted and sentenced in April](#) for calling for nationwide protests against corruption.

In May, Job Sikhala, a member of parliament for the opposition party Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), was convicted on charges of “obstructing justice” and handed a six-month suspended sentence. Sikhala’s trial was linked to a video shared online in which he is accused of saying that the ruling Zanu-PF party had [killed](#) Moreblessing Ali, a CCC activist, in June 2022. Sikhala, who has been [detained](#) since June 2022, denied making the video and an expert witness testified in court that the footage had been tampered with.

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*Khanyo Farisè*

In September 2022, Zimbabwean author and activist Tsitsi Dangarembga and fellow protester Julie Barnes were each convicted of “inciting violence” after participating in the 31 July 2020 protests against economic hardship and handed a fine of 70,000 Zimbabwean dollars (US\$193). They were each handed a six-month suspended sentence, yet later [successfully challenged their sentence in court](#).

On 10 June 2020, three ex-MDC-Alliance youth leaders – now members of the main opposition Citizens Coalition for Change, Joana Mamombe, Cecillia Chimbiri and Netsai Marova, were [arrested](#) and charged with falsifying their abduction and torture at the hands of suspected state security agents. The trio were abducted after the police arrested them at a roadblock in Warren Park amid a protest against the denial of socio-economic rights at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. They were prosecuted for three years, before eventually being [acquitted](#) earlier this month, apart from Netsai Marova, who went into exile before the trial was concluded.

### **Rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly curtailed**

President Emerson Mnangagwa's rise to power was against the background of the killings of protesters following [post-election violence on 1 August 2018](#), after the 31 July 2018 election. Six people were killed, and 35 others injured, after soldiers fired live ammunition at people fleeing post-election protests in Harare.

The protesters had demanded that official election results be released. Some of those killed and injured were shot from the back, yet five years later, no one has been held accountable. And despite the establishment of a [commission](#) to probe the circumstances that led to the killings, no justice has been served. The victims continue to be denied access to justice and effective remedies.

On 16 August 2018, baton-wielding police mounted a [vicious assault on peaceful protesters](#) who had gathered in Harare in anticipation of the 16 August national protests against deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the country. Scores of people were left injured following the crackdown. On 15 August, the day before the march, Zimbabwean police announced they were banning the protests through a [press statement](#), saying the demonstrations would turn violent. After the aborted protest, about 128 activists were arrested and placed on remand. Other protests that were planned to take place in four other cities around the country were also banned and some activists were arrested.

In another violent escalation at the beginning of 2019, Amnesty International [documented at least 15 killings by police](#) when nationwide protests erupted on 14 January, sparked by fuel price hikes. The state carried out mass arrests, which saw hundreds of people arrested, including prominent activists who were suspected of being behind the protests, on charges including public violence. By the end of April of the same year, close to 400 people had been convicted by the courts, most of them through hastily conducted trials.

During the protests, the police [used lethal and excessive force](#) such as tear gas, batons, water cannons and live ammunition. They also launched a house-to-house hunt to track down and apprehend the organizers of the protest and other prominent civil society leaders and activists. Those arrested included Evan Mawarire, a well-known local cleric and activist, and trade union leader Peter Mutasa, who were subjected to trumped-up treason charges in connection with the protests. The state charged 22 people in relation to the protests for attempting to “subvert” a constitutional government.

“Over the past five years, the Zimbabwean authorities have demonstrated little or no respect for human rights and have repeatedly flouted the rule of law. As political campaigning enters full swing, the authorities must ensure that people are able to freely exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Authorities must respect, protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of everyone before, during and after the election,” said Khanyo Farisë.

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