

World Report 2024



Zimbabwe

Events of 2023

A soldier stands on the grounds of a lithium processing plant in Goromonzi, about 80 kilometers southeast of the capital, Harare, July 5, 2023. Zimbabwe has one of the world's largest reserves of the metal, which has seen a surge in demand globally due to its use in batteries in electric cars.

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Many observers considered Zimbabwe's August 23 elections, which Emmerson Mnangagwa won, as falling short of constitutional requirements, the Electoral Act, and international election standards such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. There were also concerns about the impartiality of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission prior to and during the elections. The climate of threats, intimidation, repression, and violence against political opponents severely undermined the electoral environment.

The government's failure to investigate and prosecute abuses primarily committed by ruling ZANU-PF party supporters and state security forces entrenched the culture of impunity, especially ahead of the August 23 elections.

Repression of Civil Society Organizations

On January 22, Zimbabwean authorities announced they had [revoked the registration](#) of 291 nongovernmental and civil society organizations for "noncompliance with the provisions of Private Voluntary Organisations Act."

This was in concert with the government's efforts to enact repressive laws in 2023, most notably [an amendment](#) to the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Act. In February, President Mnangagwa claimed that the PVO Amendment Bill was necessary to [protect and defend the country's sovereignty](#) from destabilizing foreign interests.

Once signed, provisions of the act would allow the government to cancel the registration of organizations deemed to have "political affiliation." Such organizations would have little to no recourse to judicial review, with criminal penalties ranging from heavy fines to imprisonment for some violations.

[United Nations experts](#) called on President Mnangagwa not to sign the bill into law, stating that "the restrictions contained therein will have a chilling effect on civil society organizations, particularly dissenting voices." In September, it was [reported](#) that Mnangagwa had sent the bill back with reservations to Parliament for reconsideration, but it was unclear why he returned the bill.

On July 14, the president signed into law the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Amendment Bill 2022, commonly referred to as the "Patriotic Bill." The law, seen as a grave threat to the freedoms of association and expression, empowers the National Prosecuting Authority to prosecute anyone it considers to be undermining the country or using false statements to paint a negative picture of the country to foreign governments. A leading nongovernmental organization, [Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights](#), argued that the provisions of the law were "vague, lack certainty, are imprecise, and are thus prone to abuse by law enforcement [and] could be interpreted broadly and subjectively to criminalize the legitimate conduct of those asserting their freedom of expression."

On election night, government security forces [raided the offices](#) of the Election Resource Centre (ERC) and the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), arresting nearly 40 staff and volunteers and confiscating laptops, phones, and other equipment. The two civil society organizations had trained and deployed accredited observers to every constituency, district, and province in the country. The raid and arrest prevented an independent, nonpartisan verification of the official results as announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. A spokesman for the police [told](#) local media that the raid was because the two organizations were conducting an illegal parallel vote tabulation exercise.

Arrest, Detention, and Prosecution of Government Critics

Authorities in Zimbabwe continued weaponizing the law against critics of the government, denying those arrested the presumption of innocence, the right to bail, and access to a fair trial.

On May 17, six University of Zimbabwe students were arrested for staging a peaceful protest in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital. The protesters were demanding an end to the persecution of opposition politicians, including the release of opposition politician Job Sikhala. The students were charged with "criminal nuisance and disorderly conduct." They were [released](#) on bail after two months in detention.

Sikhala, a former member of parliament (MP) and opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party interim vice chairperson, has been incarcerated since June 14, 2022, at Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison, on the outskirts of Harare. He is charged with inciting violence, and several appeals for bail have been [denied](#). A lawyer familiar with his detention conditions said that Sikhala has been subjected to leg irons; his lawyers and relatives have at times been denied access, prompting [a court application](#) in one instance; and his party colleagues have been prevented from visiting him. While in detention, Sikhala's health has [deteriorated](#).

Prominent Zimbabweans, foreign diplomats, and other individuals signed a [petition](#) calling on President Mnangagwa to end Sikhala's unlawful detention "without bail and without trial, and also more broadly to ensure that the judiciary is not used as a political weapon in which differential

treatment is given to those apprehended by the state depending on real or perceived political affiliations and intentions.”

On April 28, Jacob Ngarivhume, leader of the small opposition party Transform Zimbabwe, was sentenced to [four years in prison](#) for inciting public violence over a 2020 protest call he posted on X, formerly known as Twitter. Ngarivhume had posted a video calling for anti-government protests over the state of the economy and rampant corruption.

Opposition MP Joanah Mamombe and activists Netsai Marova and Cecillia Chimbiri [were abducted, tortured, and sexually assaulted](#) on May 13, 2020. The three had participated in an anti-government protest in Harare. However, they were [charged](#) with faking their abduction and communicating falsehoods. In July 2023, the High Court [found](#) that the evidence against the three was “grossly unreasonable, irrational characterized by bias and malice” and ordered that they should be set free. The National Prosecuting Authority indicated they would appeal the decision to the Supreme Court.

In early August, ahead of the general election, a CCC supporter was killed during clashes with suspected ZANU-PF supporters in the township of Glen Norah, Harare. Police said they had [arrested 11 people](#) in connection with the CCC supporter’s death and the court charged them with “public violence,” a lesser offense than homicide.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have faced police harassment and sexual and physical assaults. In September, a man committed suicide in fear of police arrest for sodomy. The Criminal Law Act makes acts of “sodomy” punishable with of a maximum of 10 years’ imprisonment. Zimbabwe’s laws prohibit same-sex marriage.

Lack of Accountability for Abuses

In 2023, there was a pattern of arrests, charges, and criminal proceedings that amount to attacks on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, without any accountability.

On January 14, police [arrested](#), detained, and beat with batons Costa Machingauta (the opposition CCC MP for Budiriro, Harare) and 25 others. They were charged with participating in an illegal gathering and disturbing public peace in what police said was an illegal meeting at the MP’s house in Harare.

On March 4, police [shut down](#) the show of a popular musician, Wallace Chirumiko. Popularly known as “Winky D,” the reggae-dancehall artist had released an [album](#) that contained lyrics against social and political injustice, corruption, and the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe.

The authorities’ continued shutting down of meetings and gatherings of the opposition, artists, critics, and human rights defenders violated the right to freedom of assembly.

Women’s and Girls’ Rights

Zimbabwe has a very high rate of child marriage, with 34 percent of girls married before age 18.

A troubling feature of the election was the low number of female candidates, and the number of women in Parliament has been declining. The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights expressed [concerns](#) about violence against women voters and candidates ahead of the last election.

Land Rights

Reports continued to emerge of communities affected by the government's designation of their land for mining and commercial projects without adequate consultation. In July, [a court ordered](#) Labenmon Investments, a Chinese mining company, not to prospect or conduct exploration or any form of mining activity in four villages in Mashonaland East province without following due process and the law.

Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights [represented communities](#) in Mutoko, Mashonaland East province, against another Chinese mining company, Zim Win Mining Private Limited, which had started lithium mineral exploration activities in their area, resulting in displacement and damage to land and livelihoods. The lawyers asked the Chinese company to “cease and desist from coercing or unduly influencing the villagers to sign any consent forms,” which were vague and [lacked specifics](#) as to the “consequences of such mining operations on their livelihoods, farming activities, environmental impact and the exact nature of compensation for the negative effects of the mining.”

Key International Actors

Multiple election observation missions, including those from the [European Union](#) and the [United States](#), expressed deep concerns about the country's electoral process and stated that the process did not meet regional and international standards for credibility. In September, the EU announced its [intention to suspend](#) support for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission in light of concerns about its independence. The [preliminary report](#) of the SADC Electoral Observation found that “some aspects of the 2023 Harmonised Elections fell short of the requirements of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the Electoral Act, and the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2021).”

In May, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders urged Zimbabwe [to end the judicial harassment of education and labor rights defenders](#).

A September 20 [statement](#) by the US Embassy in Zimbabwe expressed concern at reports of continued politically motivated post-election violence and intimidation, reiterating that “every person ... has the right to live free of fear and to be treated fairly under the law.”

When President Mnangagwa was sworn in on September 4, only Presidents Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique, and Felix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of Congo, out of the 16 SADC heads of state, attended the ceremony. Other SADC members sent representatives to the inauguration, with the exception of Zambia.