

Freedom on the Net 2024 - Zimbabwe

Key Developments, June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024

Internet freedom declined in Zimbabwe during the coverage period, as the ruling party and state media promoted online narratives to undermine the credibility of election monitoring groups, and the government further restricted the space for online activism through punitive new laws and increased surveillance of civil society groups and journalists. Internet access remained severely hampered by infrastructure constraints, frequent electricity shortages, and rising prices for mobile service.

- After journalists for the online investigative outlet NewsHawks were surveilled and threatened due to their reporting on alleged corruption in the military, the outlet stated in February 2024 that it was halting all follow-up coverage to protect the safety of its staff (see B4 and C7).
- Progovernment disinformation spread widely during the period around Zimbabwe's August 2023 elections. The ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) spread narratives, amplified by state media, that sought to discredit domestic civil society monitors and international observers who reported critically on the conduct of the electoral process (see B5).
- In July 2023, President Emmerson Mnangagwa signed the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Amendment Act, which introduced harsh punishments for anyone found to have willfully injured the country's sovereignty or national interests, further restricting the space for online activism and critical online expression just weeks before the elections (see B8 and C2).
- In February 2024, the High Court overturned the conviction of Fadzayi Mahere, a spokesperson for the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), for publishing false statements in a video on the social media platform X (see C1 and C3).
- After 595 days in pretrial detention, CCC chairperson Job Sikhala was convicted in January 2024 on charges of inciting violence and disseminating false statements through videos circulated on social media. He was released on a suspended sentence, and both convictions were overturned after the end of the coverage period (see C3).
- While arresting dozens of election monitors on election night in August 2023, security forces reportedly demanded individuals' phone passwords before confiscating their devices, raising concerns that the devices could be subject to surveillance without sufficient oversight (see C5).

Political Overview

ZANU-PF has dominated Zimbabwean politics since independence in 1980 by carrying out severe crackdowns on the political opposition, critical media, and all sources of dissent. President Mnangagwa took power in 2017 after the military intervened to remove longtime president Robert Mugabe amid factional divisions within the ruling party. Mnangagwa, who won reelection in August 2023, has largely retained the legal, administrative, and security architecture of the Mugabe era, and has consolidated his authority through repression. Endemic corruption, a vast patronage-based governance system, weak rule of law, and poor protections for workers and land rights remain critical challenges.

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?

1 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because electricity rationing and frequent power outages of up to 20 hours per day significantly disrupted people's access to the internet.

Internet access remains severely limited in Zimbabwe, and the problem is exacerbated by an ongoing economic crisis and inadequate electrical infrastructure. While the government reports favorable statistics on internet penetration, the quality and accessibility of connections are poor in practice, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Internet penetration is lower in most rural and peri-urban areas due to relatively high costs and lack of infrastructure (see A2).

The Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) reported an internet penetration rate of 73.3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2023.¹ By contrast, the latest available statistics from Data Reportal's Digital 2024 report indicated a penetration rate of 32.6 percent of the total population as of January 2024.²

Access to the internet is severely affected by incessant power shortages. Vandalism of infrastructure and drought conditions that have decreased water levels at the Kariba Dam hydroelectric plant have each contributed to frequent power cuts.³ Following a temporary improvement to the electricity supply situation in June 2023,⁴ the crisis grew more acute in November 2023, when Zimbabweans began experiencing power cuts for as long as 20 hours per day.⁵ Electricity infrastructure is also disrupted by severe weather during the rainy season, and 18-hour power cuts returned in March 2024 after a "disturbance" at a major power generation station.⁶ Other reported factors behind the power cuts include obsolete equipment, widespread theft, and financial challenges at the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) that prevent the repair or replacement of equipment.⁷ Power cuts were expected to continue into 2025.

According to data from Ookla, as of April 2024 the median mobile download and upload speeds in Zimbabwe were 44.68 Mbps (megabits per second) and 13.76 Mbps, respectively, while the fixed-line broadband download and upload speeds were 14.04 Mbps and 12.82 Mbps, respectively.⁸ High-speed internet service is unavailable in many parts of the country, and service is frequently unreliable.⁹ Low speeds were one factor driving Zimbabweans to demand that the government grant an operating license to SpaceX's Starlink subsidiary, which offers high-speed, satellite-based internet service.¹⁰ A license was eventually granted in May 2024 (see A4).

The number of mobile-internet base stations continued to increase in 2023. According to POTRAZ, 164 base stations were deployed in the third quarter of the year, following the deployment of 363 base stations in the second quarter.¹¹

In December 2023, the head of the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Postal, and Courier Services urged mobile service providers to urgently address connectivity issues, including slow speeds and limited coverage in rural areas.¹²

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?

0 / 3

Internet access is sharply limited by the country's economic crisis, with users facing rising costs due to inflation. Many poor rural communities and people with low incomes struggle to pay for access to the internet and other telecommunications services.

High inflation, lack of access to credit, reduced consumer spending, and foreign currency shortages have all affected the affordability of internet service.¹³ Incomes in Zimbabwe have failed to keep pace with inflation,¹⁴ making the cost of mobile connections more burdensome for ordinary users.¹⁵

In April 2024, Zimbabwe introduced a new currency called Zimbabwe Gold, backed by the country's gold reserves, in response to soaring inflation.¹⁶ In April 2024, following the currency change, Econet Wireless's cheapest monthly Wi-Fi package of 8 GB cost ZiG 220, equivalent to US\$16, while NetOne's monthly 1.5 GB package was priced at ZiG 138, equivalent to about US\$10.¹⁷

According to Cable, as of September 2023, Zimbabwe had the most expensive mobile data in the world, with an average cost of US\$43.75 per gigabyte.¹⁸ POTRAZ disputed Cable's findings and has stated that the average cost of data in Zimbabwe is US\$3.21 per gigabyte.¹⁹ POTRAZ has also stated that Zimbabwe's mobile data prices are competitive when compared with other countries in Southern Africa;²⁰ the reason data seem expensive is because people have a low level of disposable income, according to POTRAZ's director.²¹

Mobile service providers have continued to increase their voice, data, and text-messaging prices,²² passing on the costs of high ICT taxes to consumers (see A4). In 2023, POTRAZ approved three upward reviews of internet tariffs in February, April, and October.²³ On April 1, 2023, companies increased prices by 50 percent, shortly after another 50 percent increase in February 2023, for an overall 125 percent increase in the price of data.²⁴ Econet Wireless, the country's largest mobile service provider, increased its prices by another 100 percent in October 2023. These moves were attributed to increases in the providers' own costs of doing business as a result of inflation and the broader economic crisis in Zimbabwe.²⁵

The 2022 Inclusive Internet Index reported that 1 GB of prepaid mobile data cost 4.26 percent of monthly gross national income (GNI) per capita in Zimbabwe; for fixed-line broadband, the relative cost was 10.04 percent.²⁶

In February 2023, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee for ICT, Postal, and Courier Services summoned representatives of two mobile service providers as well as the Ministry of ICT, Postal, and Courier Services to provide oral evidence on the performance and costs of internet services in Zimbabwe.²⁷ The committee tasked the sector with addressing three issues that affect consumers: inability to roll over unused mobile data, inability to transfer mobile data to another user, and the high cost of the Econet Wireless data bundle.²⁸ In March of that year, mobile service providers announced plans to allow users to transfer unused data to other users before expiration.²⁹

Although the cost of connectivity is high, Zimbabweans can access some websites for free. Econet partnered with the United Nations Children's Fund in 2020 to provide zero-rated access to health and educational information.³⁰ Subscribers to Econet can also access news online from Pindula News at no charge.³¹

There are significant disparities between urban and rural Zimbabweans' access to the internet. The relocation of base stations to rural areas and the upgrading of second-generation (2G) and third-generation (3G) base stations have continued as part of a broader effort to reduce these disparities. In June 2023, Econet Wireless announced plans to upgrade 500 base stations and extend coverage to 300 new sites by the end of the fiscal year.³² In late 2023, Econet deployed 10 base stations in rural areas.³³

POTRAZ has established programs to provide computers and internet access to schools in rural communities.³⁴ For several years, the authority has been establishing Community Information Centres (CICs) that are meant to improve internet access and digital literacy in marginalized communities.³⁵ As of March 2024, 182 CICs had been commissioned, with 20 more under construction.³⁶ However, usage of CICs is limited by digital literacy challenges in most rural communities, accessibility challenges associated with long travel distances or limited hours of operation, and a lack of devices at CICs that provide Wi-Fi only and do not allow public access to

computer rooms.³⁷ In the past, there were public perceptions that access to CICs would be restricted for those who are critical of ZANU-PF.

The 2022 Inclusive Internet Index reported a 22 percent gap between men’s and women’s access to the internet in Zimbabwe. Gallup’s World Poll results, however, found no statistically significant difference in rates of internet access between men and women in Zimbabwe.³⁸

The high costs of both mobile data and of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, have limited access to the internet for people with disabilities,³⁹ though in a positive step, a tax on assistive technology purchases was removed in February 2024.⁴⁰

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?

5 / 6

The day before the August 2023 elections, some sources reported that internet speeds slowed across four major internet service providers (ISPs)—Econet Wireless, Liquid Telecom, NetOne, and TelOne—raising concerns about internet throttling during the vote.⁴¹ Sources from within Econet reported no abnormal network problems, and the news outlet Techzim attributed the degradation of service to cuts earlier that month along two major subsea cables that serve Southern Africa.⁴²

In April 2024, the satellite-based ISP Starlink received an order from POTRAZ to disable services for customers in Zimbabwe. Although Starlink had not been officially available in the country, Zimbabweans had started purchasing its terminals in neighboring countries as an alternative means of accessing cheaper and more reliable internet connections.⁴³ Several companies had previously been fined in early 2024 for using Starlink without a license or authorization from POTRAZ.⁴⁴ The US-based company’s licensing was later approved in May 2024 (see A4).

Users experienced slowed connectivity on February 20, 2022, the day that the opposition CCC planned to live-stream a rally.⁴⁵ The slowdown prevented users from watching the event. The director general of POTRAZ denied the government’s involvement, instead claiming that the internet was slow because many users were downloading and sending videos at the same time.⁴⁶

Authorities had previously imposed social media blocking and a partial network shutdown on January 15, 2019 (see B1).⁴⁷ Some observers denounced the move as an attempt to cover up security forces’ abuse of citizens during demonstrations over the country’s deteriorating economy (see B8).⁴⁸ Econet said it had received a warrant from the state security minister and the director general of the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) that instructed it to shut down access under the Interception of Communications Act. Econet noted that its executives faced possible imprisonment if they did not comply with the order.⁴⁹

The High Court ruled the government’s actions to be illegal on January 21, 2019, and access was fully restored by January 24.⁵⁰ The court’s ruling against the network shutdown was based on the conclusion that the minister who issued the order did not have the authority to do so,⁵¹ rather than on the plaintiffs’ constitutional argument, prompting some observers to express concern that the decision left room for future network disruptions ordered by an official with the correct legal authority.

Zimbabwe has five international gateways for internet traffic, controlled respectively by state-owned TelOne and Powertel and privately owned Dandemutande, Econet, and Africom. State control over two of the country’s gateways gives the government some ability to unilaterally restrict access to internet and mobile networks.

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?

3 /
6

Zimbabwe had nine licensed internet access providers (IAPs), seven ISPs, and two mobile virtual network operators registered with the Zimbabwe Internet Service Providers Association (ZISPA) as of May 2024.⁵²

As of the fourth quarter of 2023, Econet Wireless had the largest market share for internet and data traffic, with 83.7 percent, followed by NetOne with 15.9 percent.⁵³ The Econet subsidiary Liquid accounted for 82.5 percent of equipped international internet bandwidth capacity, pointing to limited competition within the sector.⁵⁴

Econet Wireless remains the only service provider offering fifth-generation (5G) mobile technology, with 22 base stations deployed as of 2023.⁵⁵

License fees for mobile service providers in Zimbabwe are US\$137 million for a 20-year period, and fees for fixed-line providers are US\$100 million for a 20-year period.⁵⁶ In the past, Econet has claimed that state-owned firms were not forced to pay the full license fee amounts, disadvantaging private companies.⁵⁷

Service providers pay a 25 percent corporate tax to the revenue authority, a 15 percent value-added tax (VAT), a 5 percent health levy, a 3 percent fee for the Universal Services Fund (USF), and a 2 percent levy on electronic transactions, which could deter new players from entering the market.⁵⁸

Mobile service providers and other ISPs have complained of being overtaxed. Taxes have increased the cost of doing business, but have also been passed on to consumers, making internet access more expensive (see A2). In June 2022, POTRAZ launched the Telecommunications Traffic Monitoring System, which has been criticized by mobile service providers as another tax burden, as it introduced a charge of US\$0.06 per minute of international incoming traffic.⁵⁹ In April 2024, ISPs reported that the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority had requested that they withhold an additional nonresident tax on imported bandwidth, whether via satellite or fiber-optic cable.⁶⁰

In April 2024, Starlink filed an application to operate in Zimbabwe,⁶¹ following a public outcry calling for access to the company's satellite-based internet service. In May 2024, the president stated that he had approved the licensing of Starlink to provide services through its sole and exclusive partner IMC Communications Proprietary Limited.⁶² The company announced that it would roll out its services in late 2024, after the end of the coverage period.⁶³

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?

0 /
4

Mobile and fixed-line service providers are regulated by POTRAZ, whose board members are appointed by the president in consultation with the ICT minister.⁶⁴ POTRAZ's functions under the Postal and Telecommunications Act include promoting the interests of consumers, purchasers, and other users with respect to the quality and variety of postal and telecommunications services.⁶⁵

POTRAZ is expected to operate independently, but in practice its independence has been questioned over the years, as it has become increasingly subordinated to state security agencies since the appointment of the current director general. Under the Postal and Telecommunications Act, the ICT minister may also give policy direction and instruct the POTRAZ board to reverse, suspend, or rescind its decisions or actions, thus interfering with its independence.⁶⁶

In May 2024, the president announced that he had approved the licensing of Starlink by POTRAZ, allowing the company to operate through its sole and exclusive partner, IMC Communications (see

A4).⁶⁷ IMC Communications is linked to Wicknell Chivayo, a businessman who has boasted of his close ties to the presidency.⁶⁸ IMC's selection raised concerns about executive interference in POTRAZ's functions, as well as corruption in the awarding of government tenders.

In December 2021, the ICT minister dismissed three POTRAZ board members for allegedly defying directives to develop strategic plans to use the USF, demonstrating the ministry's involvement in POTRAZ's leadership and operations.⁶⁹

POTRAZ receives levies and taxes of up to 3.5 percent from industry players (see A4).⁷⁰ In the past, some stakeholders have accused the authority of neglecting its mandate by promoting the interests of the private sector at the expense of consumers.⁷¹ In March 2024, the ICT minister directed POTRAZ to protect consumers from being exploited through high data costs,⁷² though in the following month, POTRAZ announced its intention to review tariffs again in order to maintain the country's ICT infrastructure and the long-term viability of the sector.⁷³

POTRAZ was largely seen as having supported and enabled the government's order to restrict connectivity in January 2019. The authority was named as one of the defendants in the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) lawsuit that eventually ended the network shutdown (see A3).⁷⁴

Gift Machengete, a former intelligence official, has served as the director general of POTRAZ since 2016. Observers have stated that his appointment was an indication of the government's plans to monitor and restrict online activities.⁷⁵ IAPs and ISPs are also subject to security screenings by the military, according to local sources.

In January 2023, the Consumer Protection Commission, established through the 2019 Consumer Protection Act, became operational.⁷⁶ The commission has demonstrated an intention to promote consumer rights and responsibilities in the postal and telecommunications sector.⁷⁷

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

6 /
6

During the coverage period, there were no reports of blocking that denied access to websites and social media platforms. However, such incidents have been recorded during politically sensitive moments in recent years.

In January 2019, social media and messaging platforms—including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Tinder—were blocked for about one week during contentious protests (see A3).⁷⁸ The blocking began on January 15 and continued until a court ordered providers to lift it on January 21; access to social media was fully restored by January 24.⁷⁹ Searches for and use of virtual private networks (VPNs) surged during this period, as individuals sought ways to circumvent the restrictions.⁸⁰

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

3 /
4

In the period under review, there was no record of removals or deletions of protected material.

After the end of the coverage period, in July 2024, the Office of the President demanded that the news outlet *NewsDay* retract an article that allegedly maligned Mnangagwa by describing a panel discussion in which a panelist expressed doubt that the president would step down at the end of his second term in 2028.⁸¹ *NewsDay* later published a retraction and apology for the story.⁸²

Between July and December 2023, Meta did not report restricting any content in Zimbabwe to comply with local law.⁸³ No data were available from Google or X (formerly Twitter) about requests for content removal during the coverage period.⁸⁴

In May 2022, following public discourse on social media platforms about irregularities that had been identified in the voter rolls, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) called on Parliament to regulate election-related content online and proposed that Twitter and Facebook should take down “damaging posts” so that members of the public would not fall prey to misinformation and disinformation.⁸⁵ In March of that year, ZEC restricted the use of the reply feature on its Twitter account, limiting the electorate’s ability to engage with or ask questions in response to its posts in the lead up to the 2023 elections.⁸⁶

The Cyber and Data Protection Act (see C6), enacted in December 2021, protects service providers from liability for illegal content uploaded by users. The law carries criminal penalties for providers that fail to remove illegal content when ordered to do so by a court or other public authority, or upon discovery by the provider itself,⁸⁷ including a fine of Z\$200,000 (US\$530) and imprisonment of up to two years.⁸⁸

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?	2 / 4
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The network shutdown in mid-January 2019 exposed the lack of safeguards against arbitrary government decisions affecting internet access (see A3). The High Court judgment that nullified the shutdown also underscored the abuse of existing national laws, especially the Interception of Communications Act.⁸⁹ Although the court ordered the government to restore connectivity, it did not rule that internet shutdowns in general were illegal. Rather, it stated that only President Mnangagwa had the authority to order connectivity restrictions; the state security minister had issued the order for the January shutdown.⁹⁰

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?	2 / 4
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Self-censorship remains common among Zimbabweans. In the past, civic and opposition leaders have deleted Facebook and Twitter posts in response to threats or arrests.

During the 2023 election period, analysts noted that social media users who openly commented on political topics were either based abroad or used fake names when posting. Discussions about the elections were also attributed to foreign media outlets, as local media were more likely to face reprisals for their coverage.⁹¹

Journalists experience a high level of online abuse and harassment that is intended to silence and demonize them, resulting in increased self-censorship.⁹² In February 2024, the online investigative outlet NewsHawks ceased publishing follow-up coverage on alleged corruption in the army, citing threats and surveillance directed at its staff.⁹³

The arrest of human rights defenders and opposition figures over their online activism (see C3), as well as the government’s threatening statements about posting critical content, have increased ordinary users’ reluctance to express their opinions online.⁹⁴ In November 2021, the minister of

information, publicity, and broadcasting services said that the government had set up a “cyber-team” for the purpose of social media monitoring.⁹⁵

The 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act categorizes the publication of false news as a criminal offense (see C2). The Criminal Law Codification and Reform Amendment Act, which criminalizes willfully injuring the sovereignty or national interests of Zimbabwe, was enacted in July 2023, further encouraging self-censorship online (see C2).⁹⁶

The Zimbabwean media sector’s high level of political polarization also contributes to self-censorship among journalists, as media owners dictate their outlets’ editorial policies.⁹⁷

Human rights activists and content creators based outside of Zimbabwe continue to share information and openly criticize the government, though they risk arrest or prosecution if they return to the country.⁹⁸

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?

1 / 4

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to false online narratives, amplified by state-aligned media, that sought to discredit independent election observation groups and their critical assessments of the August 2023 balloting.

The government and the ruling party continued to dominate online discourse during the coverage period, particularly in the months surrounding the August 2023 elections. Disinformation and propaganda are rampant,⁹⁹ and progovernment commentators known as *varakashi* defend the administration and attack opponents on social media, relying on platforms like Facebook, X, and WhatsApp to spread favorable narratives.¹⁰⁰ Traditional media organizations, many of which are owned wholly or partly by the government, have developed presences online, influencing access to information.¹⁰¹

During the 2023 election campaign, political analysts noted that X was “awash” with bot accounts that pushed the government’s agenda, emphasizing ZANU-PF’s achievements and blaming Western sanctions for the economic crisis.¹⁰²

State-owned media outlets sometimes spread false information that painted the government in a positive light. Disinformation campaigns carried out by social media trolls and state-owned media houses targeted election observation missions from the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), the European Union (EU), and the Carter Center following the publication of their unfavorable reports on the government’s and the ruling party’s electoral conduct.¹⁰³ Nevers Mumba, head of the SADC observation mission and former vice president of Zambia, was targeted with coordinated online attacks and disinformation meant to discredit the mission’s findings after it released a critical preliminary statement.¹⁰⁴ In August 2023, the EU observation mission was accused by state media of bribing local journalists with whiskey, grocery vouchers, and fuel coupons, among other items, to report negatively about the elections.¹⁰⁵ The EU observers denounced the allegations as an attempt to undermine independent monitoring.

ZANU-PF also spread disinformation targeting civil society organizations engaged in election-related activities, including the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) and the Elections Resource Centre (ERC), as well as development partners. In a social media post that circulated widely and was also shared in online news outlets, ZANU-PF accused the groups of receiving US\$10 million in foreign funds to “train 12,500 election agents” for political parties.¹⁰⁶

Manipulated videos, images, and audio clips were used to influence public perceptions and sway the electorate. One video that circulated during the election period was edited to make it sound as if opposition leader Nelson Chamisa was advocating for the reversal of ZANU-PF’s land reform

program.¹⁰⁷ In another manipulated video, President Mnangagwa was portrayed conceding defeat to Chamisa before the ZEC had announced the results.¹⁰⁸

The Electoral Act and Statutory Instrument 33 of 2008 govern media reportage and conduct during elections in Zimbabwe. Leading up to the August 2023 elections, state agencies engaged with the media and other stakeholders on the topic of election reporting. The Zimbabwe Media Commission, for example, called for outlets to act professionally and responsibly and cautioned against “agenda driven journalism, fake news, misinformation, disinformation and other examples of poor journalism.”¹⁰⁹ However, according to Media Monitors, the media did not adhere to principles of objectivity, fairness, and balance in their reporting. ZANU-PF received positive coverage from state-owned media, while the opposition CCC was negatively represented. Among privately owned online outlets, ZANU-PF tended to receive more negative coverage.¹¹⁰

In 2019, Mnangagwa’s spokesperson, George Charamba, appeared to imply that ZANU-PF had paid a prominent progovernment Twitter user.¹¹¹ In subsequent years, human rights activists and opposition figures reported harassment on social media by accounts that they suspected were linked to ZANU-PF.¹¹²

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online?

1 / 3

The high cost of internet access, slow connection speeds, and the poor quality of service are among the factors that limit individuals’ and media outlets’ capacity to publish content online, negatively affecting journalists and content creators (see A2).¹¹³

News outlets and other content producers are free to seek online advertising without onerous legal restrictions. However, the allocation of advertising may be affected by political pressures or interests, limiting revenue for outlets that are critical of the authorities. The country’s dire economic situation, which can be attributed in large part to government corruption and mismanagement, also threatens the financial viability of online publishing.

Online content creators in Zimbabwe struggle to monetize their content due to restrictions on local bank accounts, difficulties in obtaining online credit and transaction services, and other economic constraints.¹¹⁴ YouTube, for example, requires a physical letter with an activation code for users to register to monetize their videos, and many have struggled to comply due to the unreliability of the postal service.

In 2022, the government announced that it had formed a partnership with Daedalus World Limited, a business management consultancy, to collect taxes from e-commerce operators, including digital advertisers and content platforms.¹¹⁵

The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) requires that webcasting be licensed under the Broadcasting Services Act.¹¹⁶ However, the rule has largely been ignored by recently formed online news agencies, many of which distribute content on YouTube without being licensed.

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?

3 / 4

Access to diverse information remains a challenge for people in rural and marginalized communities who receive news primarily from radio and television. The relative few who have access to the internet often rely on promotional bundles that offer only a limited number of platforms.¹¹⁷

Zimbabwe’s online landscape continues to grow in vibrancy, with services like Facebook, Google, and YouTube freely available and ranking among the country’s most popular websites. Numerous citizen initiatives have taken advantage of the broader access to ICT networks and increased the diversity of available information online. The youth ICT network Magamba’s @OpenParlyZW account on X monitors parliamentary activities.¹¹⁸ Other citizen journalism efforts on social media, such as @263 on X, have developed into full-fledged online news outlets.¹¹⁹ Community Podium,¹²⁰ a nonprofit media organization that seeks to promote stories about rural and marginalized communities, distributes a monthly newsletter through WhatsApp; in March 2023 it featured a story in Tonga,¹²¹ one of the country’s minority languages.

In recent years, various online news agencies have been launched by both junior and senior journalists, many of whom were frustrated with a lack of journalistic opportunities at traditional media and the political capture of mainstream newspapers. Such online platforms include NewsHawks, an investigative journalism outlet associated with senior Zimbabwean journalists.¹²² The Centre for Innovation and Technology, a digital start-up, has also reshaped the media landscape by taking advantage of tools like X Spaces to deliver information.¹²³

The 2013 constitution and the 2004 Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act criminalize homosexuality and ban same-sex marriage, which discourages journalists from reporting on LGBT+ issues.¹²⁴ Rhetoric from government officials denouncing the LGBT+ community as “alien, anti-life, un-African, and un-Christian” further contributes to difficulty in accessing information on LGBT+ issues.¹²⁵

In the 2022 Inclusive Internet Index, Zimbabwe was ranked 80th out of 100 countries for availability of news in local languages.¹²⁶

Online misinformation and disinformation have become more prevalent over time, especially during the August 2023 general elections, when the government, political party sympathizers, and the ruling party used misleading or manipulated content to promote favorable narratives or discredit civil society and the opposition (see B5). Following the introduction of the new Zimbabwe Gold currency in April 2024, fact-checking groups debunked a series of fake X posts that used photos from 2019 protests to claim that there was mass unrest over the new currency.¹²⁷

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?

3 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 due to the enactment of legislation that sharply limited the space for dissent and online mobilization ahead of the August 2023 elections.

Social media are a key source of information for citizens and activists, and Zimbabweans frequently mobilize in online protests and campaigns.

The Criminal Law Codification and Reform Amendment Act, previously known as the “Patriotic Bill,” was enacted in July 2023 (see C2). The law, which made it a criminal offense to willfully injure the sovereignty or national interests of Zimbabwe, was seen as an attack on the opposition and digital activists, and it further narrowed the space for collective action online ahead of the August 2023 general elections.¹²⁸

During the run-up to those polls, the online landscape was utilized extensively for political campaigning. However, targeted disinformation attacks against political parties, candidates, the media, and civil society impeded online mobilization, as did the high price of internet service (see A2 and B5). In August and September 2023, the police also threatened users with arrest and prosecution for online activities that they interpreted as illegal political gatherings or attempts by “unruly elements” to incite violence (see C5).

Separately in 2023, users supported and engaged with social media campaigns that criticized human rights abuses, poor governance, and corruption. For example, the X hashtag #FreeWiwa was employed to campaign against the prolonged pretrial detention of opposition politician Job Sikhala, and #ZanuPFMustGo was the rallying point of a campaign against the ruling party. Teachers advocated for better salaries and working conditions under the hashtag #Teachers4USD.¹²⁹ Internet users also used the hashtag #ShutDownZimbabwe to protest against the ongoing economic crisis.¹³⁰

President Mnangagwa has referred to the online campaigns against human rights abuses and corruption as “a cyber-war on our country in pursuit of a regime change agenda.”¹³¹ People who are active on social media during protests have been targeted for arrest (see C3), and some digital activists avoid using their real names online to reduce the risk of arrest or harassment by government supporters (see B4).¹³²

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

2 /
6

The 2013 constitution provides for press freedom, freedom of expression, and access to information.¹³³ These guarantees are contradicted by several laws, including the 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act and the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act, originally passed in 2004 (see C2).

The Freedom of Information General Regulations, enacted in September 2021, require ordinary citizens to pay fees to gain access to official information or file an appeal on decisions related to such requests.¹³⁴ Another law, the Interception of Communications Act, was used as a justification for the internet shutdown in January 2019 (see A3).¹³⁵ In March 2023, the High Court rejected a CCC lawmaker’s demand that the ZEC provide access to the voter roll in an electronic format after the commission said producing a print copy would take 58 days. The court cited the ZEC’s concerns that complying with the request would harm the security of the database.¹³⁶

Zimbabwe’s courts have been inundated with cases involving the arrest of journalists and political activists for their online activities (see C3). In April 2021, a High Court judge invalidated Section 31(a)(iii) of the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act, a provision used to charge many of those arrested for their online speech (see C2). Although in April 2023 a court convicted and sentenced opposition party spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere using the overturned provision, the conviction was later reversed in February 2024 (see C3).¹³⁷

In February 2024, the High Court ordered the assignment of a new magistrate in a cyberbullying case after the accused, Vimbai Dzingirai, raised concerns that the original magistrate had fabricated evidence and misrepresented her statements. Dzingirai was charged over social media posts in which she accused another woman of defrauding people in a Ponzi scheme (see C3).¹³⁸

Human rights defenders and opposition political groups continue to raise concerns that the judiciary is complicit in human rights violations. Journalists have faced long periods of pretrial detention, political activists have also been denied bail, and others have been brought to court in leg irons or denied medical attention while in prison (see C3).¹³⁹

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

1 /
4

Several laws criminalize online expression in Zimbabwe, including a law that prohibits the spread of false information.

In July 2023, Mnangagwa signed the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Amendment Act,¹⁴⁰ which criminalized willfully injuring the sovereignty or national interests of Zimbabwe, including through meetings or communication with foreign governments, their agencies, or proxies. Human rights defenders expressed concerns over the law's vaguely worded offenses and its harsh punishments, which include loss of citizenship, the loss of the right to vote in elections, and the death penalty.¹⁴¹ Many viewed the legislation as an attempt to silence government critics, including online activists.¹⁴²

Section 14 of Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020, Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment, and Treatment), criminalizes the publication of "false news" about public officials involved in enforcing lockdown restrictions. Anyone arrested for an infraction would be prosecuted under the criminal code, with punishments of up to Z\$500,000 (US\$1,300) in fines, up to 20 years in prison, or both.

In December 2021, the government enacted the Cyber and Data Protection Act (see C6).¹⁴³ Section 164 of the law, which amended the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act, prohibited messages distributed via computers or information systems with the intention of inciting others "to commit acts of violence against any person or persons, or to cause damage to any property." Violations of this section can be punished with a fine of up to Z\$280,000 (US\$740), up to five years' imprisonment, or both. The law imposes similar criminal penalties for sending threatening messages, cyberbullying and harassment, and the transmission of intimate images without consent. The law also imposes fines of up to Z\$280,000 (US\$740), up to 10 years' imprisonment, or both for the creation or distribution online of "racist or xenophobic material" and "language that tends to lower the reputation or feelings of persons" because of their membership in a protected group.¹⁴⁴

The Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act places restrictions on certain types of speech that apply equally online and offline. Section 33 of the law characterizes "undermining [the] authority of or insulting [the] President" in any printed or electronic medium as a crime against the state and prescribes fines, prison terms of up to one year, or both as punishment.¹⁴⁵ A landmark constitutional ruling in 2016 annulled Section 96, which criminalized defamation,¹⁴⁶ though the vaguely defined "criminal insult" offense remains in place under Section 95.

In April 2021, the High Court invalidated Section 31(a)(iii) of the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act, which criminalized publishing or communicating falsehoods prejudicial to the state, on the grounds that the Constitutional Court had struck it down under the former constitution.¹⁴⁷ The other parts of Section 31(a), which prohibit spreading falsehoods that could jeopardize public safety or promote violence, remained in force.¹⁴⁸

Section 88(b) of the Postal and Telecommunications Act criminalizes the sending of offensive or false telephone messages intended to cause annoyance, inconvenience, or needless anxiety to another person.

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

3 /
6

The government is intolerant of critical online commentary and activism, often invoking vaguely written laws to arrest social media users who engage in such behavior. Lengthy pretrial detention

for online speech has become very common, though lengthy prison sentences are still relatively rare.

In January 2024, CCC vice-chairperson Job Sikhala was convicted of inciting violence through the circulation of a June 2022 online video in which he accused the ruling party of being responsible for the murder of a CCC lawmaker whose body was found mutilated in a well that month.¹⁴⁹ Sikhala was repeatedly denied bail and held in pretrial detention.¹⁵⁰ After his conviction, he was released on a two-year suspended sentence because he had already spent 595 days behind bars.¹⁵¹ Sikhala had faced a similar charge for encouraging people to join antigovernment protests in a 2020 online video; he was acquitted of that charge in March 2024, because the state could not prove that he had posted the video in question.¹⁵²

A week after his release from prison, Sikhala was again brought to court on a separate charge of “communicating false statements” for a 2021 post in which he allegedly accused police of killing a baby by beating it with a baton. He was also convicted in this case, fined US\$500, and given another nine-month suspended sentence on the condition that he not commit another similar offense for the next five years. Both convictions were overturned in July 2024, after the end of the coverage period.¹⁵³

In April 2023, Fadzayi Mahere, a lawyer and CCC spokesperson, was convicted of publishing false statements in contravention of Section 31 of the criminal code (see C1), also for allegedly using an online video to accuse police of killing the baby in the same incident.¹⁵⁴ Mahere was ordered to pay a US\$500 fine; she was acquitted of another charge of promoting and inciting public violence.¹⁵⁵ She later filed an appeal challenging the conviction and sentence.¹⁵⁶ The High Court overturned her conviction in February 2024, noting that it had been based on a legal provision that had been invalidated (see C2).¹⁵⁷

Opposition politician Jacob Ngarivhume, who had been charged in 2020 with inciting violence through social media posts that encouraged people to join protests against government corruption, was convicted in April 2023 and sentenced to three years in prison. In December 2023, however, the High Court overturned his conviction.¹⁵⁸

Separately in December 2023, the director of the investigative journalism hub Information for Development Trust (IDT) was summoned for questioning by the Police Internal Security and Intelligence unit, which is known for surveillance and harassment of citizens, activists, and organizations that are critical of the government.¹⁵⁹ The police did not specify the subject of the inquiry, but IDT had previously published a report on the harms caused in rural communities by mining projects tied to powerful members of ZANU-PF.

Internet users also face prosecution for online posts directed at private individuals. Social media user Vimbai Dzingirai was arrested and charged with cyberbullying after she accused the accountant of the African Business Women Association (ABWA) of defrauding people; the owner of ABWA had been arrested and charged for fraud in November 2023. After a magistrate denied Dzingirai a discharge, she appealed to the High Court and claimed that the magistrate had fabricated evidence and misrepresented her statements. In February 2024, the court ordered the case to be managed by a new magistrate (see C1).¹⁶⁰

In March 2024, a student at the National University of Science and Technology was detained for allegedly making ethnically hostile posts on X directed at the Ndebele people. He was released on bail in April 2024. If convicted under the Prevention of Discrimination Act, he could receive a US\$400 fine, up to six months in prison, or both; if he is convicted under the Cyber and Data Protection Act, he could receive a fine of up to US\$5,000, a prison sentence up to 10 years, or both.¹⁶¹ The case was ongoing at the end of the coverage period.

In September 2022, sports journalist Hope Chizuzu was arrested and charged with transmitting false data messages intended to cause harm in contravention of Section 164(c) of the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act. The case was prompted by complaints from a soccer team about

posts on Chizuzu's Facebook page.¹⁶² In March 2024, the journalist was advised that the matter would proceed by way of a summons; the case was ongoing at the end of the coverage period.

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?

3 / 4

User privacy and anonymity are compromised by SIM-card registration regulations implemented in 2011. They require mobile phone subscribers to submit details about their personal identity to service providers, ostensibly to combat crime and curtail threatening or obscene communications.¹⁶³

Under the 2013 Postal and Telecommunications (Subscriber Registration) Regulations (Statutory Instrument 142 of 2013), subscribers must register with all telecommunications service providers by providing personal details, including a full name, permanent residential address, nationality, gender, subscriber identification number, and national identification or passport number.¹⁶⁴ Service providers are then required to retain such personal information for five years after either party has discontinued the subscription.

Under Section 11(1) of the 2007 Interception of Communications Act, security and law enforcement agencies can require individuals to hand over decryption keys for vague reasons, including to protect the interests of national security, to prevent or detect a serious criminal offense, or to ensure the country's economic well-being.¹⁶⁵

Under Section 163(b) of the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act, individuals cannot deny, hinder, or block authorized persons, such as law enforcement officers, from accessing computer data.¹⁶⁶

The use of unlicensed telecommunication services is also an offense in Zimbabwe, and in January 2024 POTRAZ threatened to arrest anyone using, advertising, or selling Starlink services, which were not officially licensed until May of that year (see A4).¹⁶⁷

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy?

2 / 6

Journalists, opposition politicians, and activists have reported communications and social media surveillance in recent years. There is little legal oversight of state surveillance in Zimbabwe.

On election night in August 2023, while violently arresting at least 35 election monitors from the ERC and ZESN who were conducting parallel vote tabulation, security forces seized their devices and reportedly demanded their passwords, potentially exposing the detainees to surveillance and violating their privacy rights.¹⁶⁸

Official statements have raised questions about the extent of social media surveillance in Zimbabwe. In August and September 2023, police announced that they were monitoring social media messages because some "unruly elements" were trying to incite the public to engage in unlawful political activities or gatherings, and warned that those who were allegedly sending false information about the security situation in the country risked arrest and prosecution.¹⁶⁹ Some viewed this as an attempt to counter online mobilization and deter citizens from exercising their political rights. In 2022, the permanent secretary for the Ministry of Information, Publicity, and Broadcasting Services, Nick Mangwana, stated that the government did not have the tools to monitor social media, but that it would deal with all cybercrimes according to the law.¹⁷⁰ In November 2021, however, the minister of information, publicity, and broadcasting services had indicated that the government was monitoring social media communications.

An investigation released by Toronto-based Citizen Lab in December 2020 identified the Zimbabwean government as a likely customer of Circles, a surveillance company that enables the monitoring of calls, texts, and mobile phone geolocation by exploiting weaknesses in telecommunications infrastructure.¹⁷¹ In February 2021, NewsHawks, the Zimbabwean investigative reporting website, alleged that then vice president Kembo Mohadi was targeted by Circles spyware amid power struggles within ZANU-PF, citing anonymous intelligence sources; audio recordings that seemed to implicate Mohadi in extramarital affairs had been released publicly, eventually prompting his resignation.¹⁷²

In May 2020, member of Parliament Joana Mamombe and fellow opposition activists Cecilia Chimбири and Netsai Marova alleged that they had been arrested during a protest, abducted, tortured, and sexually assaulted by security forces. In June of that year, Home Affairs Minister Kazembe Kazembe challenged their allegations, releasing an analysis of their mobile phones' geolocation data that purportedly showed they were not at the location of their reported arrest.¹⁷³ It was unclear whether the data were accurate and how the government obtained them; the possible means included surveillance technology or a request to telecommunications providers. Prosecutors pursued legal action against Mamombe, Chimбири, and Marova for making false accusations, and officials repeatedly detained them in an apparent attempt to reduce the credibility of their allegations.¹⁷⁴ During their trial in September 2020, the activists successfully sought a court order to compel Econet to release their mobile phone records, including location information, during the period of their abduction; the records have not been made public, though the three were later acquitted.¹⁷⁵

Opposition leaders have claimed that their online activities are under constant state surveillance. In 2020, lawmaker and then Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) representative Chalton Hwende, who faced treason charges in 2019, claimed that his communications were under surveillance.¹⁷⁶

Also in 2020, a document that accused several online journalists and activists of seeking to sabotage the government was leaked to *NewsDay*. The document, which was attributed to Zimbabwean security services, listed the names of individuals accused of leading online campaigns and called on state security agents to place their online activities under constant watch.¹⁷⁷

Several legal provisions may permit the government to conduct surveillance without sufficient oversight. The Post and Telecommunications Act of 2000 allows the government to intercept ostensibly suspicious communications.¹⁷⁸ The 2007 Interception of Communications Act allows the police, intelligence officers, the Tax Revenue Authority, and the Department of National Security in the Office of the President to request warrants from the minister of transport and communications to intercept communications for the purposes of law enforcement, national security, or compelling national economic interests.¹⁷⁹ The law does not ensure judicial oversight of the warrants or ensure that users are notified if there is a warrant for their communications. Provisions in the Cyber and Data Protection Act also authorize the interception, search, and seizure of electronic devices, without mandating sufficient oversight to prevent abuse (see C6).¹⁸⁰

The Cyber and Data Protection Act, which amended the Interception of Communications Act, established the Cybersecurity and Monitoring of Interception of Communications Centre. The institution is organized as a unit of the president's office, making it difficult to facilitate oversight of its activities.

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy?

**2 /
6**

Zimbabwe's legal framework requires service providers and technology companies to submit user information to the government. The government has enacted a data protection law, which established basic protections for personal information.

The 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act regulates the collection, processing, transmission, use, and storage of data. It establishes a baseline set of protections for data processed in Zimbabwe, with special safeguards for sensitive personal information, such as information about a person's race, ethnicity, or sex life, and for health data, biometric data, and genetic data.¹⁸¹ The consent requirement for the processing of nonsensitive personal data includes a provision stating that consent "may be implied," significantly weakening such protections.¹⁸² The legislation also has broad and poorly defined exemptions to its protective framework, such as for processing data "in the public interest" or in the interest of national security.¹⁸³ It permits the data protection authority to create new categories of exemption. Though the law imposes some limits on the transfer of personal data outside of Zimbabwe to countries without an adequate standard of protection, those limits similarly feature broad exemptions.¹⁸⁴

The act designates POTRAZ, the telecommunications regulator, as the data protection authority. MISA's Zimbabwe office has criticized the government for granting this role to POTRAZ, citing concerns about the regulator's independence and noting potential conflicts of interest, given that POTRAZ also regulates the industry with the most data controllers and processors.¹⁸⁵ In February 2022, POTRAZ issued a notice calling on all data controllers and processors to start complying with the Cyber and Data Protection Act and to provide it with information about the purpose of their data collection. POTRAZ has established mechanisms for users to submit complaints when their data are processed without consent.¹⁸⁶

In November 2022, POTRAZ issued a public call for input and comments on the proposed Cyber and Data Protection (Licensing of Data Controllers and Appointment of Data Protection Officers) Regulations, which would facilitate the implementation and enforcement of the 2021 law's data protection and privacy framework.¹⁸⁷ The regulations had not yet been implemented as of May 2024.

In April 2023, ahead of the August general elections, citizens reported receiving unsolicited messages from the ruling party that promoted Mnangagwa's reelection and identified the location of recipients' polling stations.¹⁸⁸ The relevant data were suspected to have been taken from the information that was collected for biometric voter registration. After MISA sent a letter to POTRAZ about the potential privacy breach, in May 2023 the regulator indicated that it would investigate.¹⁸⁹ To date, the findings of the investigation have yet to be revealed. During the last electoral period in 2018, both the ZEC and mobile service providers denied giving ZANU-PF access to voters' phone numbers,¹⁹⁰ but the ZEC was known to have compiled the numbers as part of the voter registration process. ZANU-PF's campaign messages extended to many recipients who were not party members, suggesting that individuals' privacy rights had been violated.

In February 2021, Mnangagwa launched the National Data Centre, a data storage infrastructure project that the government planned to link to the national identity registration system and a Smart City network, which would be equipped with surveillance technology.¹⁹¹ Civil society organizations like MISA have raised concerns about the project's potential misuse of personal data,¹⁹² while others have criticized the involvement of Chinese companies with ties to the Chinese military.¹⁹³

In September 2020, the High Court invalidated a warrant for Econet's subscriber database due to privacy concerns. Police had sought access to the database in pursuit of illegal dealers of foreign currency, who were allegedly using Econet's mobile money-transfer platform Ecocash.¹⁹⁴

Under a 2014 amendment to the 2013 Postal and Telecommunications (Subscriber Registration) Regulations (Statutory Instrument 142 of 2013), law enforcement agents must obtain a court order or a warrant to request information from a central subscriber information database established under that law.¹⁹⁵ Zimbabwe's Parliamentary Legal Committee noted that the 2014 amendment fell short of independent judicial oversight, since a warrant "can be issued by police officers who have been designated as justices of the peace."¹⁹⁶

The Cyber and Data Protection Act amended the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act to specify that the police are required to obtain a warrant from a judicial official before accessing a computer

or computer data.¹⁹⁷

The Postal and Telecommunications Act of 2000 requires a telecommunications licensee, such as an ISP, to supply information to government officials upon request.¹⁹⁸ Section 88 of the act also obligates the companies to report any communications with “offensive” or “threatening” content.¹⁹⁹

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?

3 / 5

Journalists and other ICT users face regular harassment and intimidation in reprisal for their online activities. Members of the political opposition and human rights defenders also receive threats in response to their online activity, with menacing language transmitted via social media, messaging tools, or phone calls.²⁰⁰

In February 2024, journalists from the investigative outlet NewsHawks were surveilled, threatened, and intimidated, with the aim of identifying their sources for a story about alleged corruption in the military. The intimidation led the group to stop publishing follow-ups to its investigation to protect the safety of its staff (see B4).²⁰¹ Journalists at NewsHawks had previously been threatened on social media, by an account believed to belong to the presidential spokesperson, for their reporting on a documentary that exposed alleged corruption and money laundering in the gold trade.²⁰²

In March 2023, in response to a post about the same documentary film by opposition party youth activist Makomborero Haruzivishe, the account using the name of the presidential spokesperson reminded Haruzivishe of his prior abduction and claimed to have agents at his location.²⁰³ Screenshots of the threatening post were widely shared and interpreted as evidence of extralegal intimidation meant to silence critics of the government.²⁰⁴

During the election period in 2023, Forever Associates Zimbabwe (FAZ), an affiliate of ZANU-PF that is registered as a private nongovernmental organization, reportedly played an instrumental role in intimidation and harassment aimed at the opposition.²⁰⁵

The environment of harassment and intimidation online extends to ordinary users. In a study detailing the experiences of Zimbabwean women on social media, respondents highlighted that users are frequently harassed for their political expression, with many forced to delete their accounts, post under pseudonyms, or change their WhatsApp numbers to avoid online harassment.²⁰⁶

In previous years, users also faced violence in retaliation for their online activities. In February 2021, ZANU-PF supporters besieged the office of MDC vice president Tendai Biti and threatened to kill him over his social media posts.²⁰⁷ A ZANU-PF spokesperson had criticized Biti that January for arguing in a Twitter post that the government should take responsibility for every COVID-19 death in Zimbabwe.²⁰⁸ In September 2020, user Nickson Mpofo was abducted and severely tortured after posting on Facebook about government corruption involving a rental car company that was linked to the abduction and torture of student Tawanda Muchehiwa.²⁰⁹

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?

2 / 3

Cyberattacks that target government websites to exfiltrate funds and data continued to succeed during the coverage period. Repeated hacking has raised concerns about Zimbabwe’s poor cybersecurity mechanisms and its readiness to deal with cyberattacks.

In February 2024, the Harare Institute of Technology was reported to have lost control over Z\$24 million (US\$63,800) in student fees after a software developer hacked its Pay Now system and changed the banking details of the institution to his own. Some Z\$21 million (US\$55,800) of the stolen funds were recovered.²¹⁰

Two Zimbabweans appeared in court in December 2023 for hacking the bank account of the Hwange Electricity Supply Company and defrauding it of Z\$2 billion (US\$5.3 million), which they sent to their own accounts the month prior.²¹¹ The stolen funds were later recovered.

In August 2023, hacking group Everest Ransomware reportedly claimed that it had hacked the website of ZESA and its subsidiaries,²¹² gaining access to data on the authority's internal finances, employees, and customers.²¹³ ZESA did not confirm the breach.

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