

Zimbabwe

Political Rights: 7 ↓
Civil Liberties: 6
Status: Not Free

Ratings Change: Zimbabwe's political rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to government repression of political opponents, civil society activists, and independent media representatives.

Overview:

Zimbabwe descended further into crisis in 2004 as the authoritarian government of President Robert Mugabe continued to stifle dissent, and militia loyal to Mugabe attacked opposition supporters with impunity. Economic collapse, and with it serious food shortages, deepened as the government expanded its ruinous policy of expropriating white-owned commercial farmland, and as other economic mismanagement and corruption widened. The government further curtailed the freedom of journalists, opposition parties, and civil society organizations.

Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980 after a guerrilla war against a white-minority regime that had declared unilateral independence from Britain in 1965 in what was then Southern Rhodesia; Mugabe has ruled the country since then. For a few years, Zimbabwe was relatively stable, although from 1983 to 1987, the government suppressed resistance from the country's largest minority group, the Ndebele, to dominance by Mugabe's majority ethnic Shona group. Severe human rights abuses accompanied the struggle, which ended with an accord that brought Ndebele leaders into the government.

The 2000 parliamentary elections were deemed by observers to be fundamentally flawed prior to balloting. Candidates and supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) faced violence and intimidation, including the use of rape as a weapon. A constitutional provision empowering Mugabe and allied traditional leaders to appoint one-fifth of parliament's members helped to ensure the continued majority in parliament of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). Voter registration, identification procedures, and tabulation of results were judged highly irregular by some independent observers. The state-controlled media offered limited coverage of opposition viewpoints, and the ZANU-PF used state resources heavily in campaigning. Mugabe issued a pardon for thousands of people, most of them from ZANU-PF, for crimes committed during the election campaign, including assault, arson, kidnapping, torture, rape, and attempted murder. According to the Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum, the rights of more than 18,000 people were violated.

In 2002, Mugabe claimed victory in a deeply flawed presidential election that failed to meet minimum international standards for legitimacy. The election pitted Mugabe against the MDC's Morgan Tsvangirai, a popular trade union leader who was arrested and charged with treason in 2003 after organizing national strikes.

Parliamentary by-elections held in 2003 in two districts near the capital, Highfield and Kuwadzanaw, were marred by intimidation against the MDC, which nonetheless won the polls. Party members were prevented from undertaking normal campaign activities and were detained, beaten, and harassed.

The MDC announced in August 2004 that it would suspend its participation in parliamentary and local elections because it believed there was no hope of a fair poll. The move could backfire, however, by allowing ZANU-PF to gain the two-thirds majority necessary to rewrite the constitution and further restrict democratic rights. In September, ZANU-PF increased its seats in parliament to 98, versus the MDC's 51, after the opposition party boycotted by-elections. The next parliamentary poll is planned for March 2005.

In the biggest split in the ZANU-PF since independence, Information Minister Jonathon Moyo was reprimanded and six of the party's ten provincial chairmen were suspended after a failed revolt against the appointment of a new vice president, Joyce Mujuru.

In recent years, Mugabe has turned against student groups, NGOs, labor unions, and white landowners to create the country's worst crisis since independence. War veterans and government-supported youth militias have occupied or disrupted opposition strongholds and white-owned land, with the overt or complicit backing of the government. Arrests of opposition members and protestors continued throughout 2004.

The government's seizures of white-owned farmland, which began in 2000, have prompted economic collapse, particularly in commercial farming on which exports, foreign exchange, and 400,000 jobs depended. Much of the seized land has gone to ZANU-PF officials, who often have no farming background, instead of to the landless rural black Zimbabweans who were supposed to benefit. The gross domestic product has fallen 30 percent since the land reform began, with the result that Zimbabwe has become one of the world's fastest shrinking economies. Fewer than 500 white-owned farms remain out of the 4,500 that existed when land invasions started. Unemployment exceeds 70 percent. Inflation was 132.6 percent in December 2004, down from a record 622.8 percent in January 2004 but still one of the highest in the world. Aid agencies have warned that nearly half of Zimbabwe's 12 million people need emergency food aid, largely because of faults in the redistribution policy. Party officials handling distribution have manipulated food aid that arrives, withholding relief from suspected opposition supporters. The situation is likely to worsen, considering the government's announcement in June that it planned to nationalize all productive farmland in the country.

Severe shortages of drugs and equipment have pushed hospitals and clinics close to ruin. Infant mortality rates have risen, and the resource-starved health system cannot cope with an HIV epidemic—one of the worst in the world—that has infected one in four adults.

Zimbabwe is in arrears to internal and external creditors, which has led to suspension of disbursements and credit lines. This situation has created shortages of key imports, such as fuel. Concern about the land-reform program was one reason that the IMF suspended financial support to Zimbabwe.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Zimbabweans cannot change their government democratically. President Robert Mugabe and the ZANU-PF, which have dominated the political landscape since independence, manipulate political structures to ensure continued control. The party remains the predominant power through its control over the security forces, most of the media, and much of the economy. Since 1987, at least 15 amendments to the constitution—including scrapping the post of prime minister in favor of an executive president and abolishing the upper chamber of parliament, the Senate—have given the executive more power. In turn, popular opposition to Mugabe has

deepened, with trade unions often at the forefront, and the opposition MDC has experienced rapid growth.

The last few years have seen political violence by ZANU-PF youth militias, which have disrupted meetings and campaigning by opposition members. Meanwhile, security forces have targeted church leaders and civic organizations. Mugabe has on several occasions invoked the Presidential Powers Act, which enables him to bypass normal governmental review and oversight procedures.

Corruption is rampant throughout the country, including at the highest levels of government. Charges of corruption emerged in the 1990s when Mugabe began to award government contracts to his relatives. Ruling party and government officials have been allocated extensive properties seized from white farmers. Reports of extensive corruption and nepotism have reduced public and investor confidence in Zimbabwe's economy. Zimbabwe was ranked 114 out of 146 countries surveyed in the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of the press is severely restricted. No privately owned radio or television stations exist in Zimbabwe, and the state-controlled newspapers and radio and television stations serve as mouthpieces of the government. The Parliamentary Privileges and Immunities Act has been used to force journalists to reveal their sources, especially regarding reporting on corruption, before the courts and parliament. The government in June proposed to censor e-mail by requiring Internet service providers to turn over to the authorities "objectionable, obscene, unauthorized" messages.

The 2002 Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), which gives the information minister sweeping powers to decide who can work as a journalist, has been used to silence media critics of the government. The AIPPA created a governmental commission that hands out "licenses" for journalists, and those operating without a license face fines or prison. In 2004, authorities shut down Africa Tribune Newspapers, whose publisher had criticized AIPPA, for failing to inform them of title and format changes. The previous year, the government closed down *The Daily News*, an independent newspaper that had harshly criticized Mugabe, for failing to register for an AIPPA license. A subsequent application for a license was rejected, and five of the newspaper's directors were arrested. Several other Zimbabwean journalists have been assaulted or detained over the years. In May, the editor and a reporter of *The Standard*, an independent newspaper, were arrested for reporting on the murder of a mining boss. Foreign reporters face extreme difficulty gaining approval to work in or even visit the country, and several have been deported.

Freedom of religion is generally respected, but academic freedom is limited. Security forces and ruling party thugs harass dissident university students, who have been arrested or expelled from school for protesting against government policy.

The small nongovernmental sector is active, and several groups focus on human rights. However, NGOs report increased difficulty in operating due to intimidation and legal harassment. Public demonstrations and protests are essentially illegal under the 2002 Public Order and Security Act, which forbids criticism of the president, limits public assembly, and allows police to impose arbitrary curfews. Security forces often disrupt opposition meetings or declare them illegal or allow party militias to attack opposition activists with impunity. Intelligence agencies are among law enforcers empowered to disperse "illegal" assemblies and arrest participants. In 2004, the government drafted the Non-Governmental Organizations Bill, which would empower a government-appointed body to investigate and audit any group's

activities and funding. The measure would ban foreign-funded organizations involved in governance and human rights issues.

The right to collective action is limited under the Labor Relations Act, which allows the government to veto collective bargaining agreements that it deems harmful to the economy. Strikes are allowed except for industries declared “essential” under the act. Mugabe has used his presidential powers to declare strikes illegal, and labor organizers are common targets of government harassment. Most notably, security forces arrested more than 400 people in response to a two-day general strike in 2003; many were beaten or tortured while in police custody. Because the labor movement provides the core of the most organized resistance to Mugabe’s authoritarian rule, it has become a particular target for repression.

While some courts have struck down or disputed government actions, increasing pressure by the regime may soon end the judiciary’s capacity to act independently. The high court in May quashed the defamation conviction of three journalists for a story that misreported facts surrounding the draft constitution. The government, however, has repeatedly refused to enforce court orders and has replaced senior judges or pressured them to resign. The judicial system has been burdened by the vacancy of nearly 60 magistrate posts, which has caused a backlog of 60,000 cases that require processing.

Security forces often ignore basic rights regarding detention, search, and seizure. With the decline in law and order, war veterans and ruling party militants have taken over traditional policing roles in land redistribution. The military has assumed more policing roles in food distribution and elections. The government has taken no clear action to halt the rising incidence of torture and mistreatment of suspects held by police or security services. In June, the government passed the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Amendment Act that allows police to hold suspects accused of economic crimes for up to four weeks without bail. Human rights activists assert this contravenes the constitutional right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty. The country’s 47 prisons are bulging with 8,000 inmates above the nominal 16,600 capacity. This overcrowding has contributed to a rise in AIDS and TB infections and to food shortages. Deaths in prisons are often caused by poor health conditions or beatings by guards.

The ruling party that is dominated by the Shona majority ethnic group continues to encourage political and economic discrimination against the minority Ndebele people. A clash between the two ethnic groups in the 1980s culminated in the government’s massacre of thousands of Ndebele. Today, the Ndebele tend to be marginalized politically and their region (Matabele, which is an opposition stronghold) lags behind in economic development.

In theory, the state does not control travel or residence. But in practice the land confiscations prevent whites from living on big farms, and foreign critics of the regime are expelled or prevented from entering the country.

The government controls the prices of many major commodities and food staples, and state-linked companies dominate many sectors. The current political turmoil and investment flight does not bode well for the business environment. In September, Mugabe announced that the government would seize half of the country’s private mining companies. A profound lack of transparency in government tenders and other operations has allowed corruption to thrive.

Women enjoy extensive legal protections, but de facto societal discrimination and domestic violence persist. Youth militias supporting Mugabe use rape as a political weapon. The Supreme Court declared that women who marry under customary law must leave their original families and cannot therefore inherit their property. Married women cannot hold property jointly

with their husbands. Access to education for women is especially limited in rural areas. Female heads of households have borne the brunt of the current economic hardships.