

2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Zimbabwe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Zimbabwe during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest and detention; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists and censorship; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and significant presence of the worst forms of child labor.

The government did not take credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Section 1.

Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2.

Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the law limited these freedoms in the “interest of defense, public security or professional confidentiality, to the extent that the restriction is fair, reasonable, necessary and justifiable in a democratic society.” The government arrested, detained, and harassed journalists, critics, and opposition politicians.

There were restrictions on individuals criticizing the government or discussing matters of public interest not aligned with the government's own messaging. Authorities were sensitive to criticism of

the government, security officials, the president, and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union- Popular Front (ZANU-PF) party.

In July 2023, the government amended the criminal code to introduce heavy penalties for citizens at home and abroad and permanent residents convicted of “willfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe.” Civil society organizations and human rights defenders reported the law continued to have a chilling effect on freedom of expression.

On August 1, Czech tourist Lukas Slavik was arrested in Masvingo for recording a video referencing the country’s struggle with water and electricity outages. Police officers at the scene charged him with publishing falsehoods, and authorities subsequently increased the charge to publishing a false statement “with intention to incite the public.” He was held in pretrial detention for 20 days and eventually acquitted and deported.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Security forces, officials, and supporters of the ruling party routinely harassed journalists, in particular to stop them from publishing articles regarding state security. On February 20, a local online investigative media platform, *NewsHawks*, reported it had stopped further reporting of a corruption scandal involving army generals due to intimidation and military surveillance. Deputy Chief Secretary in the Office of the President and Cabinet George Charamba was quoted in state-owned media outlet *The Herald* further warning media “to follow, rather than seek to lead” as this “may invite some responses, which may not be that palatable,” in response to the *NewsHawks* article.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

The government maintained censorship through media registration and accreditation laws, although many provisions of the law were inconsistent with the constitution. The law provided the government with extensive powers to control media and suppress free speech by requiring the registration of journalists and prohibiting the “abuse of free expression.” Government-controlled and independent media outlets and journalists practiced self-censorship.

State actors regularly censored media through targeted exclusion from state events. On February 29, Midlands Minister of State and Devolution Affairs Owen Ncube ordered *The Mirror* journalist Sydney Mubaiwa and *NewsDay*’s Stephen Chadenga to leave a meeting organized by the Zimbabwe Gender Commission. The minister reportedly ordered them not to attend any future government engagements because they represented “newspapers that attack government.”

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of private-sector workers to form and join unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes, however the right to strike was limited. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination and empowered the labor court to handle complaints of such discrimination and direct reinstatement of workers fired due to such discrimination. Some provisions in labor laws were not fully in line with International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining.

The Freedom House publication *Freedom in the World 2024* stated that freedom of association and collective bargaining were restricted by the government, limiting workers’ ability to negotiate better working conditions.

Amendments to the Labor Act passed in July 2023 repealed ministerial oversight of dues collection and assets purchased with those funds and limited the power of the labor minister to refuse to register a collective bargaining agreement to those cases where the agreement was inconsistent with the law.

The labor minister had the authority to appoint an investigator who could, without prior notice, enter trade union premises, question any employee, and inspect and copy any books, records, or other documents.

Unions were not required to register, but registered unions had additional rights, such as negotiating for their members at the National Employment Council, calling for a strike, and filing a lawsuit. The law limited registration of new unions in enterprises or industries that already had a union.

The law significantly limited the right to strike. The law provided that a majority of employees had to agree to strike by voting in a secret ballot. Strike procedure requirements included a mandatory 30-day reconciliation period and referral to binding arbitration. Following an attempt to resolve a dispute regarding interests not already subject to agreement and a labor officer's issuance of a certificate of no settlement, the party proposing a collective job action had to provide seven days' written notice of intent to resort to the strike or labor action, including specifying the grounds for the intended action, to call a strike legally. Failure to notify authorities regarding a strike or public gathering was punishable with a prison term of one year. The law prohibited employers from hiring permanent replacement workers in the event of a strike, but they were allowed to hire temporary workers. In July 2023, the president signed into law amendments that prescribed a sentence of up to five years in jail for organizing any strike deemed illegal, which the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) decried as "criminalizing the right to strike."

In January 2023, the government enacted a law that classified health as an essential service and limited collective job action to an uninterrupted period of 72 hours in any given 14-day period. It also stated that notice of any collective job action had to be given in writing 48 hours before commencement of such collective job action. The act prescribed a fine, imprisonment for up to six months, or both, to any individual who was a member of the governing body of any trade union or representative body of members of the health services that incited any collective job action. Before this, police and army members were the only legally recognized essential services employees and could not strike, but the law allowed the Ministry of Public Service and Labor to declare any nonessential service an essential service if a strike was deemed a danger to the population. The law also allowed employers to sue workers for liability during unlawful strikes, with penalties that included a fine, up to five years' imprisonment, or both.

The government arrested Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe President Obert Masaraure and 15 teachers in January for alleged unlawful gathering with intent to promote public violence, breaches of peace, or bigotry. The court, however, did not find them guilty and acquitted them on August 21.

Collective bargaining agreements applied to all workers in an industry, not just union members. Collective bargaining could take place at the enterprise and industry levels. At the enterprise level, workers' councils could negotiate collective agreements, which became binding if approved by 50 percent of the workers in the bargaining unit. Industry-level bargaining took place within the framework of National Employment Councils. Unions representing at least 50 percent of the workers could bargain with the authorization of the minister of public service and labor. The law encouraged the creation of employee-controlled workers' committees in enterprises where less than 50 percent of workers were unionized. Workers' committees existed in parallel with trade unions. Their role was to negotiate shop-floor grievances, while that of the trade unions was to negotiate industry-level grievances, notably wages. The minister and the registrar had broad powers to take over the direction of a workers' committee if they believed it was mismanaged. Trade unions regarded the existence of such a parallel body as an arrangement that allowed employers to undermine the role of unions.

The Ministry of Public Service and Labor did not effectively enforce labor laws. Penalties for violations of freedom of association or collective bargaining laws were not commensurate with those for similar violations. Those charged with violating the law were subject to lengthy judicial delays and appeals. Penalties were rarely applied to violators. The government demonstrated an unwillingness to implement collective bargaining rights enshrined in the 2013 constitution, including through its limited participation in social dialogue under the Tripartite Negotiating Forum.

The Tripartite Negotiating Forum, a body established by law, formalized dialogue efforts among government, labor leaders, and employers on social and economic policy. Labor unions stated the forum did little to address their demands for wage increases and labor law reform, and the government showed little progress in supporting workers' protections or the peaceful resolution of labor disputes.

Government interference with trade union activity was common, including infiltrating unions to hamper their effectiveness and introducing new unions affiliated with the ruling party. Police and state intelligence services regularly attended and monitored trade union meetings and other activities. Police or ZANU-PF supporters sometimes prevented unions from holding meetings with their members and carrying out organizational activities. Although the law did not require unions to notify police of public gatherings, police demanded such notification.

Parastatal unions were generally perceived as progovernment. The Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions was regarded the largest progovernment trade union and a rival to the ZCTU, which had a history of alignment with opposition parties. The federation was launched in 1996 with the stated purpose of providing an alternative to the ZCTU. It claimed more than 40 affiliates and to be the largest labor body in the country; however, precise membership numbers were not known.

The 2022 ILO Direct Contacts Mission to the country noted with concern the lack of progress on improving civil liberties and trade union rights, the application of the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act, and measures to curb antiunion discrimination.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

Parliament-mandated National Employment Councils set the minimum wage for all industrial sectors through agreement between employers and labor unions. The minimum wage, when paid, seldom exceeded the poverty line due to inflation. Employers paid many agricultural and domestic workers less than minimum wage. Many public servants, including in the education and health sectors, earned salaries that put them below the poverty line due to rampant inflation.

The law did not provide for a standard work week, but it prescribed a minimum of one 24-hour continuous rest period per week. Unions and employers in each sector negotiated the maximum legal work week. No worker could work more than 12 continuous hours. The law prescribed that workers receive not less than twice their standard remuneration for working on a public holiday or on their rest day. Wages remained a major point of friction among workers, employers, and government in the Tripartite Negotiating Forum. Low confidence in the country's newest currency – the Zimbabwe gold, launched in April but depreciated by 64 percent on the parallel market as of the end of the year – led workers to continue to advocate for wages in U.S. dollars.

Occupational Safety and Health

The government set occupational safety and health (OSH) standards on an industry-specific basis. Occupational safety and health standards were up to date and appropriate for the main industries in the country. The law provided for workers to remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment.

Several work-related injuries and deaths occurred in the mining sector due to low investment in occupational safety and health, noncompliance with rules and regulations, and poor awareness of safety and health practices due to lack of training. The growth of the informal mining sector led to increased exposure to chemicals and environmental waste for artisanal miners, including children.

Abuses by management at certain enterprises and companies owned by People's Republic of China (PRC) parastatals and private PRC citizens were reported, including reports of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of workers; unsafe working conditions; underpayment or nonpayment of wages; unfair dismissals; firings without notice; failure to abide by collective bargaining agreements; and failure to report health and safety incidents. In July, the country deported two PRC nationals accused of abusing two mine workers by hanging them from a front-end loader at Makanga Mine in Bindura, although the workers survived. A September report by the nonprofit organization Center for Natural Resource Governance noted many cases of Chinese mining companies violating labor laws, often with apparent impunity.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The Ministry of Public Service and Labor was responsible for enforcing the minimum wage and work hours laws for each sector. The government did not effectively enforce these laws, particularly in the farming and domestic service sectors. The number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce labor laws, including those covering children. Penalties for violations of wage or working hour restrictions were not commensurate with penalties for comparable offenses. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

The quasi-governmental Zimbabwe Occupational Safety and Health Council regulated working conditions. Staffing shortages and a limited mandate, however, rendered the council largely ineffective. The law permitted unannounced inspections by the Occupational Safety Council, and penalties for labor violations included taking the company to court, stationing an official on the company's premises to monitor compliance, and prohibiting the company from operating. The Ministry of Labor reported 8,028 labor inspections conducted in 2022, claiming a 320 percent increase from 2021. The ministry reported it conducted routine inspections as well as targeted inspections based on reports from trade unions and anonymous tips.

Nearly 88 percent of the country's workers labored in the informal sector according to a July 2023 report by the Zimbabwe Statistics Agency. Labor laws technically applied to informal sector workers but were not observed or enforced. Most informal workers worked in agriculture, trading, or mining. According to the Zimbabwe Miners Federation, approximately 500,000 persons worked in the small-scale or artisanal mining sector, but only 40,000 were registered with the Ministry of Mines and Mining Development, according to the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit, an independent think tank. Police frequently clashed with and arrested vendors in Harare's central business district. The district restricted the number of vendors to 6,000 per day but more than 100,000 vendors operated daily as of June 2023. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Vendors Initiative for Sustainable Economic Transformation stated authorities arbitrarily confiscated their members' goods and required vendors to pay unofficial fees to sell their goods in private spaces.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention, but other sections of the law were contradictory and thus weakened these prohibitions. The government's enforcement of security laws often conflicted with the constitution. Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained persons, particularly political and civil society activists, labor leaders, street vendors, and journalists perceived as opposing the government.

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. Police did not always respect these requirements. The law stipulated that arrests required a warrant issued by a court or senior police officer and that police inform an arrested person of the charges before taking the individual into custody. Regulations required a preliminary hearing be held before a court within 48 hours of an arrest. This was not followed consistently. According to the constitution, only a competent court could extend the period of detention. Authorities did not observe this consistently, and there were several cases where activists were held for more than 48 hours without a competent court extending the period of detention.

The law provided that bail be made available for most accused persons. Lower courts commonly denied bail based on previous arrests, including for defendants never convicted of a prior offense.

A destitute detainee could apply to the government for an attorney, but only for capital offenses. Some opposition party members, civil society activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens had limited or no access to legal counsel.

The government regularly used arbitrary arrest and detention as tools of intimidation and harassment, especially against opposition party members, political activists, civil society members, journalists, attorneys, and ordinary citizens asserting their rights.

The government launched a crackdown on government critics in the lead-up to the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Summit on August 17 in Harare. In June, police arrested 80 opposition activists after violently breaking up their meeting at a private residence. In July, police arrested 44 members of the Zimbabwe National Student Union who were holding a meeting in Harare. At the time of the SADC Summit, human rights groups estimated more than 160 activists were arrested, and more than 100 were detained without bail.

Following the SADC Summit, ruling party ZANU-PF Spokesperson Christopher Mutsvangwa announced the government was ready to release all activists detained before the summit, because they no longer posed a threat to the successful hosting of the summit; legal analysts viewed this as evidence of executive interference with the judiciary. Despite this announcement, many of the activists remained in detention without bail. All activists detained in the government's SADC Summit crackdown were subsequently released on bail or had their cases adjudicated by the end of the year.

Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem, although there were no reports of detainees being held for periods equal to or exceeding the maximum possible sentence. Magistrates regularly denied bail to accused persons associated with the opposition. Opposition leader Job Sikhala was arrested in 2022 and was jailed pending trial for more than 18 months before being released from prison on January 30.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3.

Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution prohibited torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. NGOs and local media, however, reported security forces assaulted and tortured citizens, including targeted assaults on civil society activists, opposition members, and other perceived opponents of the government. Throughout the year, police used excessive force in apprehending, detaining, and interrogating criminal suspects. Police and military officers used excessive force and violent means to disperse peaceful demonstrations and to disrupt informal trading.

Security forces often acted in the sole interest of the ruling party. On July 31, state agents boarded a plane at Robert Mugabe International Airport and forcibly removed four human rights activists who were going to Victoria Falls for a conference. The NGO Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights reported that human rights activist Namatai Kwekweza, labor union leader Robson Chere, former opposition councilor Samuel Gwenzi, and musician Vusumuzi Moyo made a distress call before disappearing for eight hours. According to Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, when they eventually located the four, Chere had been tortured and was in severe pain. Police charged the activists with disorderly conduct. The four were held in pretrial detention for 35 days before being granted bail on September 4. Their case remained pending at year's end.

Impunity for politically motivated violence remained a problem. Impunity was also a significant problem in the security forces including police, military, intelligence officers, and among civilian authorities who oversaw them.

Investigations into violence from previous years remained pending, including into state-sponsored violence that resulted in the deaths of 17 civilians in 2019 and of seven civilians in postelection violence in 2018. Despite the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into the 2018 postelection violence and a 2022 High Court ruling demanding respondents pay three million Zimbabwean gold (\$388) to one of the victims, Zakeo Mutimutema, the government paid no compensation to the victims or the families of those killed.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

Child Marriage

The constitution declared anyone younger than age 18 a child. A 2022 law abolished child marriage and aligned marriage laws with the constitution. The marriage law prohibited anyone underage from marrying or entering a civil partnership. The law also criminalized assisting, encouraging, or permitting child marriages or civil partnerships. Authorities did not effectively enforce the law. Despite legal prohibitions, some rural families and religious groups continued to force girls to marry. High rates of unemployment, the prevalence of girls dropping out of school, and families' inability to earn a stable income were major causes of child marriage. Child marriages were common, with 34 percent of girls married before reaching age 18, according to the nonprofit organization Girls Not Brides.

Families gave girls or young women to other families in marriage to avenge spirits, as compensation in interfamily disputes, or to earn the family money. Some families sold their daughters as brides in exchange for food, and sometimes if a wife died, her family offered a younger daughter as a replacement bride to the widower.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government often cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, and other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for granting refugee status and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees; however, there were no refugee status determination sessions conducted during the year as the government worked to establish a new National Eligibility Committee to handle adjudications. As of May, Tongogara Refugee Settlement hosted 16,182 refugees and asylum seekers, despite being designed to host only 3,000.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

An estimated 300 to 350 long-term residents identified as Jewish. There were no reports of antisemitic incidents.