

The State of the World's Human Rights; Zimbabwe 2024

A bill that threatened the existence and work of civil society organizations remained before parliament. There was an increase in violations of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, particularly before the Southern African Development Community summit when the use of arbitrary arrests and detentions escalated. The economy continued to deteriorate in the context of an El Niño-induced drought, and 7.6 million people faced food insecurity. Authorities facilitated treatment for women with obstetric fistula. Legislation outlawing the practice of early and child marriage was enacted. A bill to abolish the death penalty was passed into law.

Background

The economic crisis deepened. In September the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe devalued the ZiG (Zimbabwe Gold) – the country's latest currency – by 43%. The devaluation weakened the official exchange rate from ZiG 13.9 to ZiG 24.4 to the US dollar.

Freedom of expression, association and assembly

By October, the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill 2024 had passed through the National Assembly and the Senate. However, in November it was returned to the Senate for reconsideration after it was noted that some amendments made by the National Assembly during the committee stage process had not been incorporated.

The government said the PVO Bill aimed to “curb money-laundering and [the] financing of terrorism” and ensure that NGOs “do not undertake political lobbying.” The lapse in progress of the original PVO Amendment Bill 2021 in August 2023, following parliament’s dissolution ahead of elections, raised hopes that President Emmerson Mnangagwa had duly considered submissions from civil society organizations raising concerns that the bill fell short of international human rights standards and provisions in the Constitution. However, the new Bill maintained provisions that could adversely affect civic space and threaten the very existence and operations of civil society organizations.¹

Authorities continued to use repressive tactics, including via the justice system, to silence dissent and criminalize opposition members.

In January, Job Sikhala, a former leader of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) opposition party, was released from prison after being given a two-year suspended sentence and fine for “incitement to violence”. He had spent 595 days in pre-trial detention. In February he was given a nine-month suspended sentence and fined on charges of “publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state” – offences that the Constitutional Court declared void in 2014. The charges related to a video circulated on Facebook in which it was claimed that a police officer killed a baby. In July the High Court of Zimbabwe acquitted him of the charges.² Former CCC lawmaker Fadzayi Mahere, who had been convicted in 2023 for “communicating falsehoods” after posting the video on X (formerly Twitter) was acquitted in February 2024 by the High Court following appeal.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

There was an increase in the use of arbitrary detention against and prosecution of human rights defenders, political opposition members and supporters, activists, journalists and others expressing dissenting views or exercising their right to peaceful assembly.

In particular, the government intensified its crackdown against opposition and civil society members ahead of the Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Southern African Development Community held on 17 August in the capital, Harare. Police arrested more than 160 people including elected officials, opposition members, union leaders, students and journalists.³

On 16 June, police raided the home of CCC party leader Jameson Timba during a private gathering, arresting 78 people. They were held in custody for more than 48 hours before being brought to court, in violation of Zimbabwean law, and charged with “gathering with intent to promote public violence and disorderly conduct”. On 4 September, 12 of those arrested were acquitted after the court found that they were not involved in the gathering. On 27 November, after 160 days in detention, Jameson Timba and 34 of his co-accused were convicted and given suspended prison sentences.

On 24 June, 44 Zimbabwe National Students Union members were arrested in Harare and charged with “disorderly conduct” before being released. On 29 June, members of the National Democratic Working Group, a social justice movement, were arrested at a private residence in Harare during a meeting to raise funds for impoverished families, a gathering deemed by authorities to be “unsanctioned”.

On 31 July, activists including Namatai Kwekweza, Robson Chere, Samuel Gwezi and Vusumuzi Moyo were forcibly removed from a plane and arrested by state agents. The four were held for eight hours without access to their lawyer and denied bail. Robson Chere was tortured in detention, suffering extensive physical injuries.

On 1 August, 13 activists, including former legislator John Houghton, the former mayor of Kariba, George Masendu, and activist Farai Mageva, were arrested in Kariba for staging an “unsanctioned protest” demanding the release of opposition leader Jameson Timba and 77 other activists. They were detained at Kariba police headquarters before being released on bail on 2 September. On 2 August, Kelvin Gonde and opposition leader Jacob Ngarivhume were arrested and charged with participating in an unlawful gathering and disorderly conduct. On 16 August, police in Gokwe arrested 12 people for allegedly participating in an anti-government demonstration.

Right to information

The Media Institute of Southern Africa Zimbabwe, an independent organization, recorded six violations that undermined press freedom and prevented journalists from fulfilling their constitutional duty to inform the public.

In February the Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution for Midlands province banned Sydney Mubaiwa, bureau chief of the Mirror Midlands newspaper, and Stephen Chadenga, a journalist on NewsDay newspaper, from reporting on government functions in the area. They were attending a meeting organized by the Zimbabwe Gender Commission when they were singled out and barred from attending government events.

In the same month, NewsHawks, an online investigative publication, said it had dropped further reporting on three army generals after it received “subtle threats and direct pressure” from state security agents.

Also in February, journalist Admire Chitsungo was arrested and detained briefly at Kadoma Central Police Station after photographing local police confiscating vendors’ wares in Kadoma.

On 4 June, 16 journalists were barred from covering the signing of the “Integrity Pledge” by the new Reserve Bank Governor, John Mushayavanhu, and his staff at the bank’s offices in Harare.

In August a senior police officer ordered Nunurai Jena, a correspondent for the Studio 7 news station, to leave an inter-district meeting held by the Mashonaland West branch of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front party in the Chinhoyi municipality. The order was given on grounds of his association with Studio 7.

Later the same month, police handcuffed Herald newspaper journalist Charles Muchakagara and tried to confiscate his camera when he photographed a traffic accident in Harare.

Economic and social rights

The El Niño-induced drought and the protracted economic decline adversely affected access to nutrition, health, water and sanitation, education, social protection, shelter, agriculture, energy and infrastructure. According to UNICEF, 7.6 million people (50% of the population) faced food insecurity. In April the government declared the drought to be a national disaster. In May, authorities issued a joint flash appeal, costed at USD 3.9 billion, which included USD 2 billion for immediate response to the drought and the rest for ongoing resilience-building.

The authorities continued to take measures to contain a cholera outbreak that began in 2023. According to the WHO, by 31 July, Zimbabwe had recorded a total of 34,549 cholera cases, with 718 associated deaths, yielding a case fatality rate of 2.1% across 63 districts and 10 provinces. On 30 July the Ministry of Health and Child Care declared the end of the outbreak, after an 18 month-long response, with the last cholera case being reported on 30 June.

The Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Defence, Home Affairs, Security Services and War Veterans’ Affairs undertook public hearings to establish whether and to what extent people in Zimbabwe were affected by statelessness. Noting the effects of statelessness on the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, the committee recommended that the government set aside resources for a quantitative study to determine the numbers of people at risk of statelessness, and that employees of the Civil Registry department be trained to offer quality services to stateless people.

Women’s and girls’ rights

Teenage pregnancy, child abuse, early and child marriage, and early school dropout rates among girls remained prevalent. A local media source reported that at least 16 girls at Monozi Primary School (serving pupils up to 13 years old) in Mbire District failed to sit their Grade Seven examinations due to pregnancy.

Women participating in informal cross-border trade in Zimbabwe continued to face gender-based violence and economic exploitation, impeding their ability to exercise their human rights, including the right to decent work.⁴ They frequently faced physical assault, sexual harassment and intimidation, often perpetrated by state officials, including border authorities.

Notable progress was made in the provision of maternal healthcare through the treatment of obstetric fistula. During the year the government and its partners established three treatment centres providing free care for women living with the condition.

Children’s rights

In September, President Mnangagwa assented to the Criminal Laws Amendment (Protection of Children and Young Persons) Bill 2024, which raised the age of consent from 16 to 18. The act includes provisions to protect young people from sexual abuse and early and child marriage. The law followed a Constitutional Court ruling in 2022 which found that the Criminal Law Code did not adequately protect children aged 16 to 18 from sexual exploitation.

Death penalty

On 31 December, President Mnangagwa signed into law the Death Penalty Abolition Bill. The Act abolished the death penalty for all crimes by prohibiting courts from imposing the punishment, amending the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act to delete references to the death penalty, and repealing sections that set out how the penalty should be imposed and carried out, among other things.⁵ It also includes provisions for the re-sentencing of those under sentence of death at the time of abolition. However, a new provision in the Defence Act introduced by the Death Penalty Abolition Act 2024 allows for the reinstatement of the death penalty if a state of public emergency is declared under section 113 of the Constitution.
