

World Report 2025



Zambia

Events of 2024

Journalists and activists commemorate World Press Freedom Day during a march in Lusaka, Zambia, on May 3, 2022.

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Human rights concerns in Zambia persisted throughout 2024 as the administration of President Hakainde Hichilema increasingly exhibited tendencies toward authoritarianism. Respect for civil and political rights did not improve, as the authorities harassed and intimidated journalists, youth activists, and political opposition leaders for expressing dissent or criticism of the government.

Since October 2023, the country has been grappling with a severe [cholera](#) outbreak, which comes after years of government policies neglecting health care, sanitation, and access to safe drinking water.

Freedoms of Association, Assembly, and Expression

There has been a marked increase in intolerance toward dissent and political opposition. Despite President Hichilema's [promise](#) to uphold press freedom, journalists covering protests and political events have been subjected to arbitrary detention, harassment, and violence by police. The authorities have increasingly weaponized provisions of the Public Order Act of 1955 to restrict and disrupt opposition activities. This legislation allows authorities to prohibit gatherings not sanctioned by the police.

In April, police officers assaulted and arrested [two journalists](#), Rodgers Mwiimba of Millennium TV, Innocent Phiri of KBN TV as they covered a planned rally by the opposition party United

Kwacha Alliance. The police detained the journalists and allegedly compelled them to delete their footage before they were released without charges. The Zambia Police Service explained in a [statement](#) that the journalists were arrested for filming and conducting interviews with two politicians at a rally that was not “lawfully sanctioned.”

On May 17, a Lusaka magistrate court [convicted and sentenced](#) Raphael Nakacinda, secretary general of the main opposition party, Patriotic Front, to 18 months in prison with hard labor for “defaming the president.”

This is despite the [repeal](#) in 2022 of the offense of criminal defamation of the president, provided for under section 69 of the Zambian Penal Code. This provision has [historically](#) been utilized to target government critics and journalists. Upon taking office in 2021, President Hichilema had said that the provision “inhibits the growth of democracy and good governance, impedes human rights and basic freedom.”

Also in May, Andrew Chewa Mukosa, a Catholic priest, was [questioned](#) by police about to his Good Friday sermon that was perceived as critical of the government.

In August, police [arrested](#) and detained for two days, journalist Thomas Allan Zgambo for a post on the Facebook page of an online news outlet, Zambian Whistleblower, in which he called for government transparency regarding a property allegedly linked to President Hichilema. Authorities charged Zgambo with publishing seditious material, a colonial-era offense that carries a [minimum sentence](#) of seven years’ imprisonment. In October, police [arrested Zgambo](#) and detained him for 16 days, following the publication of an article critical of top government officials.

Increased Authoritarianism

Ahead of Zambia’s national elections scheduled for 2026, the authorities increasingly exhibited hostility toward dissent and the political opposition.

The media reported that the authorities have [monitored and restricted](#) the movements of former president Edgar Lungu. The former president reportedly said that he has been threatened with arrest for “engaging in activities that disrupt [public order](#) and safety.” On May 18, police [disrupted a meeting](#) between Lungu and Bishop Clement Mulenga of Kabwe Diocese, which they alleged was illegal.

In September, the president [suspended](#) three Constitutional Court judges, 48 hours before the judges were to hear a [significant case](#) to determine former president Lungu’s eligibility to contest the 2026 election. The suspended judges had previously dismissed President Hichilema’s 2016 challenge of Lungu’s electoral victory. The Law Association of Zambia said in a [statement](#) that it did “not support the suspension or disciplining of any judicial officer for doing what they are constitutionally mandated to do.” It said the suspensions affected the constitutionally guaranteed independence of the judiciary. Hakainde dismissed the three judges in October.

In his annual address to parliament on September 13, President Hichilema alarmingly [remarked](#) that if the country’s constitution were not amended to rectify perceived “lacunae, omissions, or oversights” the country might not conduct general elections for “eight or nine years.”

Cholera Outbreak

Since October 2023, Zambia has been experiencing an [outbreak of cholera](#), the most severe to occur in the country in 20 years. From the start of the year to August 4, [UNICEF](#) had recorded 23,378 cumulative cases, including 740 related to the outbreak. The cholera crisis is exacerbated by a combination of factors, including [inadequate access to healthcare](#), [clean water](#), and [extreme weather events](#). According to [WaterAid](#), 6.4 million Zambians – nearly one-third of the population

– lack access to clean water and 12.8 million people have no access to adequate sanitation, which puts them at increased risk of contracting dangerous waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

Despite government efforts to improve access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, including the rehabilitation of water treatment plants and building of new boreholes, [UNICEF](#) found a decline in the 2024 public allocation to water, sanitation and hygiene in the national budget.

Lead Contamination in Kabwe

Three decades after the closure of a lead and zinc mine in Kabwe, communities in and around the city suffer lead poisoning from severe lead contamination. An estimated 200,000 people are [exposed](#) to lead, including children who often suffer irreversible [cognitive harm](#). Ongoing lead [mining](#) and processing activities, and the disposal of large mountains of lead waste in publicly accessible areas, exacerbate existing health concerns.

In April, President Hichilema created an [interministerial committee](#), composed of representatives of government and civil society, to address lead contamination in Kabwe. The committee had yet to start functioning at time of writing.

With a World Bank loan, Zambia Mining and Environmental Remediation and Improvement Project sought to reduce lead exposure in Kabwe. It concluded its work in June. The project tested and treated some children and cleaned up a small number of homes and a highly polluted canal. The project, however, failed to provide durable solutions as it did not address the source of the contamination, the former mine itself.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Article 155 of the penal code punishes consensual same-sex relationships with up to 14 years' imprisonment. On June 4, two petitioners filed [a petition](#) at the Constitutional Court, urging the decriminalization of homosexuality.