

# Civic Freedom Monitor: Zimbabwe

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## Recent Developments

*While we aim to maintain information that is as current as possible, we realize that situations can rapidly change. If you are aware of any additional information or inaccuracies on this page, please keep us informed; write to ICNL at [ngomonitor@icnl.org](mailto:ngomonitor@icnl.org).*

## Introduction

Civil society in Zimbabwe has a long history of engagement in humanitarian, developmental, and political spheres. Despite ongoing hostility and suspicion by the state, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in advocating for reforms.

Zimbabwe’s legal system is based on a combination of influences from Dutch civil law, English common law, and customary laws and traditions. While the Constitution of Zimbabwe protects the freedoms of association, expression, and assembly, the exercise of these rights is undermined by restrictive laws, politically motivated enforcement, and administrative barriers. The government has routinely used legal tools to monitor, harass, and limit the operations of CSOs—especially those engaged in governance, human rights, and election-related work. Peaceful protests are frequently disrupted by police, often with excessive force, and individuals have been arrested or assaulted for criticizing government officials or policies.

## Civic Freedoms at a Glance

<b>Organizational Forms</b>	Private Voluntary Organizations, Trusts, and Unincorporated Associations (“Universitas”)
<b>Registration Body</b>	<p><b>PVOs:</b> The Registrar and the PVO Board, a body made up of representatives from 5 ministries and 8 PVO representatives.</p> <p><b>Trusts:</b> The Registrar of Deeds and, if certain criteria are met, the Registrar and the PVO Board as well.</p> <p><b>Universitas:</b> The Registrar and the PVO Board, if certain criteria are met.</p>

<p><b>Barriers to Formation</b></p>	<p>Mandatory registration under the PVO Act, with penalties (fines and imprisonment) for carrying out activities or seeking financial assistance as an unregistered group.          Complex registration procedures for PVOs, including requirement to publish notice in local paper, calling for persons to lodge objections with Registrar.          No fixed time period for government review of PVO registration applications.          PVOs may be required to submit a sworn affidavit identifying their beneficial owner at time of registration.          Foreign organizations required to conclude memorandum of understanding with Government.</p>
<p><b>Barriers to Operations</b></p>	<p>Selective application of law by governmental authorities resulting in some CSOs being targeted.          Provincial and local authorities arbitrarily require CSOs to sign duplicative Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs).          Broad and vague restrictions on activities deemed to constitute support for a political party.          International CSOs (\$250) and local CSOs (\$150) required to pay fees to register.</p>
<p><b>Barriers to Resources</b></p>	<p>Foreign funding for conducting voter education prohibited.          Hostile environment created by government accusations against PVOs that receive foreign funding.          Regular changes in monetary policies result in uncertainty in the market.          PVOs have broad duties to refuse donations from “illegitimate or illegal sources,” to report such donations, and to use formal channels to transmit funds.</p>
<p><b>Barriers to Expression</b></p>	<p>Prohibition against insulting the office or person of the President, uttering words which are likely to undermine police authority, or communicating falsehoods prejudicial to the state.</p>
<p><b>Barriers to Assembly</b></p>	<p>Police interpret “notification” to mean “submit an application” even when organizers are not required to do so.          Broad criminalization of “willfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe,” which includes participating in a meeting to plan “subversion.”</p>

## Legal Overview

This section provides a brief overview of Zimbabwe’s legal framework for the promotion and protection of civic freedoms. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

## RATIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

Key International Agreements	Ratification*
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	1991
Optional Protocol to ICCPR (ICCPR-OP1)	No

<b>Key International Agreements</b>	<b>Ratification*</b>
International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	1991
Optional Protocol to ICESCR (Op-ICESCR)	No
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)	1991
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	1991
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women	No
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	1990
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW)	No
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	2013

<b>Key Regional Agreements</b>	<b>Ratification</b>
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights	1986
African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child	1995
Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community	2001
Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa	2003
Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights	1998

\* Category includes ratification, accession, or succession to the treaty

## **CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

On May 22, 2013, a new Constitution came into force in Zimbabwe following a national referendum. The Constitution was the product of the reform agenda under the Inclusive Government. The key sections are the following:

### **58 Freedom of assembly and association**

- (1) Every person has the right to freedom of assembly and association, and the right not to assemble or associate with others.
- (2) No person may be compelled to belong to an association or to attend a meeting or gathering.

### **59 Freedom to demonstrate and petition**

Every person has the right to demonstrate and to present petitions, but these rights must be exercised

peacefully.

## **60 Freedom of conscience**

- (1) Every person has the right to freedom of conscience, which includes—
  - (a) freedom of thought, opinion, religion or belief; and
  - (b) freedom to practise and propagate and give expression to their thought, opinion, religion or belief, whether in public or in private and whether alone or together with others.
- (2) No person may be compelled to take an oath that is contrary to their religion or belief or to take an oath in a manner that is contrary to their religion or belief.
- (3) Parents and guardians of minor children have the right to determine, in accordance with their beliefs, the moral and religious upbringing of their children, provided they do not prejudice the rights to which their children are entitled under this Constitution, including their rights to education, health, safety and welfare.
- (4) Any religious community may establish institutions where religious instruction may be given, even if the institution receives a subsidy or other financial assistance from the State.

## **61 Freedom of expression and freedom of the media**

- (1) Every person has the right to freedom of expression, which includes—
  - (a) freedom to seek, receive and communicate ideas and other information;
  - (b) freedom of artistic expression and scientific research and creativity; and
  - (c) academic freedom.
- (2) Every person is entitled to freedom of the media, which freedom includes protection of the confidentiality of journalists' sources of information.
- (3) Broadcasting and other electronic media of communication have freedom of establishment, subject only to State licensing procedures that—
  - (a) are necessary to regulate the airwaves and other forms of signal distribution; and
  - (b) are independent of control by government or by political or commercial interests.
- (4) All State-owned media of communication must—
  - (a) be free to determine independently the editorial content of their broadcasts or other communications;
  - (b) be impartial; and
  - (c) afford fair opportunity for the presentation of divergent views and dissenting opinions.
- (5) Freedom of expression and freedom of the media exclude—
  - (a) incitement to violence;
  - (b) advocacy of hatred or hate speech;
  - (c) malicious injury to a person's reputation or dignity; or
  - (d) malicious or unwarranted breach of a person's right to privacy.

## **62 Access to information**

- (1) Every Zimbabwean citizen or permanent resident, including juristic persons and the Zimbabwean media, has the right of access to any information held by the State or by any institution or agency of government at every level, in so far as the information is required in the interests of public accountability.
- (2) Every person, including the Zimbabwean media, has the right of access to any information held by any person, including the State, in so far as the information is required for the exercise or protection of a right.
- (3) Every person has a right to the correction of information, or the deletion of untrue, erroneous or misleading information, which is held by the State or any institution or agency of the government at any level, and which relates to that person.
- (4) Legislation must be enacted to give effect to this right, but may restrict access to information in the interests of defence, public security or professional confidentiality, to the extent that the restriction is fair, reasonable, necessary and justifiable in a democratic society based on openness, justice, human dignity, equality and freedom.

## **NATIONAL LAWS, POLICIES, AND REGULATIONS**

Relevant national-level laws and regulations affecting civil society include:

1. Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Act, 2013
2. Constitutional Amendment (No 2) Act
3. Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Amendment Bill B. 10, 2021
4. The Cooperative Societies Act [Chapter 24:05]
5. Emergency Powers Act [Chapter 11:04]
6. Foreign Subversive Organizations Act [Chapter 11:05]
7. Unlawful Organizations Act [Chapter 11:13] [1]
8. Suppression of Foreign and International Terrorism Act [Chapter 11:21] (Not yet in force)
9. Prevention of Discrimination Act [Chapter 8:16]
10. Labour Act [Chapter 28:04]
11. Income Tax Act [Chapter 23:06]
12. Indigenisation and Empowerment Act [Chapter 14:33]
13. Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment (General) Regulations, 2010 (Statutory Instrument 21 of 2010)
14. Deeds Registries Act [Chapter 20:05] (Act No 10 of 1959)
15. Deeds Registries Regulations, 1977 (RGN 249 of 1977)
16. Public Order Security Act [Chapter 11:17] (Act No.1 of 2002 as amended most recently by Act 18 of 2007)
17. Immigration Act [Chapter 4:02]
18. Immigration Regulations, 1998 (Statutory Instrument 195 of 1998)
19. Standard Scale of Fines as substituted by the Finance Act, 2009 (No. 3 of 2009) with effect from 23rd April 2009
20. Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act
21. Public Order and Security (POSA) Act (repealed and replaced by [The Maintenance of Peace and Order Act](#) (Chapter 11:23) (MOPA))
22. Protected Areas and Places Act
23. The Cyber Security and Data Protection Act
24. Interception of Communication Act [2]

25. Official Secrets Act [3]
26. Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act repealed and replaced by the Freedom of Information Act
27. Flag of Zimbabwe Act, 2001
28. Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment, 2022

## **PENDING REGULATORY INITIATIVES**

### **Broadcasting Services (Amendment) Bill**

The government introduced the Broadcasting Services (Amendment) Bill, 2024 in the National Assembly in November 2024. Parliament held public hearings on the Bill in late December 2024, and the Parliamentary Legal Committee is currently considering the constitutionality of the Bill. The Bill contains some concerning provisions that may limit freedom of expression, including an obligation for broadcasters to ensure that programming “reflects Zimbabwean attitudes, opinions, ideas, values” (without defining these), and an obligation for broadcasters to make one hour per week of broadcasting time available to the government... to explain its policies to the nation”

### **Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies Amendment Bill**

The government intends to introduce a Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies Amendment Bill to strengthen the regulation of such cooperatives in the country. However, this has been on the legislative agenda since 2023 with little movement.

## **Legal Analysis**

This section provides an in-depth assessment of Zimbabwe’s legal environment for civic freedoms, including the barriers to the exercise of the freedoms of association (formation, operations, resources), expression, and peaceful assembly. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

## **ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS**

CSOs in Zimbabwe primarily operate under three legal forms: private voluntary organizations (PVOs), trusts, and membership-based common law entities known as *universitas*.

While there is no publicly available central registry of CSOs, unconfirmed statements by government officials put the number of CSOs operating in the country at over 20,000.

### **Private Voluntary Organizations**

Private voluntary organizations (PVOs) are governed by the Private Voluntary Organizations Act. Section 2 of the Act defines a PVO as a “legal person, legal arrangement, body or association of persons, corporate or unincorporate, or any institution” with one or more of the following objectives:

- a. Provision of material, mental, physical, or social needs;
- b. Charitable support for individuals or families in distress;
- c. Prevention of social distress or destitution;
- d. Activities aimed at improving living standards;

- e. Provision of funds for legal aid;
- f. Prevention of cruelty to animals or promotion of animal welfare;
- g. Other prescribed objectives;
- h. Collection of contributions for any of the above purposes.

## **Trusts**

Trusts are regulated by the Deeds Registries Act, which authorizes the Registrar of Deeds to register notarial deeds in donation or in trust. Trusts often pursue broad and flexible objectives that benefit an identifiable constituency. Under a 2025 amendment to the PVO Act, a trust that pursues one of the objects of a PVO as set out in the Act must register as a PVO unless it qualifies for a specific exemption.

## **Universitas**

The universitas form is based in common law and refers to an entity comprised of members, governed by a constitution, and operating exclusively for the benefit of its members. Although not codified in legislation, this form has been recognized by the Zimbabwean Supreme Court in the case of *Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights & Anor v. The President of the Republic of Zimbabwe & Anor*. Under the 2025 amendment to the PVO Act, an entity organized as an *universitas* that pursues one of the objects of a PVO and does not qualify for an exemption must register under the PVO Act as a PVO.

## **PUBLIC BENEFIT STATUS**

Zimbabwean law does not provide for a special “public benefit” or tax-exempt” status that applies only to certain CSOs based on their objectives. However, under the Income Tax Law, all CSOs are generally exempt from taxation on donations, grants, and membership dues.

## **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Few laws actively enable public participation in governance and policymaking in Zimbabwe.

The Freedom of Information Act, [passed](#) on July 2, 2020, aims to give effect to the constitutional right to access information enshrined in Section 62 of the Constitution. This law replaced the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (Chapter 10:27) (AIPPA).

The Constitution of Zimbabwe includes progressive provisions promoting women’s participation in public life. Section 17 mandates the State to ensure equal participation of men and women in all government institutions and to adopt affirmative measures to address historic gender imbalances. Article 124(1)(b) reserves 60 seats in the House of Assembly for women and Section 120(a) guarantees 60 seats in the Senate for women, six seats per province.

In contrast, LGBTQ+ individuals lack legal protections. Although the administration of President Emmerson Mnangagwa—in power since 2017—has adopted less harsh and discriminatory rhetoric towards sexual minorities than that of former President Robert Mugabe, discriminatory laws remain in force. Section 73 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act still criminalizes consensual same-sex conduct between men, punishable by up to one year in prison, a fine, or both.

Additionally, laws are sometimes used to target gender-nonconforming individuals. For instance, in 2014, a transgender woman, Ricky Nathanson, was arrested and charged under Section 46 (“criminal nuisance”) for allegedly “masquerading as a woman.” Although the case was dismissed, in 2019 the High Court awarded her \$400,000 in damages for unlawful detention and arrest, while affirming that transgender individuals are entitled to the same constitutional rights as all other citizens.

CSOs undertake activities to increase public awareness of constitutional and legal rights to public

participation. Groups such as Veritas disseminate information on legal reforms and public policies that affect public participation, while organizations like the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights issue online alerts on the arrest or harassment of human rights defenders and others exercising their fundamental rights to free speech and association.

## **BARRIERS TO FORMATION**

The PVO Act imposes significant legal barriers relating to the formation and registration of CSOs in Zimbabwe.

### **Mandatory Registration**

The PVO Act makes registration mandatory for any organization seeking to engage in activities covered by Section 2 of the Act. Under Sections 6(2) and (3), no PVO may begin or continue its operations—or solicit financial support or public contributions—without being registered for the specific objectives it intends to pursue.

Further restrictions are set out in Sections 6(4) through 6(11). The penalties for collecting funds for an unregistered organization (Section 6(3)) include up to one year imprisonment, a fine not exceeding level twelve (approximately USD 2000), or both. The penalties for managing or controlling an unregistered organization (Section 6(4)) are imprisonment not exceeding two years, a fine not exceeding level twelve (approximately USD 2000), or both.

### **Registration Procedures**

Registration under the PVO Act is burdensome. After filing an application, the applicant must, at its own expense, publish a notice in a local paper inviting objections. Any objections must be submitted to the Registrar of PVOs within 21 days of the date of publication. If it appears to the Registrar that the PVO has a beneficial owner or controller, the Registrar may require the PVO to submit a sworn affidavit disclosing the beneficial owner's or controller's name and the extent of his or her beneficial ownership or control of the PVO.

After review, the Registrar of PVOs may provisionally accept or reject a registration application. The Registrar will then pass on the application to the Private Voluntary Organizations Board (PVOB), which may accept or reject an application provisionally approved by the Registrar.

### **Time Period for Government Review**

The PVO Act does not specify a time frame within which the government must review and decide on registration applications.

### **Grounds for Denial**

The legal grounds for denying registration are vague and subject to abuse. The Registrar may deny registration if the organization *appears* not to be operating to further its registered objectives or if the constitution or management of the organization fail to comply with the PVO Act (emphasis added). Where the Registrar of PVOs rejects a PVO's application to register, the PVO may, within 14 days of receiving notice of the rejection, appeal to the Minister of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare.

Since the commencement of the 2025 amendment to the PVO Act, trusts and PVOs seeking to register under the PVO Act have reportedly encountered significant delays and challenges, which civil society observers have attributed to a lack of familiarity with the new procedures among registration authorities.

### **Re-registration Procedure**

A PVO must apply to amend its registration particulars if there has been a "material change" to those particulars. A "material change" is defined as a change to:

- Organizational constitution regarding disposal of assets;
- Objects;
- Territorial scope; and
- Beneficial owner or controller.

The PVO must submit its amendment application within one month of the material change. If the Registrar determines that the material change will not adversely impact the defense, public safety, public order, public morality, public health, or general public interest of Zimbabwe, the Registrar may update the relevant entry in the Register of PVOs and notify the applicant. If the application is rejected, the Registrar may require the applicant to reverse the material change or to re-register under the ordinary registration procedure.

### **Foreign Organizations**

Foreign organizations seeking to operate in Zimbabwe—especially those engaged in humanitarian or development work within the scope of the PVO Act—are also required to register as PVOs. Most international organizations operate as PVOs and must secure a memorandum of understanding or cooperation with the government at both national and local levels.

Section 3 of General Notice 99/2007 requires international organizations to submit applications to the Registrar of PVOs. The applications must include curriculum vitae and either an Interpol or local police clearance certificate for the country representative, among other requirements.

## **BARRIERS TO OPERATIONS**

CSOs in Zimbabwe face numerous legal and practical obstacles to their operations under the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Act and related practices. These barriers are particularly pronounced in the context of political activity or perceived dissent.

### **Interference in Internal Governance**

The PVO Act grants the Minister of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare extensive powers to interfere in the internal governance of PVOs. Under Section 21, the Minister may apply to the High Court to appoint one or more trustees to run the affairs of the organization for up to 60 days, and to suspend any or all members of a PVO's Executive Committee if the organization is deemed to have failed to comply with its objectives or constitution, engaged in maladministration or illegal activities, or if it is considered "necessary or desirable to do so in the public interest." While the High Court is deciding on the application to appoint trustees, the Minister may appoint one or more provisional trustees who will have the same powers as the Executive Committee. Any decision that the provisional trustees make will not be invalidated if the High Court ultimately refuses to appoint the Minister's suggested trustees.

Suspensions are announced by notice in the government gazette and may be amended or revoked at the Minister's discretion. If the suspension is not lifted within 30 days, the PVO must call new elections in accordance with its constitution (Section 21).

### **Restrictions on Activities**

The 2025 amendment to the PVO Act introduced new penalties for a range of activities that are considered support to a political party, including:

- Supporting or opposing any political party or candidate at the presidential, parliamentary, or local level;

- Contributing funds to a political party or candidate; or
- Denying a beneficiary assistance based on political affiliation.

The 2025 amendment also requires a PVO to comply with a list of broad principles which includes, among others, the obligations to be nonpartisan, sensitive to local cultural values and norms, and to economically and socially benefit the community where it operates.

## **Inspections**

The Registrar of PVOs is designated as the supervisory authority for monitoring the governance and development impact of PVOs (Section 7 of GN 99/2007). Monitoring entails site visits by social service officers and review of annual narrative and financial audit reports.

The Minister also has the authority to appoint inspectors to examine the financial and operational records any PVO (Section 20). Upon receiving a notice of inspection, the PVO must provide full access to the relevant documents, which may be retained for a “reasonable period.” Inspectors are empowered to investigate any aspect of the organization’s activities and report their findings to the Registrar.

Although many PVOs have not fully complied with inspection requirements, enforcement has historically been selective, targeting organizations deemed politically sensitive rather than those in technical breach of the law.

## **Severe Sanctions**

The PVO Act establishes harsh penalties for non-compliance with the Act. Offenses include raising funds without registration; serving as an office bearer after being convicted of a dishonesty-related crime with a sentence of more than five years; and failing to provide information upon official request. Sanctions include fines, imprisonment, cancellation of registration, and suspension or dismissal of board members.

## **Government Harassment**

CSOs in Zimbabwe frequently experience harassment and disruption, particularly around elections or during humanitarian crises. State interference may take the form of repeated demands for information, arbitrary suspensions, or accusations of political activity. Examples include:

- In March 2021, the Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare threatened to de-register dormant CSOs and those operating outside of their mandates.
- In April 2021, state authorities ordered Connect, a family therapy and counseling training organization, to cease operations in Manicaland province.
- Also in April 2021, *The Herald* newspaper accused the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum of acting like a political party and spreading misinformation about human rights abuses in Zimbabwe to foreign diplomats in exchange for funding.
- Since mid-2021, Provincial Development Coordinators have required CSOs to submit annual work plans to continue operating. This practice was challenged in court, and in September 2021, the High Court barred Provincial Development Coordinators from interfering with CSO operations. However, violations have continued. For example, in February 2022, more than 30 CSOs were banned in Makoni district for failing to register with the province. They were required to pay \$100 to renew or \$200 for new registrations, despite the absence of a clear legal mandate.
- In July 2021, President Mnangagwa threatened to de-register CSOs that were allegedly diverging from their mandates. Mnangagwa warned that CSOs are “dwelling into political matters that amount to interference in the internal affairs of our sovereign mother country.”

## **GONGOs**

Since 2000, the government has increasingly supported the creation of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), including associations of workers, students, doctors, teachers, and other CSOs. GONGOs often present a distorted picture of civic space, undermining the credibility and independence of legitimate CSOs.

### **Arbitrary Requirements and Fees**

Local authorities often impose unauthorized fees on CSOs to secure memorandum of understanding (MoUs), which are increasingly treated as a prerequisite for operations. These fees range from US\$100 to US\$1,000 per year. Although not legally required, this practice is reportedly endorsed by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development.

### **Barriers to International Contact**

In 2023, the government enacted the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act 2023, commonly called “the Patriotic Act,” which creates a new crime of “willfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe.” Zimbabwe’s High Court in June 2025 struck down part of the Act but left in place a provision which criminalizes participation in a meeting to plan armed intervention or “subversion.” Civil society observers have argued that this provision is vague, overbroad, and can be used to impose draconian penalties for meeting with foreign governments.

While there are no legal restrictions on internet access, the Interception of Communications Act grants the government the authority to monitor digital communications, and authorities have also targeted perceived critics under the 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act.

## **BARRIERS TO RESOURCES**

Under the PVO Act, an organization must be registered before it can seek or receive funds. The Act also requires a PVO to refuse donations from “illegitimate or illegal sources,” to report such donations, and to use formal channels to transmit its funds.

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission Act (ZEC Act) prohibits the receipt of foreign funding for the purpose of voter education, unless the funds are channeled through the Commission itself.

Beyond these specific restrictions, several practical constraints undermine access to resources in practice.

Political rhetoric has been used to delegitimize CSOs that receive foreign funding. The government has repeatedly accused foreign-funded PVOs of serving as instruments of Western influence and undermining national sovereignty. This narrative contributes to a hostile environment for donor-supported organizations, particularly those engaged in governance, human rights, or accountability work.

There have been cases of government misappropriation of donor funds allocated to CSOs. For instance, funds from the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis, held at the Reserve Bank and designated for civil society, were used for governmental purposes.

The PVO Act is silent on the issue of investment and the generation of income through economic activity. In practice, however, CSOs do engage in limited revenue-generating activities, such as selling publications or offering consultancy services.

## **BARRIERS TO EXPRESSION**

The Constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the media. In practice, however, these rights are significantly curtailed by subordinate laws and selective enforcement, particularly in cases involving criticism of government policies or advocacy for politically sensitive causes.

Several provisions of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act hinder free expression:

- Section 22A states that anyone found guilty of “damaging the sovereignty and national interest” will be subjected to the same punishment as for treason, which can include the death penalty.
- Section 33 criminalizes insulting the office or person of the President.
- Section 31 makes it a crime to communicate falsehoods that are prejudicial to the state, which can be interpreted broadly.
- Section 177 of the Criminal Law Act criminalizes uttering words that are likely to undermine policing authority.

There are numerous examples of the government restricting speech and advocacy:

- In January 2019, the government shut down the internet during protests called by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union (ZCTU) after increases in fuel prices were announced. The shutdown aimed to hinder the spread of information via social media about the protests. In response to a constitutional challenge, the High Court ruled that the shutdown was illegal, resulting in the resumption of full internet services by providers.
- In January 2021, journalist Hopewell Chin’ono and two opposition politicians were arrested for social media posts about police brutality. The three were charged with “publishing a false statement prejudicial to the state.”
- In March 2022, Clapton Redi was charged with insulting the president in a conversation overheard by a third party.
- Musicians have also been targeted by the government. In early 2023, popular dancehall musician, Winky D, was warned about his lyrics—which spoke to poor service delivery, corruption, and the difficult situation of youth—by a group affiliated with the ruling party called the Economic Empowerment Group.

## **BARRIERS TO ASSEMBLY**

Sections 58 and 59 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe guarantee the rights to freedom of assembly and association and the right to demonstrate and present petitions, provided such activities are conducted peacefully. However, these rights are frequently undermined by subordinate laws and inconsistent enforcement practices.

Key laws regulating assemblies include:

- The Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA), enacted in 2019 to replace the 2002 Public Order and Security Act (POSA), though it largely retained the same restrictions);
- Section 37 of Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, which criminalizes public gatherings that breach or are likely to breach the peace; and
- The Protected Areas and Places Act, which designates certain areas as off-limits for assemblies.

In practice, the government has restricted the right to assemble and participate in public gatherings. Ahead of the Southern African Development Community Summit in August 2024, the authorities arrested numerous opposition figures, activists, and members of civil society, some of whom reportedly suffered

torture and ill treatment while in custody.

### **Advance Notification**

MOPA requires written notification to the police for any public gathering involving more than 15 people in a public place. Notice must be given five days in advance, or seven days for a demonstration or procession. During election periods, the notice period is reduced to three days. Although the law obliges the authorities to respond, it does not specify a timeframe for doing so.

In practice, the police often misinterpret these provisions as giving them the right to either approve or deny the holding of gatherings. This leads to the disruption of gatherings—even private meetings—by opposition groups and civil society activists that fail to “notify” the police.

### **Place Restrictions**

Section 10 of MOPA prohibits assemblies within 20 meters of Parliament, 100 meters of the Supreme Court, and 100 meters from areas protected under the Protected Areas and Places Act.

### **Criminal Penalties**

Section 37(1)(b) of the Criminal Code provides that any person participating in a public gathering who acts in an “obscene, threatening or abusive” manner or otherwise breaches the peace may face fines or up to five years in prison.

### **Lack of Police Protection and Excessive Police Force**

In practice, police protection is extended almost exclusively to gatherings affiliated with the ruling ZANU PF party. Assemblies by opposition parties or civil society groups are often denied protection or met with excessive force. Examples include:

- After harmonized elections were held on July 30, 2018, peaceful demonstrations were organized to protest the inordinate delays in releasing the election results. On August 1, 2018, the military opened fire on protesters, killing six civilians.
- In January 2019, protests against fuel price hikes led by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) were violently suppressed by the military, leading to multiple casualties. CSO activists, political opposition leaders, and other critics of the government were abducted, arbitrarily arrested, and tortured after the protests.
- In February 2022, police used tear gas and water cannons to violently disperse a political rally held by the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) in Gokwe. The next day, CCC supporters were attacked by suspected ZANU PF supporters during a rally in Kwekwe, resulting in one death and seventeen injuries.
- In September 2022, police violently dispersed and arrested students at the University of Zimbabwe, who were peacefully protesting a hike in university tuition.
- In January 2023, police arrested 25 CCC members and assaulted their lawyer who were meeting in a private residence. They were charged with gathering with the intent to cause violence.

## **Additional Resources**

This section contains links to external reports and news reports relevant to civic freedoms. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

## GLOBAL INDEX RANKINGS

Ranking Body	Rank	Ranking Scale (best - worst possible)
<a href="#">UN Human Development Index</a>	153 (2023)	1 - 193
<a href="#">Transparency International</a>	157 (2025)	1 - 182
<a href="#">Fund for Peace Fragile States Index</a>	18 (2024)	179 - 1
<a href="#">World Justice Project Rule of Law Index</a>	123 (2024)	1 - 142
<a href="#">Freedom House: Freedom in the World</a>	Status: Not Free Political Rights: 9 Civil Liberties: 17 (2025)	Free/Partly Free/Not Free 40 - 0 60 - 0

## REPORTS

UN Universal Periodic Review Reports	<a href="#">Zimbabwe UPR page</a>
UN Human Rights Reports	<a href="#">Zimbabwe</a>
U.S. State Department	<a href="#">2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Zimbabwe</a>
Fund for Peace Fragile States Index Reports	<a href="#">Zimbabwe</a>
IMF Country Reports	<a href="#">Zimbabwe and the IMF</a>
International Commission of Jurists	<a href="#">ICJ: Zimbabwe</a>
Human Rights Watch	<a href="#">World Report (2025)</a>
International Center for Not-for-Profit Law Online Library	<a href="#">Zimbabwe</a>

## historical notes

The operations of CSOs in Zimbabwe have been shaped by restrictive legislation since the colonial era. The Welfare Organizations Act of 1967, enacted under colonial rule, was designed to control organizations perceived to support the liberation movement or publicize human rights abuses in then-Rhodesia. During this period, most CSOs focused on humanitarian work and operated under the auspices of churches or as educational and training institutions. Few ventured into political rights advocacy, as doing so risked severe reprisals from the colonial government. In parallel, the Unlawful Organizations Act was used to ban African political and resistance movements.

After independence in 1980, the socio-political environment deteriorated in the late 1990s, prompting a shift in civil society priorities toward democracy, governance, and human rights. Indeed, most of Zimbabwe's opposition was born and bred in civil society.

As CSOs became more vocal in demanding reforms, the state intensified its legislative and administrative harassment, viewing them as political adversaries. Under President Mugabe's rule, ZANU PF often

asserted that CSOs, churches, and non-politicians had no role in national politics.

The formation of the Inclusive Government (IG) in February 2009 raised hopes for greater political openness. Some opposition representatives in the IG leaned on CSOs for technical expertise and staffing to advance reform efforts. Despite promises of legislative reform, little progress was made. Human rights conditions also remained poor, despite the secondment of a few CSO representatives to top government offices and new institutions, such as the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and the Zimbabwe Media Commission. During the final ten months of the IG (October 2012 – July 2013), CSOs and their staff members were increasingly targeted, with several CSO directors charged with operating “illegally,” which essentially meant not being registered.

Following ZANU PF’s landslide victory in the 2013 elections, CSOs continued to prioritize the harmonization of laws with the new Constitution. However, the ruling party’s parliamentary dominance stymied efforts to reform restrictive laws governing association, assembly, and expression. At the same time, CSO leaders continued to face legal threats and criminal charges.

Between 2013 and 2017, ZANU PF was riven by internal struggles. In 2017, Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa was dismissed and fled the country, only to return after a military intervention in November 2017, which ousted President Mugabe and brought Mnangagwa to power.

The change of leadership has not improved conditions for CSOs. Following harmonized elections on July 30, 2018, inordinate delays in releasing the election results led to peaceful protests being organized. On August 1, 2018, the military opened fire on protesters, killing six civilians. In response, the government established the Mothlanthe Commission of Inquiry, chaired by former South African President Kgalema Mothlanthe. The Commission’s December 2018 report recommended compensating victims, prosecuting responsible security personnel, and promoting political dialogue. However, none of these recommendations were adopted in subsequent years, despite continued advocacy from CSOs. On January 26, 2021, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, representing victim of the August 1 violence, served notices of its intention to sue top officials in the Ministry of Defense, Police, and other security bodies.

On March 26, 2022, parliamentary by-elections were held. The Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC)—a newly formed opposition party—won two-thirds of the contested seats, despite widespread political violence and repression. CSOs were accused of supporting the opposition, further intensifying government hostility and harassment toward civil society.

## **NEWS**

### **[Detrimental Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill enacted](#)** (June 2025)

After several years of tireless opposition from civil society to prevent from its adoption, the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill (PVO Bill) was enacted in April 2025. This new law represents an unprecedented attack on civic space in Zimbabwe and will have a detrimental impact on fundamental freedoms. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, urge the authorities in Zimbabwe to repeal this law and to guarantee in all circumstances freedom of association and expression in the country.

### **[Zimbabwe moves to modernize broadcasting laws](#)** (February 2025)

The Broadcasting Services Amendment Bill has advanced to its second reading in the National Assembly, introducing significant reforms to modernize the sector, Herald Online has reported. According to the report, the Information, Publicity, and Broadcasting Services Minister Dr. Jenfan Muswere highlighted key updates, including governance adjustments, revised licensing structures, and technological enhancements. The proposed amendments potentially aim to align national broadcasting regulations with constitutional requirements and global best practices.

### **[Senate approves controversial PVO Amendment Bill](#)** (February 2025)

The controversial Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill has moved a step closer to becoming law after passing through the Senate. It now awaits President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s

signature to take effect. Rights activists and opposition groups argue that once signed into law, the PVO Bill will severely restrict the ability of government critics, civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to operate freely in Zimbabwe. The PVO Bill was first passed by the Senate in February 2023, but President Mnangagwa referred it back to Parliament for reconsideration.

### [The PVO Bill is a threat to Zimbabwe's democracy](#) (October 2024)

The recent passing of the Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) Bill by the Zimbabwe Senate has sparked widespread concern among civil society organizations and democracy advocates. The bill, which awaits President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa's signature to become law, gives the government unprecedented control over the management, finances, and operations of NGOs. This move is touted as a measure to prevent NGOs from straying from their mandates and interfering in Zimbabwe's political landscape.

### [Zimbabwe police arrest interim opposition party leader for holding unauthorized political gathering](#) (June 2024)

Zimbabwean police arrested the interim opposition party leader Jameson Timba and 70 other youths for disorderly conduct during a private meeting at Timba's residence, according to their lawyer Agency Gumbo. "Timba and the youths were severely beaten and injured," said Gumbo. In the statement, Gumbo added that Timba is presently detained at Avondale police station with 20 others and the remaining are held in Harare central police station. Gumbo also demanded the immediate release of the detainees and contended that the arrests violated human rights.

### [Zimbabwe opposition and rights groups bemoan 'Patriotic Bill'](#) (June 2023)

Opposition and rights groups in Zimbabwe are bemoaning the passing of a so-called "Patriotic Bill" by the lower house of parliament, which they say curtails several fundamental freedoms enshrined in the country's Constitution. Lawyers say if President Emmerson Mnangagwa signs the Criminal Law Code Amendment Bill into law, it will not stand in court because it is flagrantly unconstitutional. Among other things, the bill would authorize penalties against people found "willfully damaging the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe."

### [CCC members in court for bail hearing](#) (January 2023)

Twenty-five members of the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party are expected back in court for continuation of their bail application on allegations of gathering at the house of Budiriro Member of Parliament Costa Machingauta with intent to cause public violence. They are charged with gathering with intent to commit public violence.

### [More details emerge in Murehwa assault](#) (January 2023)

An official purporting to be a Zanu PF functionary says the party has declared war on the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) as the ruling party and CCC "trade blows." In a leaked audio posted on one of the ruling party's many WhatsApp groups, the Zanu PF official is heard vociferously defending the Murehwa violence that took place in Chirowa Village, Murewa North.

### [Government passes bill to squeeze democratic space](#) (January 2023)

The Zimbabwean government led by President Emmerson Mnangagwa has passed the Patriotic Bill in a bid to suppress dissent ahead of the 2023 plebiscite. The new law was modeled after the Logan Act of the United States. The Logan Act forbids negotiations between unauthorized American people and foreign governments that are involved in a conflict with the United States.

### [Activists arrested on Unity Day](#) (December 2022)

The arrest of the three activists in Bulawayo on Thursday after they attended a Unity Day memorial to remember the victims of the Gukurahundi massacres has been widely condemned by CSOs who called for their immediate release. Thamsanqa Ncube, Samkeliso Tshuma and Melusi Nyathi were charged with contravening Section 37 (1)(a) (ii) of the criminal act: "Participating in gathering with intent to promote public violence, breaches of the peace or bigotry."

### [30 people displaced as Zanu PF violence mounts in Gutu District](#) (November 2022)

Political violence rocking Gutu District and perpetrated by Zanu PF youth ahead of the 2023 general

elections is creating a humanitarian crisis by the day with more than 30 families running away from home and workplaces.... The ringleader in the attack has been identified as Josephat Sarukore, who is the Zanu PF District chair.

### [Students protest over 'irrational, unlawful' fees hike](#) (September 2022)

University of Zimbabwe (UZ) students led by Allan Chipoyi, president of the Students Representative Council (SRC) on Monday peacefully protested an astronomical increase in fees. The protest ended after the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) deployed its Support Unit. Scores of students were arrested and detained at Avondale Police Station.

### [Hand grenade explodes near venue of Nelson Chamisa rally](#) (September 2022)

A hand grenade exploded a few metres away from Gadzema Stadium in Chinhoyi, the venue of Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) leader Nelson Chamisa's rally, in what the opposition says was an attempt by Zanu PF to intimidate its supporters.

### [Ziyambi tricked CSOs on PVO Bill](#) (August 2022)

Civil society members claim that Justice minister Ziyambi Ziyambi tricked them into believing that their submissions to the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVOs) Amendment Bill would be considered in Parliament. However, they now feel that their views were ignored. The Bill reportedly gives too much power to Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare minister to register and de-register NGOs.

## **ARCHIVED NEWS**

[PVO Amendment Bill will hit hard](#) (March 2022)

[The balancing act on the PVO Bill](#) (March 2022)

[Go to war-torn Ukraine, govt tells NGOs](#) (March 2022)

[Suspected ZANU PF Activists Torch CCC Bindura Councillor's Homestead](#) (March 2022)

[Makomborero Haruzivishe finally released on bail after 9 months in jail](#) (January 2022)

[Court reserves judgment in NGOs case](#) (August 2021)

[Govt onslaught on NGOs starts](#) (July 2021)

[NGO warned against meddling in politics](#) (July 2021)

[Zimbabwean authorities order NGO to close its doors](#) (May 2021)

[Mnangagwa threatens to crack whip on NGOs](#) (October 2020)

[Cabinet Approves Sanctions Law](#) (October 2020)

[Cyber Security Bill: New Monster in the Room](#) (July 2020)

[Don't Beat Up Civilians: Court](#) (April 2020)

[Zimbabwe arrests Mnangagwa critic over Facebook post](#) (August 2018)

[Zimbabwean Civil Society Remain Cautious Over Upcoming Elections](#) (June 2018)

[Man arrested for 'insulting' Zimbabwean flag by not standing still](#) (March 2017)

[Government Proposes Tighter Controls over Social Media](#) (August 2016)

[Statement On the Disappearance of Civil Society Activist Itai Dzamara](#) (March 2016)

[Human rights lawyers concerned about Dzamara's continued disappearance](#) (March 2015)

[Group Remembers Victims of Chiadzwa Crackdown](#) (November 2014)

[Zimbabwe court says Robert Mugabe 'insult law' invalid](#) (October 2013)

[Demonstrators Assaulted during International Day of Peace Event](#) (September 2013)

[Uncomfortable Questions For Zimbabwe Civil Society](#) (September 2013)

[Zimbabwe elections 'must be held by 31 July'](#) (June 2013)

[Zimbabwe 'bars' EU and US from observing polls](#) (March 2013)

[Zimbabwe must respect fundamental freedoms in run-up to constitutional referendum](#) (February 2013)

[Masvingo governor threatens NGOs](#) (February 2013)

[Civil society 'under siege' as police raid youth offices in Bulawayo](#) (February 2013)

[UN condemns attacks on human rights defenders ahead of elections](#) (January 2013)

[Zimbabwe targets human rights activists](#) (November 2012)

[Civil society organizations meet to discuss draft constitution](#) (October 2012)

[EU: Zimbabwe sanctions stay until elections](#) (July 2012)

[NGO'S crackdown continues as Chikomo's trial commences](#) (July 2012)

[Reports say EU planning Zimbabwe sanctions lift](#) (July 2012)

[Scores of protestors arbitrarily detained in Bulawayo](#) (July 2012)

[Violations persist as UN Chief visits](#) (May 2012)

[Civil society groups present conflicting reports](#) (May 2012)

[U.N. Rights Commissioner due in Zimbabwe to assess situation](#) (May 2012)

[Zimbabwe Justice Minister Under Fire For Rejecting Reform Amendments](#) (October 2011)

[West Using NGOs to Fan Instability, Says Minister](#) (October 2011)

[Freedom House Condemns Crackdown on Peaceful WOZA Protest in Zimbabwe](#) (September 2011)

[Zimbabwe's CSO's launch advocacy charter at UN human rights council](#) (September 2011)

[Chiefs want NGOs back](#) (July 2011)

[Constitution back on track as parties compromise](#) (May 2011)

[Zimbabwe: The Road to Reform or Another Dead End?](#) (April 2011)

[Zimbabwe Human Rights Activist Charged With Failure to Register Group](#) (April 2011)

[Civic groups demand end to persecution of rights defenders](#) (April 2011)

[Free Activists Charged for Viewing Mideast Video](#) (February 2011)

[Government to Summon NGOs](#) (July 2010)

[EU demands 'concrete progress' on Zimbabwe rights](#) (July 2010)

[Outreach Process Monitors Face More Arrests and Threats](#) (July 2010)

[VP Mujuru Warns NGOs](#) (May 2010)

[EU imposes another year of sanctions](#) (February 2010)

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<https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/zimbabwe>