

Zimbabwe: Rights Activists Acquitted After Year-Long Trial

Stop Using Criminal Justice System to Repress Peaceful Activism



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Police officers outside the Magistrates Court in Harare, Zimbabwe, April 6, 2021. © 2021 Tafadzwa Ufumeli/Getty Images

(Johannesburg) – A [Zimbabwe](#) court’s acquittal of three human rights activists on disorderly conduct charges more than a year after their arrest highlights the authorities’ misuse of the criminal justice system against dissidents, Human Rights Watch said today. Zimbabwean authorities should end politically motivated arrests and prosecutions of human rights defenders, activists, and journalists.

On August 21, 2025, a Harare Magistrates Court [acquitted](#) the human rights activists Robson Chere, 41, Namatai Kwekweza, 26, and Samuel Gwenzi, 40. On July 31, 2024, state agents had pulled the three off a plane before takeoff at Harare’s international airport and [held them incommunicado](#) for nearly eight hours. The arrests appeared to be part of an [intensified crackdown](#) on opposition and civil society groups ahead of the Southern African Development Community Summit of Heads of State and Government in Harare in August 2024.

“The baseless prosecution of the three human rights activists shed a spotlight on unjust arrests, mistreatment, and politically motivated trials in Zimbabwe,” said [Idriss Ali Nassah](#),

senior Africa Researcher at Human Rights Watch. "It shouldn't have taken a year for the defendants to be acquitted, such cases need to end."

The police had [charged](#) them with participating in an illegal protest outside the Harare Magistrates Court in June 2024. [United Nations special rapporteurs](#) described the charges against the three activists as "baseless" and of "being used as a fig-leaf to target human rights defenders and opposition voices for calling for greater democracy, human rights and accountability in Zimbabwe."

Initially, a Harare magistrate [denied the three bail](#), ruling that they were likely to abscond or commit other offenses, and that their release might undermine delivery of justice. In September 2024, the High Court [granted them bail](#) after they had spent 35 days in detention.

The trial began on September 5. The prosecution continued with the proceedings for nearly a year, even after Kwekweza demonstrated that her passport showed that she was [not even in the country](#) when the alleged offense occurred.

At the trial, the activists' lawyers documented evidence of [torture and other ill-treatment](#). Chere, who leads a teachers' union, had [bloodstained clothes](#) and limped in pain during his first court appearance after the arrest. [Doctors](#) determined that Chere had suffered extensive soft tissue injuries and was in urgent need of treatment to prevent permanent kidney damage. Gwenzi, a member of a local council and a human rights activist, said his interrogators had assaulted him and [threatened to harm](#) his family.

The administration of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who took power in a military coup in 2017, has committed [serious human rights violations](#) and has failed to institute promised reforms to improve respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, Human Rights Watch said. The authorities have [arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted](#) critics of the government on baseless charges.

Violence, intimidation, harassment, and repression [aimed principally at political opposition members](#) and civil society activists have restricted civic and political space. Many of those arrested have been denied basic due process, including the presumption of innocence and the right to bail.

"Even as I celebrate a court victory, it is still only half a victory because the system remains unchanged," Kwekweza said in a [statement](#) after the acquittal. "Without accountability, my acquittal remains only half a victory. There are many others still facing judicial persecution appearing in court for crimes they did not commit.... There are many more who have been convicted in political trials, abducted, tortured, and silenced."

Zimbabwe's [Constitution](#), as well as the [African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), both of which Zimbabwe has ratified, protect the rights to freedom of association and expression. The two treaties also provide for the pretrial rights of detainees, as well as freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

"The year-long prosecution of these three activists and other peaceful critics of the government on baseless charges shows the Zimbabwe government's lack of resolve to institute lasting human rights reforms," Nassah said. "Zimbabwe authorities should respect

the right to fair trial for everyone in line with the government's domestic and international obligations and stop weaponizing the criminal justice system against human rights defenders, activists, and journalists."

