

World Report 2024



Zambia

Events of 2023

Zambian police surround former president Edgar Lungu's house in Lusaka, after Lungu and his wife, Esther Lungu, were summoned to appear by the police, May 3, 2023.

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When Hakainde Hichilema was elected president of Zambia in 2021, there were hopes that he would improve the human rights situation in the country. However, there has been growing intolerance for political opposition and dissent, cases of arbitrary detention and censorship, and threats to the rights of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

In February 2023, the police arrested opposition leader Chishimba Kambwili after a group of youths protesting the high cost of living assembled outside his residence in Lusaka, the capital. At various points during the year, authorities used the Public Order Act to disrupt opposition activities, including refusing in some cases to grant authorization for opposition meetings and rallies.

According to the [United Nations Children's Fund](#) (UNICEF), some 29 percent of girls (and 2 percent of boys) are married by 18 in Zambia.

Zambia criminalizes consensual same-sex conduct with up to life imprisonment.

In August, President Hichilema became the chair of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation.

Freedom of Assembly

Writing in the *Washington Post* on March 28, President Hichilema said “my government has returned our democracy to health, shoring up the civil liberties the people demanded: the right of assembly, an end to defamation laws that challenged free speech, and removing the death penalty.”

However, a month earlier, opposition leader Chishimba Kambwili was [arrested](#) and charged with unlawful assembly after a group of youths protesting the high cost of living assembled outside his residence in Lusaka. He was [released](#) after spending a night in detention.

On June 28, the Law Association of Zambia (LAZ) [condemned](#) “increased incidents of police brutality against members of the opposition.” The statement followed the [arrests](#) of opposition presidential hopeful Emmanuel Mwamba, opposition member and blogger Rizwan Patel, and former State House Special Assistant for Politics Christopher Zumaniimba.

In response, the Minister of Home Affairs and Internal Security [stated](#) that the government “remains committed to upholding the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law,” and that the “government will continue to foster an environment that encourages open discourse, respects freedom of expression, and ensure that law enforcement agencies operate within the confines of the law.”

In January, police [stopped a meeting](#) of the former ruling Patriotic Front (PF) party, arguing the PF had not obtained permission to gather. In April, the PF applied to the High Court for [judicial review](#) of alleged abuse of power by the Zambia Police Service in cancelling the January meeting. Zambia police also denied clearance to the PF to hold a public rally on August 26, citing security concerns. The Inspector General of Police said that the PF could only hold a public rally at the end of September. The police also [denied](#) the Socialist Party permission to hold a rally in Kitwe on October 7, citing “security concerns” and “insufficient manpower.”

In August, LAZ [criticized](#) the government for denying the opposition the right to freely operate, and for using the [Public Order Act](#) to violate citizens’ constitutional rights of association, assembly, and expression. Section 5(4) of the act requires that anyone intending to assemble or convene a public meeting, procession, or demonstration, give the police seven days’ notice. Although the provision does not require formal prior approval from the authorities, the police have interpreted it to mean permission is required before any public assembly can proceed.

In October, Zambian police thwarted [planned protests](#) against the rising cost of living that had been organized by a group calling itself “protest movement.”

Also in October, police [forced their way](#) into the home of opposition Patriots for Economic Progress leader Sean Tembo and arrested him for “hate speech.” Tembo [had urged the police](#) to wait for the arrival of his lawyers. Tembo previously had been arrested on the same charge in September and [detained for six days](#) in violation of his right to be brought before a court of law within 48 hours.

In October, 13 leading civil society and human rights groups issued [a joint statement](#) expressing concern over the “failure by public authorities to protect the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.” They urged the government to “quickly enact the Access to Information Bill and the [Public Gatherings Bill](#) in order to safeguard the right to freedom of expression and assembly in the country.”

In April, the UN Human Rights Committee [expressed concern](#) about allegations of “restrictions on peaceful assemblies, such as cancelling assemblies at the last minute, arbitrary arrests, bodily injuries, deaths and property damage, especially during peaceful anti-government protests and political gatherings organized by the opposition.” The Human Rights Committee is the body of 18 [independent experts](#) that monitors implementation of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) by state parties.

Freedom of Association

In January, the ruling United Party for National Development (UPND) party stated that the Public Order Act would be [amended](#) to allow every Zambian citizen including those in the opposition to gather freely, without hinderance. Among the restrictive laws that President Hichilema promised to repeal is [NGO Act No. 16 of 2009](#). The law [unduly restricts](#) the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and civil society groups that operate in the country and subjects them to excessive and unwarranted controls, including by placing them under the authority of a government-dominated NGO Registration Board that has the authority to interfere in their activities. However, nearly two years into his term, his administration has not fulfilled this promise.

In June, the *Daily Mail*, a state-owned newspaper, [dismissed](#) a photojournalist who had taken pictures of people queuing up for mealie meal when some parts of the country were experiencing shortages of the basic food commodity. The journalist was accused of [sabotaging](#) the government.

In October, the Independent Broadcasting Authority wrote to [Hot FM Radio Station](#) telling the radio station to “strengthen its international controls.” This was after the station had hosted Dr. Sishuwa Sishuwa, a leading Zambian academic and critic of the government. The broadcasting authority stated that the academic’s assertions had “the potential to cause disunity in the country.”

The [UN Human Rights Committee](#), in its concluding observations on the [fourth periodic report of Zambia](#), expressed concern about reports that “opposition political parties have been denied access to public media and that some private radio stations have been forced to stop broadcasting programs featuring opposition political leaders.”

By-Election Violence

In April, [political violence](#) was reported in a by-election campaign in Serenje district in Zambia’s Central Province. Supporters of the ruling UPND allegedly attacked the president of the Socialist Party, Fred M’membe, and his supporters who had gathered at a campaign rally. M’membe [reportedly](#) used his gun to disperse the crowd. On April 9, M’membe [was arrested](#) for unlawful discharge of a firearm and assault. He was charged together with two other suspected Socialist Party members for allegedly assaulting nine UPND members.

Religious leaders under the [Christian Churches Monitoring Group](#) called on the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) to [take action](#) against the UPND and the Socialist Party for violating the provisions of the Electoral Code of Conduct by engaging in violence during the by-election campaign.

On August 22, M’membe was [summoned](#) to Ibex Hill police station in Lusaka and charged with the additional offense of “acts intended to cause grievous bodily harm” relating to the April by-election violence. M’membe told the [media](#) that his arrests were “a clear attempt to silence prominent critics of the UPND government.”

Restrictions on the Former President

In September, police [stopped](#) a church service that was to be attended by former Zambian President Edgar Lungu and his wife Esther, citing security concerns. Earlier, in the same month, President Hichilema had [denounced](#) alleged coup plotters who he claimed were planning to undermine the country’s democratic rule and stability by trying to illegally seize power. The president had written on [Facebook](#) that: “to colleagues that think we are timid by being kind and that they can break the laws and entertain thoughts of illegal takeover of government including undemocratic coup d’état, our only word is that; We are coming for you and we will not allow you to make Zambians start running around as is the case in some places.”

On [September 7](#), the authorities denied Lungu’s request to travel to South Africa for medical purposes.

On September 16, Lungu was [reportedly](#) removed from a plane and stopped from travelling to South Korea to attend a World Peace Conference. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting stated that government took the action because he did not get travel clearance from cabinet.

Also in September, [media reported](#) that police told Lungu to stop jogging in public with supporters, with officers describing his weekly runs as “political activism.” The authorities told Lungu that his exercise sessions accompanied by members of his Patriotic Front party amounted to “unlawful assembly,” and advised him to seek police approval for future jogging events.

Cleanup of Lead Contamination in Kabwe

Kabwe, the capital of Zambia’s Central Province, is one of the world’s worst [pollution hotspots](#) because of contamination from a former lead and zinc mine. In March, the Ministry of Green Economy and Environment [outlined](#) its vision of Kabwe as a “Green City” with “buried lead surfaces” at [a roundtable conference](#) organized by a civil society alliance, the Alliance for Lead-Free Kabwe, of which Human Rights Watch is a member. However, the ministry has not taken any public steps to implement this vision, nor has it acted on the president’s directive to establish a technical committee for the planning of the mine cleanup. In July, youth activists released a [video](#) in which they describe life in a dangerously polluted town and advocate for comprehensive cleanup of the former mine site.

[Lead is a toxic metal](#) with no safe level of exposure; children are especially at risk. It causes stunted growth, learning difficulties, memory loss, developmental delays, and many other irreversible health effects. It can also cause coma and death.

Key International Actors

In March, United States Vice President Kamala Harris [visited Zambia](#), discussing debt restructuring with President Hichilema and announcing a range of private sector commitments worth more than US\$7 billion aimed at supporting climate resilience, adaptation, and mitigation.

In July, the UN Human Rights Council [adopted](#) Zambia’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) outcome. During the UPR, Zambia received and supported [recommendations](#) to, among other things, amend the Public Order Act to ensure the full enjoyment of freedom of expression, assembly and association, and take measures to end child marriage.

In September, Hichilema became the chair of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation. As chairperson, he nominated former Zambian Vice President Nevers Mumba as the head of the regional bloc’s Electoral Observer Mission (SEOM) to Zimbabwe. The mission’s [preliminary report](#) found that the August 23 elections in Zimbabwe “fell short of the requirements of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the Electoral Act, and the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2021).” Hichilema did not attend President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s inauguration in Harare following the disputed election.

In September, the president visited China to engage in discussions on restructuring the country’s external debt. Around two-thirds of [the US\\$6.3 billion debt](#) that Zambia is in the process of restructuring with its official creditors is owed to the Export-Import Bank of China. At the meeting, Hichilema and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed several bilateral agreements, including on economic cooperation and investment, and reportedly discussed Chinese investment in Zambia’s energy, mining, and infrastructure sectors.