

# Zimbabwe: Journalist Held on Baseless Charges

Detention of Blessed Mhlanga Highlights Threats to Free Expression, Media Freedom



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*Journalist Blessed Mhlanga walks to an awaiting prison vehicle in Harare, Zimbabwe, after his bail ruling was postponed on February 27, 2025. © 2025 Photo by JEKESAI NJIKIZANA/AFP via Getty Images*

(Johannesburg) – [Zimbabwean](#) authorities should immediately release and drop the groundless charges against a journalist for his reporting, Human Rights Watch said today. [Blessed Mhlanga](#), a senior journalist for the independent media outlet Heart and Soul TV, has been in [detention](#) since his arrest in Harare on February 24, 2025.

The authorities [charged](#) Mhlanga with transmitting information that incites violence or causes damage to property under Section 164 of Zimbabwe's Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act. The charges relate to interviews that Mhlanga did in November 2024 and February 2025 with Blessed Geza, a war veteran and leader of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, who fought during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle in the 1970s. During one interview, Geza [demanded the resignation](#) of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, accusing him of nepotism, corruption, and incompetence.

“Zimbabwean authorities should immediately release the journalist Blessed Mhlanga and drop the charges against him for simply doing his job,” said [Idriss Ali Nassah](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “These baseless charges are yet another stark reminder that the rights to freedom of expression and the media are under serious threat in Zimbabwe.”

On February 28, a [magistrate court](#) denied Mhlanga bail on the grounds that his release would cause national unrest and undermine peace and security. The High Court [upheld the decision](#) on March 21, leaving him languishing in prolonged pretrial detention at Harare’s maximum-security Chikurubi Prison. Prison facilities in Zimbabwe are often [unsanitary, overcrowded](#), and have no running water in cells. Hopewell Chin’ono, a renowned journalist, reported on March 18 that Mhlanga had fallen “[seriously ill](#)” in prison.

Since taking power in a military coup in 2017, the administration of President Mnangagwa, which initially promoted itself as a “[new dispensation](#)” respectful of basic rights, has arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted a number of critics of the government on baseless charges. Zimbabwe’s criminal justice system has repeatedly violated the due process and fair trial rights of those arrested on politically motivated grounds, often unjustly detaining them for prolonged and arbitrary periods.

On March 12, the authorities [arrested](#) an opposition local government councilor member from Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and [charged](#) him with undermining the authority of and insulting President Mnangagwa. [Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights](#) reported that the council member had shared a TikTok video showing a woman criticizing Mnangagwa for allegedly mismanaging the economy. The councilmember was released after two days.

A leading opposition figure, Job Sikhala, who was detained in June 2022 and convicted of [incitement to commit public violence](#), disorderly conduct, and obstruction of justice, was released in January 2024 after [595 days](#) in custody after receiving a suspended sentence. Another opposition leader, Jacob Ngarivhume, spent eight months in detention before a court [set aside his conviction](#) in December 2023.

Zimbabwe’s [Constitution](#) and two international treaties to which Zimbabwe is a party, the [African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), protect the right to freedom of expression. Targeting journalists and political opponents for peacefully exercising those rights undermines Zimbabwe’s standing as a rights-respecting country.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) [Resolution on the Safety of Journalists and Media Practitioners in Africa](#) obligates states to ensure that the right to express oneself through the media is not subjected to undue legal restrictions. Principle 20 of the ACHPR [Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa](#) calls upon states to take measures to prevent arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists.

Additionally, the United Nations Human Rights Council in a [2017 resolution](#) recognized the “importance of creating a safe and enabling environment” and protecting journalists, whistleblowers, witnesses, and anti-corruption activists from “threats arising from their activities in preventing and fighting against corruption.”

International human rights law provides that any pretrial restrictions should be consistent with the right to liberty, the presumption of innocence, and the right to equality under the law. The UN Human Rights Committee, the international expert body that provides authoritative analysis of the ICCPR, [has stated](#) that pretrial detention “should be an exception and as short as possible.”

Many of these rights are also protected under Zimbabwe’s [Constitution](#). Section 50(1)(d) states that any person who is arrested “must be released unconditionally or on reasonable conditions, pending a charge or trial, unless there are compelling reasons justifying their continued detention.”

“The arrest and prolonged detention of Blessed Mhlanga sends a message to all journalists that their work makes them a target for mistreatment,” Nassah said. “The Mnangagwa government should respect basic rights and stop weaponizing the law and judicial system against journalists, human rights defenders, opposition politicians, and activists.”

