



February 2026

MEDIA CAPTURE AND THE ILLUSION OF MEDIA PLURALITY

**Mapping threats to the
media in Zimbabwe**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Zimbabwean media landscape is characterised by a deep-seated architecture of state control, a legacy of colonial-era manipulation¹ that has been refined by the successive post-independence governments of leaders, Robert Mugabe (1980-2017) and Emmerson Mnangagwa (2017 to present) respectively.

While the advent of President Mnangagwa's so-called Second Republic initially promised a departure from the Mugabe era's overt belligerence, the reality in 2026 is a sophisticated system of legalised repression and elite capture of the media. Despite an illusion of media plurality, some of Zimbabwe's private media outlets are controlled by politically connected elites, undermining genuine independence.² The distinction between the state and the supposedly 'independent' media has become dangerously porous, as politically connected individuals—often referred to as proxy owners—dominate the private sector to ensure narrative alignment with President Mnangagwa's ruling ZANU-PF party.

Zimbabwean journalists currently face severe threats, including legal restrictions, direct political interference, surveillance, arrests and physical violence as well as dire economic vulnerabilities, which has resulted in a hostile operating environment.

Contemporary threats to the media have evolved from the blunt force of the early 2000s to a more insidious form of lawfare. This includes the weaponisation of cyber-security legislation and a nascent, albeit terrifying, trend of conflating investigative journalism with subversion and terrorism. This report argues that without fundamental

legislative reform and the restoration of regulatory independence, the Zimbabwean media will continue to function as a tool for regime legitimisation rather than a democratic watchdog.

KEY FINDINGS

The research highlights several critical findings regarding the state of media in Zimbabwe:

Media capture and the illusion of media plurality: The Zimbabwean media landscape is marked by an illusion of media plurality. The distinction between state-owned and private media is increasingly blurred, because some private outlets are directly owned or indirectly controlled by politically connected elites, the military and Zanu PF affiliates. The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) has consistently awarded licences to entities with links to the military or ruling party.

State and Executive Dominance: The **Broadcasting Services Amendment Act (2025)**³ has further entrenched executive power by granting the President authority to appoint the **Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ)** board. The requirement for the president to act "after consultation with the Minister and the (parliamentary) Committee on Standing Rules and Orders"

1 Henning Melber, "Media, public discourse and political contestation in Zimbabwe", Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, Issue 27 2004, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/100348/27_Media-Public-Discourse.pdf

2 Owen Gagare, "TV licensing controversy: Zanu PF emerges the biggest winner in major scandal", The NewsHawks, November 27, 2020, <https://thenewshawks.com/tv-licensing-controversy-zanu-pf-emerges-biggest-winner-in-major-scandal/>

3 https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Act%20No.%20of%202025%20Broadcasting%20Services%20Amendment.pdf accessed on 26 January 2026

does not soften the blow as these entities are unlikely to oppose a powerful president.

Another way in which the state exerts its control over the broadcast media is through the statutory creation of **'The Government Hour'** on all broadcast platforms. Section 11(5) of the Broadcasting Services Amendment Act (2025) mandates that all licensees reserve one hour per week for the government to explain its policies, a clear case of mandatory state propaganda.⁴

Digital Enclosure: The amended broadcasting Act's expansion to include "internet-based broadcasting" (podcasts and webcasting) subjects digital creators to the same restrictive conditions that have historically crippled traditional media.

Severe legal, political and physical threats to journalists: Journalists in Zimbabwe face significant legal and political threats through weaponised legislation.⁵ Laws such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (the "Patriot Act"), the Freedom of Information Act, are frequently used to criminalise journalism, curtail critical reportage deemed to injure national interest or insult the president.

Dire economic conditions: The threats to the media are aggravated by dire economic conditions and poor salaries that profoundly impact journalistic independence and integrity.⁶ Many journalists are poorly paid, with some earning as little as US\$100 per month or going months without salaries. This financial strain has led to instances where journalists accept 'gifts' from controversial

public figures or, in extreme cases, resorting to criminal activities like armed robbery, further eroding public trust.

Structural censorship: The prohibitive costs of annual licensing fees for new news outlets also limit media diversity and solidifies the state's grip on the sector. This combined weight of challenges creates an environment where journalistic truth is often compromised for institutional survival.

It is recommended that there should be an urgent reform of the legal and regulatory environment for the Zimbabwean media to operate freely and perform its watchdog role. Statutes that criminalise journalism such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021), the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, the "Patriot Act" amendments of 2023 and the Interception of Communications Act (ICA) of 2007 should be amended or repealed.

There should also be independent regulatory oversight and transparency in the licensing processes for all media outlets, particularly by the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ). This entity has been accused of giving licenses to entities linked to the ruling elite. This oversight will ensure that there is genuine media plurality instead of the prevailing elite capture. To enhance journalism standards and independence, journalists, through their unions, and other bodies must push for an improvement of working conditions and salaries. The state should also guarantee journalistic freedom and protect journalists from physical violence, arbitrary arrests and detention, harassment, online harassment and surveillance.

4 Ibid

5 Committee to Protect Journalists, "Zimbabwe documents by year", 2025, <https://cpj.org/africa/zimbabwe/>

6 Evidence Chenjerai, "When Advertising and Journalistic Integrity Collide; Advertising Usually Wins", Global Press Journal, January 10, 2023, <https://globalpressjournal.com/africa/zimbabwe/advertising-journalistic-integrity-collide-advertising-usually-wins/>

INTRODUCTION

For a democracy to truly thrive, it requires more than periodic holding of elections as and when they are legally due.

It demands an empowered citizenry with unfettered freedom of expression and association. In an ideal scenario, the media serves as the lifeblood of this democratic organism, subjecting public officials, public institutions and corporate entities to the necessary scrutiny and facilitating robust dialogue. However, these ideals remain illusory in Zimbabwe.

Despite the ritual holding of elections, successive ZANU PF governments have shown no appetite for establishing and entrenching a democratic state. Instead, they have established an authoritarian regime and also deliberately shackled the media to stifle dissent.

This report offers a critical, in-depth analysis of Zimbabwe's complex media landscape. It examines how a deeply rooted history of state control—originally designed for colonial power retention—has been repurposed to shape a contemporary environment of surveillance-led repression of both citizens and the media. Although the constitutional promise of democracy and the attendant rights and freedoms exist on paper, the lived reality of Zimbabwean journalists is one of 'managed' pluralism, where the state's hand is always heavy. The hoped-for transition from the era of Robert Mugabe to President Mnangagwa's 'Second Republic' has not heralded the anticipated liberalisation; rather, it has seen the modernisation of authoritarian tactics, shifting from physical cudgels to digital surveillance and lawfare.

OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE REPORT

The primary objective of this report is to delineate the historical trajectory and current manifestations of state control and manipulation within the Zimbabwean media

landscape. It aims to highlight the evolution from overt colonial propaganda to more subtle, yet equally pervasive, forms of state and elite capture that undermine genuine media independence. Specifically, the report seeks to;

- Trace the historical foundations of media control, from its origins during the colonial era through post-independence periods.
- Expose the contemporary legal, political, and economic threats faced by journalists and media houses in Zimbabwe.
- Analyse the mechanisms of media capture and the resulting illusion of media plurality, given that private outlets are often controlled by politically connected elites, the military and ruling party affiliates.
- Highlight the hostile operating environment and detail specific instances of harassment, detention, and physical violence against journalists and media houses.
- Assess the impact of the multi-faceted challenges on journalistic independence, integrity as well as the media's capacity to play its watchdog role.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

The following key terms and concepts used throughout this report are defined as:

State control; Refers to the government's influence over media content, ownership and operations. In the Zimbabwean context, it has been historically aimed at advancing the economic and political interests of the ruling elite. It includes direct propaganda and indirect means of influence.

Media capture; Describes a situation where private media outlets are either directly owned or indirectly controlled by politically connected elites, the military, or affiliates of

the ruling party, thereby compromising their editorial independence.

Illusion of media plurality; It is the deceptive appearance of a diverse media environment, where numerous media outlets exist, but lack genuine editorial independence, mostly because of political affiliations or financial control. It results in a homogeneity of news.

Weaponised legislation; Pertains to the strategic use of legal frameworks and statutes such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act or the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act) among other laws, to criminalise journalism, suppress dissent and restrict reporting deemed critical or injurious to state interests or the presidency, leading to arbitrary arrests and detentions.

Structural censorship; Encompasses systemic barriers and economic constraints that indirectly restrict media freedom and diversity.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The report synthesises information from a wide range of sources to provide a robust analysis. The research methodology involved a qualitative approach, combining primary data gathered through interviews with journalists, media stakeholders and lawyers media stakeholders and secondary data from a comprehensive desk research.

To direct insights into the challenges faced by journalists and media houses, interviews were conducted with various individuals within the media fraternity, including representatives from the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ), the Zimbabwe National Editors Forum (ZINEF) and the Young Journalists Association of Zimbabwe (YOJA).

Secondary sources such as academic journals and books were used to provide historical context and theoretical frameworks on media and politics in Zimbabwe. Additionally, articles from news websites and reports from international and local media freedom advocacy groups, such as Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, MISA Zimbabwe and Unwanted Witness, offered detailed accounts of legal threats, incidents of harassment, surveillance practices and economic pressures impacting the media.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While there have been significant transformations in the Zimbabwean media landscape since the colonial era, a singular constant remains: the state's exploitation of the media as an instrument to sustain the political and military elite's grip on power.

This stranglehold on power manifests itself in various ways, among them systemic censorship, the politicisation of ownership, control of editors and journalists and the suppression of dissenting voices. In a 2018 paper titled; “*Media and Democracy in Zimbabwe*”, authors Lungisani Moyo and Trevor Chabwinja aptly observed that in “Zimbabwe, with the changes in its name at different times, including Southern Rhodesia, Rhodesia, Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, and finally Zimbabwe in 1980, never really experienced genuinely free media.”⁷

COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS: THE PRESS AS A TOOL OF WHITE SUPREMACY (1890–1980)

The first newspapers in Zimbabwe, the *Mashonaland*, *Zambezi Times* and the *Rhodesian Herald* were owned by Argus Press of South Africa. Cecil John Rhodes, who was the force behind the British imperialism in southern Africa, was also behind the setting up and growth of newspapers in the then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. His friend, Francis Dorma, was the editor of the first paper and Argus Press was given the monopoly to establish newspapers in Southern Rhodesia. “Newspapers during this period were designed to promote the cause of

the white settler colonialism and their business interests in South Africa. In fact, the papers were designed to sustain colonial imperialist system and to serve their narrow interests, which had nothing to do with the indigenous populations,” noted Moyo and Chabwinja.⁸

The colonial press was heavily censored and functioned as a vehicle for the colonial administration's hegemonic interests and propaganda.⁹ By the mid-20th century, a few African-run publications had emerged to challenge the white-dominated media narrative. The *Bantu Mirror*, launched in 1932, ostensibly to offer news from an African perspective.¹⁰ However, the publication, which was owned by members of the Associated Bantu Press of South Africa and received an annual government subsidy, was ineffective as it was heavily censored by the colonial regime's Department of Native Affairs. Writing about the publication in a 1977 Seminar Paper, academic, Eric Songore, described the *Bantu Mirror* as follows:

“Though this newspaper was stated as ‘a Native Newspaper to give news to and reflect the views of the Bantu people’, it was anything but ‘native’. There was everything official to it to make it completely unAfrican.”¹¹

7 Lungisani Moyo and Trevor Chabwinja, “Media and Democracy in Zimbabwe”, University of Fort Hare, December, 2015, <http://krepublishers.com/02-Journals/JC/JC-09-0-000-18-Web/JC-09-1-2-000-2018-Abst-PDF/JC-09-1-2-058-18-162-Moyo-I/JC-09-1-2-058-18-162-Moyo-I-Tx%20%5B6%5D.pmd.pdf>

8 Ibid

9 Terrence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa”. *Journal of African History* 32, no.2 (1993): 211-262

10 [file:///Users/watcher/Downloads/Mandishona%20Songore,%20Eric%20Richard,%20Anatomy%20of%20Minority%20Dominance,%20Rhodesia%201933-%201940,%20\(Henderson%20History%20Seminar%20Paper%20no.%2039.%20\).pdf](file:///Users/watcher/Downloads/Mandishona%20Songore,%20Eric%20Richard,%20Anatomy%20of%20Minority%20Dominance,%20Rhodesia%201933-%201940,%20(Henderson%20History%20Seminar%20Paper%20no.%2039.%20).pdf) accessed on 26 January 2026

11 Ibid

In one of its editorial columns, the publication stated:

“You are all agreed that a white man is superior to us (Africans) in all details and envy him as well as ape most of his doings; we want to come to his level.”¹²

Another outlet launched in 1956, *African Daily News*, provided more assertive Black Nationalist discourse, but it drew fire from the Rhodesian authorities.¹³ The publication gained popularity but was eventually banned in 1964 for its open criticism of Ian Smith’s regime and opposition to the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI).¹⁴

The Roman Catholic run *Moto* and the United Methodist Church’s *Umbowo* also played a pivotal role in the articulation of African issues and perspectives as they were critical of some repressive colonial policies while supporting African nationalist politics in the 1960s–70s. *Moto* was known for routinely denouncing the Ian Smith regime and supporting the liberation struggle. Unsurprisingly, the publication was banned in 1974. Its printing press was bombed on the eve of independence.¹⁵ Legal instruments, such as the Official Secrets Act (1911) and Emergency Powers Regulations, gave the colonial state sweeping authority to restrict the flow of information and criminalise subversive media.¹⁶ African journalists and editors were routinely detained or censored. The nationalistic press faded after independence in 1980 while the hitherto colonial press switched its allegiance to a new ruling elite.¹⁷

POST-INDEPENDENCE OPTIMISM AND DISILLUSIONMENT

The first decade after independence brought renewed hope for media diversity and liberalisation. The new government, led by Robert Mugabe, inherited a media system designed to serve colonial interests. Initially, the government promoted pluralism in public communication. The establishment of the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) by the nascent Mugabe administration in 1981 was presented as a progressive step to decentralise media ownership and safeguard journalistic integrity. The government argued it wanted “to decolonise the media and not to control it”.¹⁸

The ZMMT was established to transfer media assets into indigenous hands while supposedly preserving journalistic independence. In reality this turned out to be a transfer of media assets into the hands of an African government whose espousal of Marxist ideologies of a ‘one-party state’ and other socialist concepts which emphasised a tightly controlled media whose mandate was to amplify state ideologies. These ideological underpinnings and Zanu PF’s quest for an unchallenged one-party dispensation precluded any possibilities of journalistic independence and media freedom.

And so, ZMMT took over the ownership of a chain of newspapers from the previous owner, South Africa’s Argus Group. The publications under the ZMMT stable

12 Ibid

13 Richard Saunders, “Never the Same Again: Zimbabwe’s Growth Towards Democracy. Harare: Edwina Spicer Trust, 2000.

14 Dumisani Moyo, “The Press and Political Repression in Zimbabwe”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 22 no. 6 (2000): 743-762.

15 Pindula, “Moto Magazine”, ND, https://www.pindula.co.zw/Moto_Magazine#:~:text=One%20of%20its%20editors%20was,after%20Zimbabwe%27s%20independence%20in%201980

16 Wallace Chuma, “The Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust and the Ambiguities of Media Reform”, *African Affairs* 103, no 410 (2004): 537-555

17 Stanford D Mukasa, “Press and Politics in Zimbabwe.” *African Studies Quarterly* 7, no.2-3 (2003): 161–174. africa.ufl.edu/asq.africa.ufl.edu

18 Hlengiwe Dube, “Freedom of Expression in Zimbabwe”, MISA Zimbabwe, December 31, 2019, https://africaninternetrights.org/sites/default/files/Freedom-of-Expression-in-Zimbabwe_MISA-Zimbabwe.pdf

included Zimbabwe's biggest-selling dailies *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*, weekly publications like the *Sunday News* and *Sunday Mail*, as well as the *Zimbabwe Inter-Africa News Agency* (ZIANA).¹⁹

Though publicly portrayed as autonomous, the state media under the ZMMT was effectively transformed into a pro-government apparatus.²⁰

Media scholar Stanford Mukasa observed that "with independence in 1980, the bulk of the surviving nationalist press... faded into oblivion, and the hitherto colonial press switched its allegiance to a new ruling elite".²¹ This marked the beginning of a state media monopoly whose structure mimicked the colonial model it replaced. Journalists were discouraged from critiquing the government, and editorial policy was steered toward consolidating the authority of the ruling Zanu PF. In addition, the Trust's mandate was gradually usurped by political operatives who used it to enforce party loyalty and suppress dissent.²²

Journalists who failed to toe the party line, such as the editor of the Bulawayo based *The Chronicle*, Geoffrey Nyarota, who allowed the publication of the Willowgate Scandal in 1988, were punished.²³ This was a story of a scandal wherein *The Chronicle* exposed cabinet ministers who were abusing a government vehicle importation facility for personal gain. After the high-profile exposures which left the Mugabe government deeply embarrassed, Nyarota was removed from his position and offered what was branded as a promotion as

the regime flexed its powers to appoint and dismiss editors and journalists and ensure they toed the government line. Any modicum of independence that the ZMMT trustees had enjoyed was eventually taken away in 1996 when the government assumed direct control of the trust. Announcing the move, the then Director of Information, Bornwell Chakaodza, said that a 29 April 1996 amendment to the ZMMT's deed gave the state the authority to oversee the operations of the ZMMT. Chakaodza also said although the ZMMT Board retained the right to appoint editors, these were now supposed to be approved by then President Mugabe and the information minister- a clear demonstration of how the regime had moved to entrench its authority in the operations of the state media.²⁴

Nonetheless, the post-independence period witnessed moves to establish vibrant independent media outlets which ran stories that were critical of government and public officials. One of these was *The Daily Gazette* which immediately became popular after its launch in 1992. At the peak of its success, it was said to be selling as many as 60 000 copies a day- a figure most publications would struggle to match in this era.²⁵ *The Daily Gazette* was owned by Elias Rusike. His company, Modus Publications, also published the hugely popular *Financial Gazette* weekly and *The Sunday Gazette*. However, huge capital constraints led to the closures, first of *The Daily Gazette* in 1994 and later, *The Sunday Gazette*.²⁶

Another milestone in the Zimbabwe media landscape occurred in 1999 when the privately

19 <https://ifex.org/government-assumes-control-of-zimbabwes-largest-media-group/> accessed on 26 January 2026

20 Mandlenkosi Mpofu, "Politics and the Media in Zimbabwe: A Historical Perspective (Harare: Weaver Press, 2020.

21 Stanford D Mukasa, "Press and Politics in Zimbabwe." *African Studies Quarterly* 7, no.2-3 (2003): 161-174.asq. africa.ufl.eduasq.africa.ufl.edu

22 Bruce Mutsvairo, "The Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust and the Myth of Independence," *African Journalism Studies* 38, no.3 (2017): 19-34

23 Geoffrey Nyarota, "Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsmen", Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006

24 <https://ifex.org/government-assumes-control-of-zimbabwes-largest-media-group/> accessed on 26 January 2026

25 <https://niemanreports.org/in-zimbabwe-the-independent-press-struggles-to-survive/> accessed on 26 January 2026

26 https://www.africafiles.org/article_ID-3841.html#:~:text=Outside%20of%20the%20chains%2C%20most,of%20the%20company%20were%20sold. Accessed on 26 January 2026

owned Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) established the hugely popular and rabidly anti-government, *Daily News*, with veteran journalist Geoffery Nyarota as the editor. The newspaper, which was a massive hit in urban areas due to its fearless and critical reporting, was launched the same year as the then Morgan Tsvangirai-led opposition Movement for Democratic Change. The *Daily News* gave a voice to opposition parties and other government critics, hence its mass appeal especially in urban areas which quickly became opposition strongholds.

Disconcertingly, in the aftermath of the establishment of the *Daily News*, the independent media in Zimbabwe began to suffer far greater state violence than what the colonial authorities had employed against dissenting journalists and media outlets. In 2001, the *Daily News* printing press was bombed by suspected state security agents.²⁷ Journalists from the media house were intimidated, while in some rural areas, copies of the newspaper were confiscated and destroyed.

Less than a week before the bombing, about 500 state-aligned veterans of Zimbabwe's 1970s independence war had demonstrated in front of the newspaper's offices, to protest its coverage of the death of Democratic Republic of Congo President Laurent-Desiré Kabila, whose army had been fighting a rebel

insurgency with the help of Zimbabwean troops. The protesters reportedly hurled stones at the newspaper's offices, breaking windows, and they assaulted a *Daily News* reporter, Julius Zava.²⁸

A day before the bombing, some government officials had allegedly branded the *Daily News* a security threat which needed to be dealt with. Then, in the early hours of 28 January 2001, an armed group of unidentified assailants detained at gunpoint the six-man security crew at the factory where the *Daily News* was printed. Several explosives were scattered inside the building and these later detonated, causing material damage estimated at US\$2million. No was ever brought to book over the bombing. Although no one was physically hurt in the blast, the financial and psychological toll was massive.²⁹

The *Daily News* was eventually shut down in 2003 amid a government crackdown. Another independent daily paper, *Mirror*, was established in 2002 but also faced state repression, which eventually led to its takeover by the Central Intelligence Organisation before its closure. In 2010, AMH launched another daily paper, *NewsDay*, which is the only independent daily newspaper currently in operation. As the following sections will show, the threats facing *NewsDay* and other media outlets are escalating, more sophisticated and severe.

27 Andrew Meldrum, "Bombs wreck Harare presses", *The Guardian*, January 29, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jan/29/zimbabwe.andrewmeldrum>

28 <https://cpj.org/2001/01/zimbabwe-unpatriotic-newspaper-bombed/> accessed on 27 January 2026

29 Ibid

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

This section offers an analysis of the current media landscape in Zimbabwe. The threats under review in this section range from legal challenges, political and institutional, economic and ownership-related threats, digital and technological and societal and extra-legal threats.

A holistic examination of these categorised threats reveal that media workers and organisations in Zimbabwe are facing an onslaught on all fronts.

LEGAL AND REGULATORY THREATS

The successive Mugabe and Mnangagwa administrations have wielded a battery of draconian laws to dominate the press and intimidate journalists. These laws broadly target any reporting deemed “false,” “subversive,” or a threat to the “national interest,” providing cover for arbitrary arrests, harassment and even torture of journalists³⁰. The laws under discussion are:

Official Secrets Act (OSA, 1933): This colonial-era relic criminalises possession or disclosure of classified documents. Successive governments have used it to gag whistleblowers and journalists. Though rarely prosecuted, the law’s mere existence intimidates reporters as they risk arrest for handling any document labelled “secret,” no matter the public interest.

Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA, 2002): In 2002, the government of Zimbabwe passed the now-repealed Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA). Despite its benign-sounding name, AIPPA

empowered the government to control publishing through tough licensing and accreditation requirements. All newspapers had to register with a new Media and Information Commission (MIC) under the Ministry of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services. Every journalist required accreditation under the law, a condition which is still in place today. In effect, the state could withhold registration or revoke licences at will. Critics noted that AIPPA simply revived the spirit of colonial censorship laws.³¹ Once enacted, the *Daily News* management refused to register under AIPPA and challenged the law in court. In September 2003, Zimbabwe’s Supreme Court ruled that *Daily News* was operating “outside the law” for not registering, and refused to hear its constitutional challenge until it did so.³² Within days, police raided and sealed the newspaper’s offices arguing the media house was operating illegally. The newspaper was thus shut down.

The media clampdown under AIPPA however went beyond the *Daily News*. The *Daily News* came back on the streets in 2010, but has changed its editorial stance, with some critics saying it is now operating like an extension of the state controlled newspapers. In public statements in 2003, Information Minister Jonathan Moyo explicitly named the remaining weeklies as targets of suspicion. He vilified the *Standard* and the *Zimbabwe*

30 Reporters Without Borders, “Zimbabwe (Index 2025)”, <https://rsf.org/en/country/zimbabwe#:~:text=Extremely%20harsh%20laws%20are%20still,threatening%20the%20work%20of%20journalists>

31 Stanford D Mukasa, “Press and Politics in Zimbabwe.” *African Studies Quarterly* 7, no.2-3 (2003): 161–174. africa.ufl.edu/asq/africa.ufl.edu

32 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Attacks on the Press 2003: Zimbabwe”, March 11, 2004, <https://cpj.org/2004/03/attacks-on-the-press-2003-zimbabwe/>

Independent as “running dogs of imperialism” for their criticism of government, and warned that MIC investigations were underway against the registered papers.³³ The two weeklies are still operating, despite remaining targeted. In 2004, the MIC shutdown another independently weekly the *Sunday Tribune* claiming it had not followed registration laws.³⁴ In 2005, the MIC shut the *Weekly Times* a few months after its launch using the AIPPA.³⁵

Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA, 1960): Originally passed under Rhodesia, the now-repealed LOMA remained on the books long after independence and was a blunt instrument for Mugabe’s government. Section 50 of LOMA criminalised any “false news” likely to “cause fear and despondency” or “undermine authority.” In January 1999, the *Standard* journalists Mark Chavunduka and chief reporter Ray Choto were charged under LOMA Section 50(2) for an article alleging a military coup plot.³⁶ Security forces secretly detained and tortured them. Choto later remarked that his “captors emphasised that they did not dispute” the content, but punished him nonetheless. The Supreme Court eventually quashed the charges, finding LOMA’s language “too vague and too draconian”. In a 2000 judgment, Supreme Court’s Justice Nicholas McNally ruled that LOMA was unclear and should be re-written to conform with the country’s constitution. “This section is too intimidating. No one can be sure whether what he says or writes will not attract prosecution and imprisonment,” McNally said in a written judgment.³⁷

The Broadcasting Services Act 2001, as amended.

This Act facilitates state authority over media houses by compelling them to acquire broadcasting licences and operate within a monitored system.³⁸ The law’s content-monitoring provisions gave the state a legal basis to surveil programming and penalise broadcasters who deviated from state-approved narratives. In practice, this created an environment where only state-owned or Zanu-PF-aligned platforms such as the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) could operate freely, ensuring a monopolisation of public discourse.

The Act has been amended several times including in 2025, to accommodate digital-age reforms, including internet-based broadcasting, revised board structure, and a new legal requirement for motorists to obtain a public broadcaster (ZBC) radio licence or exemption before getting a permit or insurance processing mandatory radio licensing for motorists.

Public Order and Security Act (POSA, 2002) and Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA, 2019): The now-repealed POSA, passed in 2002, effectively replaced LOMA but maintained strict controls. POSA required police permission for any public gathering and criminalised “unlawful” demonstrations, giving security forces license to break up protests and arrest bystanders – including reporters – on flimsy grounds. In 2019 Mnangagwa’s government repealed POSA

33 Angus Shaw, “Zimbabwe threatens another newspaper”, *Independent*, October 6, 2003, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/zimbabwe-threatens-another-newspaper-90025.html>

34 Press Gazette, “Closure of Tribune is purely political”, June 24, 2004, <https://pressgazette.co.uk/archive-content/closure-of-tribune-is-purely-political/>

35 Reporters Without Borders, “Weekly Times closed down just two months after launch”, February 28, 2005, <https://pressgazette.co.uk/archive-content/closure-of-tribune-is-purely-political/>

36 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Supreme Court dismisses charges against two tortured journalists”, <https://cpj.org/2000/05/supreme-court-dismisses-charges-against-two-tortur/#:~:text=the%20two%20journalists%20had%20been,said%20in%20a%20written%20judgment>

37 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Supreme court dismisses charges against two tortured journalists”, May 23, 2000, <https://cpj.org/2000/05/supreme-court-dismisses-charges-against-two-tortur/>

38 Law.co.zw, Broadcast Services Amendment Act 2025 (Zimbabwe), Act No. 2 of 2025, <https://www.law.co.zw/download/broadcasting-services-amendment-act-2025-zimbabwe/> accessed on 27 January 2026

and replaced it with the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA), which critics say is equally restrictive. Although it mostly covers demonstrations, the law also gags the media by prohibiting journalists from covering or even being near unsanctioned events.

The Interception of Communications Act (ICA 2007)

The then Mugabe-led government enacted this law to arm itself with powers to access telephonic, electronic, and internet communications of citizens as well as media practitioners. In terms of this law, a cabinet minister, rather than an independent court, is empowered to issue surveillance warrants, granting the executive discretion to spy on journalists and citizens, ostensibly on the grounds of national security. Telecommunications providers were compelled to install interception technologies and retain subscriber data, a move that effectively integrated private firms into the state surveillance apparatus.

Cybersecurity and Data Protection Act (2021):

Ostensibly regulating data and cybercrime, this Act passed by the Mnangagwa regime marked Zimbabwe's formal entry into and codification of digital-age surveillance—legitimising state intrusion under the guise of promoting cybersecurity. In addition to ordinary citizens, the Act enables the government to surveil journalists and media organisations. The law has broad or vague provisions allowing police to criminalise routine journalism. It obliges telecommunication providers to share subscriber data on request (with minimal oversight) and penalises sharing “false” information on networks.

It provides for the establishment of a state-controlled **Cybersecurity Centre** housed in the Office of the President, merging cybersecurity

with interception of communications. It mandates data retention by service providers, authorises real-time monitoring of internet activity, and grants intelligence services broad access to personal data. Despite the façade of “data protection,” the Act codifies executive control over digital surveillance.

Key Sections that threaten journalists and media operations:

- Section 10: “A law enforcement agent may, with a warrant issued by a magistrate, access any computer system or data for the purpose of investigating any offence”
- Section 15: Authority to monitor all internet communications
- Section 20: Data retention requirements for all service providers
- Section 25: Government access to personal data for security purposes
- Section 30: Cybercrime investigation powers including real-time monitoring

Rather than safeguarding citizens' data, this Act systematically dismantles privacy rights through provisions which establish comprehensive surveillance capabilities. Three following provisions reveal the true, disturbing intentions of the state:

- Section 35: allows broad national security exceptions to data protection
- Section 40: authorises broad intelligence service access to personal data
- Section 45: authorises international intelligence sharing agreements without any safeguards or oversight

By deliberately conflating cybersecurity with national security, the Mnangagwa regime has created legal justification for sweeping surveillance powers. The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Zimbabwe) has spoken out against this conflation, saying transforms every citizen into a potential threat.³⁹

39 Misa Zimbabwe, “Analysis of the Data Protection Act.” Misa Zimbabwe, December 6, 2021. <https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2021/12/06/analysis-of-the-data-protection-act/>.

Criminalising Journalism

Section 164 exemplifies how the Cybersecurity and Data Protection Act weaponises vague language against journalistic freedom. Citizens face five years imprisonment or maximum fines for transmitting data messages deemed to “incite violence”—a standard so subjective that even legitimate reporting is criminalised. The case of journalist Blessed Mhlanga demonstrates this danger: in February 2025, he was charged with inciting violence. His supposed crime was broadcasting his interview with ruling Zanu-PF party Central Committee member and war veteran Blessed Geza, who viciously attacked President Mnangagwa for alleged corruption and gross violations of the constitution, and demanded his ouster. Mhlanga was charged with allegedly “inciting violence”. His case was investigated not just by the regular police, but by its Counter-Terrorism Unit — a frightening development that reveals the Zimbabwean regime’s conflation of journalism with terrorism.⁴⁰ As of 2026, the case is pending before the courts.

Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act (2023) – the “Patriot Act”:

In 2023, Parliament passed sweeping amendments labelled the *Criminal Law Codification and Reform Amendment Bill, 2022*, widely dubbed the “Patriot Bill” or “Patriot Act.” It criminalises vaguely defined acts of “wilfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe,” punishable by fines, loss of citizenship or even death.⁴¹ Critics – including Amnesty and RSF – warned that terms like “national interest” are so broad that any criticism of government policy could be deemed treasonous. President Mnangagwa signed it into law in mid-2023. Journalists

fear that reports labelling official wrongdoing could now be prosecuted as “sedition.”

Media lawyer, Chris Mhike, who has represented many journalists targeted by the state told *Intelwatch* the legislative and media policy frameworks in Zimbabwe are inimical to the maintenance and development of press freedom. He said various pieces of media law and policy pose the risk of threats, arrests, and general harassment of the media; particularly the private media. “Section 61 of the Constitution specifically protects media freedom. This is an improvement on the 1979 (Lancaster House) Constitution of Zimbabwe. The explicit inclusion of media freedom in the current (2013) Constitution therefore marked, at least on paper, an improvement on the safety and protection of members of the press,” Mhike said. “However, these constitutional changes have failed to stop the promulgation of new toxic media laws, and the perpetuation of repressive cultures against independent journalists.”

POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL THREATS

The Zimbabwe government’s surveillance tools

The Zimbabwe Republic Police and Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) has invested in increasingly sophisticated spyware. Under Mugabe, the Interception of Communications Act (ICA, 2007) gave the state blanket powers to intercept phone calls, emails, faxes and postal mail with almost no judicial oversight.⁴² Under Mnangagwa this surveillance infrastructure has expanded with the use of spyware. Unwanted Witness’s 2025 report titled: *“Surveillance/Spyware: An Impediment*

40 Amnesty International, Zimbabwe: The Arbitrary Detention of Journalist a Brazen Attack on Press Freedom, Amnesty International, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org.zw/2025/02/zimbabwe-the-arbitrary-detention-of-journalist-a-brazen-attack-on-press-freedom/>.

41 Amnesty International, “<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/06/zimbabwe-parliaments-passing-of-patriotic-bill-is-a-grave-assault-on-the-human-rights/>”

42 Reporters Without Borders, “All communication can now be intercepted under new law signed by Mugabe”, August 6, 2007, <https://rsf.org/en/all-communications-can-now-be-intercepted-under-new-law-signed-mugabe#:~:text=Reporters%20Without%20Borders%20regrets%20that,15.06.2007>

to *Civil Society in East & Southern Africa*”, highlights Zimbabwe as a country where unchecked digital spying by the state is “stifling free expression, intimidating dissenting voices, and threatening democracy”.⁴³

Zimbabwe is also known to use spyware developed by the Israeli firm NSO Group, mostly known for its Pegasus spyware which, according to David Pegg and Sam Cutler,⁴⁴ can infiltrate smartphones, extract messages, photos, emails and even activate microphones and cameras without the user’s knowledge. In 2021, MISA Zimbabwe wrote to Parliament of Zimbabwe expressing concern over the acquisition of surveillance spyware by the Zimbabwe government. This was after two reports emerged indicating that Zimbabwe is a customer of Israeli telecom company Circles, a surveillance firm that reportedly exploits weaknesses in the global mobile phone system to snoop on calls, texts, and the location of phones around the globe.⁴⁵ Circles is also reported to be affiliated with NSO Group, which develops the often-abused Pegasus spyware. Circles, whose products work without hacking the phone itself, says they sell only to nation-states. MISA said it was not only concerned with the use of such tools in the absence of substantive cybersecurity and data protection legislation in Zimbabwe but also with the lack of transparency around the acquisition of this cybersecurity equipment and the conditions under which it is sold to Zimbabwe.

A 2020 report titled, “*Running in Circles: Uncovering the Clients of Cyberespionage Firm, Circles*”, by the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab — which investigates digital

espionage against civil society—revealed that government agencies in Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Zambia and Zimbabwe are using the surveillance technology developed by Circles to snoop on the personal communications of opposition politicians, human rights activists and journalists.⁴⁶ Circles exploits flaws in Signaling System No.7 (SS7), the set of protocols that allow networks to exchange calls and text messages between each other. This allows government agencies to track individuals, including journalists, across borders without a warrant, bypassing international conventions.

DIGITAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL THREATS

As discussed above, Zimbabwe is using advanced spyware developed by the Israeli firm NSO Group, mostly known for its Pegasus spyware which, can infiltrate smartphones, extract messages, photos, emails and activate microphones and cameras without the user’s knowledge. The roots of digital repression lie in the Interception of Communications Act (2007), which authorises government agencies to legal intercept private communications. The Act undermines constitutional rights to privacy and freedom of expression. For journalists, the Act creates the constant risk of surveillance, especially when covering sensitive issues such as corruption or national security.⁴⁷

Additionally in 2013, the government gazetted Statutory Instrument 142 of 2013 on Postal and Telecommunications (Subscriber Registration) Regulations, permitting its security agencies to spy into people’s telephone call records,

43 Unwanted Witness, “Unwanted Witness Launches Ground Breaking Report On Surveillance Threats in East & Southern Africa”, June 10, 2025, <https://www.unwantedwitness.org/unwanted-witness-launches-groundbreaking-report-on-surveillance-threats-to-civil-society-in-east-southern-africa/>

44 David Pegg and Sam Cutler, “What is Pegasus spyware and how does it hack phones?” The Guardian, 2021.

45 Misa Zimbabwe, “Concern over acquisition and use of surveillance tools in Zimbabwe,” Misa Zimbabwe, 2021

46 Bill Marczak, John Scott-Railton, Siddharth Prakash Rao, Siena Anstis and Ron Deibert, “Running in Circles – Uncovering the Clients of Cyberespionage Firm Circles,” Citizen Lab, December 1, 2020

47 NewsDay -No to snooping on citizens phone-April 12 2025<https://www.newsday.co.zw/editorials/article/200040678/no-to-snooping-on-citizens-mobile-phones>

text messages and internet communication.⁴⁸ The Instrument 142 also compels telecom companies to register subscribers and hand over data to authorities. Such laws erode constitutional guarantees that protect journalists and their sources.

In 2014, the then Security Minister, Didymus Mutasa, confirmed there was mass surveillance, saying the government “sees everything...we have our means of seeing things, we see things through our system. So no one can hide from us in this country”⁴⁹. After leaving government in 2015, Mutasa said, “Your phones are listened to a lot. The CIO is huge and it produces many reports.”⁵⁰

Further confirming widespread social media monitoring, in 2020, the late Zimbabwe National Army Commander, Edzai Chimomyo said the army would snoop into private communications to ‘guard against subversion’, raising fears that the country was moving towards a surveillance State.⁵¹

Social media monitoring

Security agents actively track social media activity including posts by media practitioners. This is exemplified by the fact that prominent journalists like Hopewell Chin’ono have been arrested for social media posts deemed critical of the state.

Evidence also suggests that the government has been getting information directly from

mobile network operators in Zimbabwe without the subscribers’ knowledge and consent. In some cases, the data has been gathered and used to track down to opposition figures and human rights defenders. For instance, phone tracking was used to track Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) legislator Joana Mamombe, Netsai Marova and Cecilia Chimbiri before their arrest and detention. Zimbabwe largest telecommunications provider Econet Wireless was given a 48-hour ultimatum by the High Court to release cell phone records pertaining to the three CCC activists’ movements, tracked through their mobile phones on the day they were allegedly abducted by State security agents.⁵² This suggests that Zimbabwean journalists are also tracked and monitored in a similar manner.

Hacking

There have been instances when websites belonging to independent newsrooms in Zimbabwe were hacked by unknown attackers, posing a serious threat to press freedom and media sustainability. A notable example occurred in 2013, when AMH had the websites of its three publications— *NewsDay*, *The Zimbabwe Independent*, and *The Standard*—hacked by unknown attackers who posted hostile content. This not only disrupted operations but also raised concerns about the vulnerability of independent voices in Zimbabwe’s increasingly hostile digital environment.⁵³

48 Everson Mushava -NewsDay Govt to spy on cell phones, October 1 2013 <https://www.newsday.co.zw/editorials/article/200040678/no-to-snooping-on-citizens-mobile-phones>

49 NGO Forum, The Right to Privacy in Zimbabwe, Harvard Law School, 2016, https://humanrightsclinic.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/zimbabwe_upr2016.pdf.

50 Bulawayo 24, Mutasa challenges Zanu PF to arrest him, July 1, 2015, <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-national-byo-70282.html>

51 Brenna Matendere, “Army to monitor social media,” Newsday (Harare), March 3, 2020, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/slider/article/48340/army-to-monitor-social-media>.

52 Pellargia Mupurwa, “High Court orders Econet to release GPS data in MDC activists abduction saga.” September 3, 2020. <https://techmag.tv/2020/09/03/high-court-orders-econet-to-release-gps-data-in-mdc-activists-abduction-saga/>

53 L.S.M Kabwezain Connectivity-Techzim “AMH News websites NewsDay, Independent, Standard hacked, September 10, 2013, <https://www.techzim.co.zw/2013/09/alpha-media-news-sites-hacked/>

Phishing

There is also a fraudulent practice of sending emails or other messages purporting to be from reputable companies in order to induce journalists to reveal personal information, such as passwords and credit card numbers. Journalists in Zimbabwe face persistent phishing attacks which critics say includes state-sponsored surveillance and online harassment. The attacks aim to compromise journalists' sources, steal sensitive information, or disrupt their ability to report. In 2021, Blessed Mhlanga, head of news and current affairs at the News Day affiliated Heart and Soul TV Radio, shared a screenshot from someone who came to their inbox claiming to be from Twitter's Documentation Centre. It was however not clear if this was a targeted attack.⁵⁴

ARRESTS, DETENTION AND HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS

It is not just the invasion of privacy that journalists are subjected to, but there has been an increase in the number of journalists who were charged, detained or otherwise punished for simply doing their jobs. Stories which are critical of the President as well as those which expose corruption in the security sector have historically attracted the wrath of state apparatus. In 1999, Ray Choto and Mark Chavunduka were tortured by police and military intelligence personnel for publishing an exposé about soldiers arrested

in an attempted coup in Zimbabwe.⁵⁵ When Chavunduka and Choto were brought to court on 21 January 2000, they both had cigarette burns on their bodies. The two journalists filed civil and criminal charges against the police and military for wrongful arrest, detention, assault and torture. Although the court ordered the then police commissioner, Augustine Chihuri, to investigate the journalists' accusations, nothing was done.

On 9 March 2015, Itai Dzamara, a journalist turned activist, was abducted while having a hair cut in Harare's Glenview high density suburb.⁵⁶ Prior to his disappearance, he had been protesting outside the Parliament building calling for the government to respect human rights and boost the moribund economy. Despite a court order directing the police to investigate his case, nothing has materialised and he remains unaccounted for.⁵⁷

Owen Gagare, then chief reporter at the *Zimbabwe Independent*, was arrested and charged with publishing "falsehoods" alongside editor Dumisani Muleya⁵⁸. They had published a story about secret talks between opposition leaders and the military. Gagare's story was confirmed by then MDC-T secretary for security and intelligence Giles Mutsekwa. During detention, the police quizzed him about the source of his story. The duo was released on summons. Gagare faced more persecution in his subsequent role as *NewsHawks* news editor. He was placed under surveillance in 2024 and the online investigative outlet was forced to

54 Garikai Dzoma in Cyber Security "Screenshots: Twitter phishing attack on a Zimbabwean journalist" April 11 2021 <https://www.techzim.co.zw/2021/04/screenshots-twitter-phishing-attack-on-a-zimbabwean-journalist/>

55 Committee to Protect Journalists, "Supreme court dismisses charges against two tortured journalists", May 23, 2000, <https://cpj.org/2000/05/supreme-court-dismisses-charges-against-two-tortur/>

56 Zimbabwe Human Rights Association, "8 Years Later: We Still Remember Itai Dzamara and Call for Justice and Truth," 15 March 2023 <https://www.zimrights.org.zw/8-years-later-we-still-remember-itai-dzamara-and-call-for-justice-and-truth/>

57 Amnesty International, "Ten years without answers since journalist and activist Itai Dzamara's enforced disappearance," 7 March 2025 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/03/zimbabwe-ten-years-without-answers-since-journalist-and-activist-itai-dzamaras-enforced-disappearance/>

58 Aljazeera, "Zimbabwe police charge and release editor", May 7, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/5/7/zimbabwe-police-charge-and-release-editor#>

drop an investigation of corruption by senior military commanders.⁵⁹ The military issued a statement saying the matter flagged by *NewsHawks* was “under investigation, sub-judice and therefore still undergoing due-legal process.”⁶⁰ President Mnangagwa’s spokesman George Charamba told the state-run *Herald* that the army had its “its own internal processes to investigate any allegation against any of its members and it is always prudent for the media to follow, rather than seek to lead such a process... Leading through advocacy muddies the water and may invite some responses, which may not be that palatable.”

Prominent journalist Hopewell Chin’ono was arrested three times between 2020 and 2021. In 2020 he was charged with “incitement to commit public violence”. This was after he re-tweeted a post by opposition leader Jacob Ngarivhume who was calling for a national shut down in protest of poor governance by President Emmerson Mngangagwa’s administration. Chin’ono was tracked to his place of residence where he managed to live-stream his arrest with the police breaking into his house. His lawyer, Beatrice Mtetwa, reported that eight police officers, some in uniform and others in plain clothes raided his home in July 2020. They harassed his workers and broke his door to gain entry without producing a search warrant.⁶¹

During the same year, Chin’ono was again arrested after he tweeted that he had spoken to some members of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) who told him that Henrietta Rushwaya, a controversial gold

dealer related to President Mnangagwa, was going to be granted bail in a case she had been accused of smuggling gold. In 2021 Chin’ono was again charged with publishing falsehoods under Section 31 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act despite the fact that the statute was outlawed by the Constitutional Court in 2014.⁶²

In February 2025 Mnangagwa’s government arrested Blessed Mhlanga, a radio and TV anchor with Alpha Media, after he conducted on-air interviews with a Zanu PF war veteran who had called for the president’s resignation. When he first appeared in court, Mhlanga, through his lawyer Chris Mhike, complained that he was harassed by the police.⁶³

Mhlanga spent 72 days pretrial detention and remains on trial under Section 164 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act together with his employer Heart & Soul TV, an AMH subsidiary. Mhlanga has since filed a Constitutional Court application challenging his arrest and the matter is pending before the courts. He told *Intelwatch* there was nothing criminal about the charge he is facing, describing it as a “political charge”. Mhlanga told *Intelwatch* that his arrest had motivated him to report more on politics and “strengthened” him instead of cowering him into resignation.

“I was arrested a lot of times. I think this is my seventh time getting arrested and this was the only time I spent the long time in jail. I was doing my work and I will continue doing my work. Journalism is not a crime.”

59 Misa Zimbabwe, “NewsHawks freezes military story”, February 20, 2024, https://zimbabwe.misa.org/media_violations/newshawks-freezes-military-story/

60 The NewsHawks, February 16, 2024, <https://x.com/NewsHawksLive/status/1758474948429984066>

61 263 Chat, Police Raid Journalist Chin’ono’s House, July 21 2020. Available at: <https://www.263chat.com/police-raid-journalist-chinonos-house/>

62 American Bar Association, Zimbabwe: The Persecution and Prosecutions of Hopewell Chin’ono, October 20, 2021 https://www.americanbar.org/groups/human_rights/reports/zimbabwe-the-persecution-and-prosecutions-of-hopewell-chinono/

63 NewZimbabwe.com, “HSTV’s Blessed Mhlanga complains about inhumane treatment by police officers, state opposes bail says he will interfere with witnesses who are his juniors” February 25 2025 <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/hstvs-mhlanga-complains-about-inhumane-treatment-by-police-officers-state-opposes-bail-says-he-will-interfere-with-witnesses-who-are-his-juniors-at-work/>

As previously discussed in this report, the Mhlanga case demonstrates how the Zimbabwean government seemingly equates journalism with terrorism.

In July 2025 the editor of *Zimbabwe Independent*, Faith Zaba, was arrested on “insult” charges for allowing publication of a satirical political column mocking President Mnangagwa’s tenure as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) chair. Zaba’s arrest, as aptly noted by Amnesty International, is a “grotesque assault on freedom of expression”.⁶⁴ She was detained for three days despite the fact that she was ill and had handed herself over to the police after receiving information that she was being sought. Her bail application could not be heard on her first court appearance because the prosecution was allegedly not ready.⁶⁵ The next day, the presiding magistrate caused Zaba’s further detention saying that he wanted his ruling, in which he had granted her US\$200 bail already, typed before he reads it in court.⁶⁶ Human rights lawyer Paida Saurombe told *Intelwatch*:

“Even a handwritten ruling from a magistrate’s court is valid for appeal at the High Court, provided it is clear. To detain a suspect on the pretext of power cuts, or to claim that a verdict cannot be delivered because it has not been typed, is nothing more than a flimsy excuse. In Zaba’s case, it was clearly aimed at keeping her behind bars without justification.”

The government also charged AMH (publishers of the *Zimbabwe Independent*) alongside Zaba, resulting in editor in chief, Kholwani Nyathi, appearing in court on

behalf of the company. The AMH editors have since petitioned the courts to drop the charges but at the time of writing, the charges were pending before the courts.⁶⁷ Zimbabwe National Editors Forum (ZINEF) national coordinator Njabulo Ncube told *Intelwatch* that it was clear from the charges that the Zimbabwean media was under serious attack.

“When journalists are arrested for satirical columns and quotidian or mundane criticism of those in power, it raises serious questions about press freedom, the rule of law and governance, in this case under President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s administration...It’s essential for authorities to respect and protect the rights of journalists guaranteed by the constitution and the law to ensure free, independent and informative reporting in the public interest.”

Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ) president George Maponga bemoaned the weaponisation of the law to target journalists and called for the government to use media oversight bodies for addressing grievances against the media.

“In a (supposedly) free and democratic society such as ours, it is upon all parties to use laid-down processes and procedures in seeking recourse, especially when they feel they have been wronged by the media, rather than resorting to arresting and detaining journalists. This is an unnecessary use of strong arm tactics and amounts to weaponising legal channels, criminalising the profession.”

64 Amnesty International, “Zimbabwe: arbitrary detention of journalists an assault on freedom of expression” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/zimbabwe-arbitrary-detention-of-journalist-an-assault-on-freedom-of-expression>

65 Lindie Whiz, “Journalist Faith Zaba spends second night in custody as documents examined” ZimLive, July 2 2025 <https://www.zimlive.com/journalist-faith-zaba-spends-second-night-in-custody-as-medical-documents-examined/>

66 Mary Taruvinga, NewZimbabwe.com July 3 2025 Zimbabwe Independent editor Zaba’s bail ruling postponed due to power outages <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/zimbabwe-independent-editor-zabas-bail-ruling-postponed-due-to-power-outage/>

67 Misa “Amh editors challenge prosecution,” August 29, 2025, https://zimbabwe.misa.org/media_violations/amh-editors-challenge-prosecution/

ECONOMIC AND OWNERSHIP-RELATED THREATS

Media ownership concentration

After the November 2017 ouster of President Mugabe through a military coup, there was cautious hope that the airwaves would be opened and that the independent media would be given a chance to flourish. This optimism was predicated on the then new President Mnangagwa's promises of reforms. That hope has however, been extinguished not only by a clear return to old laws, but by a subtler strategy: capture through co-option, patronage and selective licensing that gives the surface appearance of pluralism while hollowing out media independence in practice.

The inclusion of AMH owner, Trevor Ncube, in Mnangagwa's Presidential Advisory Council (PAC)—and the subsequent turbulence at titles in his AMH stable—illustrated how proximity to power can create internal pressure on newsrooms. The then AMH editor-in-chief Dumisani Muleya, who was also the *Zimbabwe Independent* editor, resigned in 2019⁶⁸ after being given a less influential position. Insiders at the stable revealed Ncube was pressuring editors to “soften” their editorial coverage to be less critical of the Mnangagwa regime. Muleya was replaced as editor-in-chief by Wisdom Mdzungairi, who also served as the *NewsDay*

editor. Mdzungairi left the post in 2023 after it was revealed he was on the government payroll as a public relations practitioner.⁶⁹

After Ncube's appointment to the PAC, Mnangagwa's son-in-law Gerald Mlotshwa bought a 39% stake in AMH allowing him to appoint a board member in the stable.⁷⁰ Mlotshwa appointed Brenda Kamoto from his law firm Titan Law into the AMH board to cement his position.⁷¹ While it is not clear if he interferes in editorial issues, his mere presence as a shareholder has a chilling effect on media freedom, particularly at AMH where journalists could potentially feel the need to self-censor to keep their jobs. The sale of the AMH stake to Mlotshwa and other transfers of equity to figures close to the ruling elite has been one way of ensuring media capture. Media researcher Lazarus Sauti observed that Mlotshwa's buy-in “is a clear indication that the private media in Zimbabwe is now captured by President Mnangagwa's family members or cronies”.⁷²

Another way of ensuring media capture has been through the broadcast licences. In 2020, the regime ostensibly ended the state's 40-year monopoly on television broadcasting by licensing six new stations. However, a closer look at the new licensees debunks any pretence of liberalisation of the broadcast sector and the entry of genuinely independent players. All licensees are linked to the ruling Zanu PF and military elite.

68 Dumisani Muleya, “Dumisani Muleya: Goodbye, time for change,” ZimLive, October 4, 2019, <https://www.zimlive.com/dumisani-muleya-goodbye-time-for-change/>

69 ZimLive, “NewsDay editor ousted after Mnangagwa spokesman claims he is on payroll”, January 17, 2023, <https://www.zimlive.com/newsday-editor-ousted-after-mnangagwa-spokesman-claims-he-is-on-payroll/>

70 The NewsHawks “Mnangagwa son-in-law appoints AMH board member”, October 9, 2022, <https://thenewshawks.com/mnangagwa-son-in-law-appoints-amh-board-rep/>

71 The NewsHawks, “Mnangagwa son-in-law appoints AMH board rep” October 9, 2022, <https://thenewshawks.com/mnangagwa-son-in-law-appoints-amh-board-rep/>

72 Derick Matsengarwoszi, “In Zimbabwe a struggling media is a target for capture”, <https://africanarguments.org/2023/04/in-zimbabwe-a-struggling-media-is-a-target-for-capture/>

The licenses were given to:⁷³

- **Zimpapers Television Network (ZTN)** – a subsidiary of Zimbabwe Newspapers Ltd, the state-controlled print conglomerate.
- **Nkululeko Rusununguko Media (NRTV)** – owned by the Zimbabwe National Army.
- **Acacia Media (Kumba TV)** – owned by Sharon Mugabe, a Zanu PF activist and former aspirant.
- **Channel Dzimbahwe (Channel D)** – backed by Happison Muchechetere, former ZBC general manager.
- **Jester Media (3K TV)** – part of the *Daily News* stable.
- **Fairtalk Communications (Ke Yona TV)** – led by Qhubani Moyo, a Zimbabwe Electoral Commissioner. Fairtalk has known ties to the military.

MISA Zimbabwe warned at the time that in effect the licensees “either already hold print or broadcasting licences or are linked to the government or the governing party,” risking a “homogeneity of news and views”.⁷⁴

Like television, commercial radio in Zimbabwe is also captured. When Zimbabwe first granted private radio licences in 2012, they were awarded to *Star FM* run by *Zimpapers* and *ZiFM Stereo* owned by a

Zanu-PF legislator and former minister, Supa Mandiwanzira. As noted by former radio personality and former opposition legislator, James Maridadi, the stations operate “as an extension of the State-owned Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation”.⁷⁵ Maridadi said: “I don’t see [Mandiwanzira] biting the hand that feeds him, because it is Zanu PF that gave him that licence.”

Radio licenses issued afterwards also favoured Zanu PF insiders. In 2015, the BAZ awarded eight new local FM licences – most of which were linked to Zanu PF officials and the military. In Bulawayo, *Skyz Metro FM* was given a licence. It later emerged that Fairtalk was actually in partnership with the army’s Rusununguko company to run the radio station.⁷⁶ Other radio stations like *Diamond FM* (Mutare) and *Gogogoi FM* (Masvingo) are subsidiaries of Zimpapers and AB Communications (Mandiwanzira’s company) respectively.⁷⁷ Amnesty International in 2015 expressed concern that all 10 commercial radio licences issued had gone to companies “owned by or controlled by” the government or close to the ruling party.⁷⁸ Because of this ownership structure, none of Zimbabwe’s current broadcast outlets can genuinely criticise President Mnangagwa or his party. Journalists practise self-censorship.

73 Gibbs Dube, “Zimbabwe Grants Television Licences to Companies Linked to Government, Ruling Party”, November 20, 2020, <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/zimbabwe-licences-television-ruling-party-rusununguko/5670137.html>

74 Gibbs Dube, “Zimbabwe Grants Television Licences to Companies Linked to Government, Ruling Party”, November 20, 2020, <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/zimbabwe-licences-television-ruling-party-rusununguko/5670137.html>

75 Stephen Chadenga, “ZiFM, Star FM an extension of ZBC: MP” Misa Zimbabwe, May 12, 2016, <https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2016/05/13/zifm-star-fm-an-extension-of-zbc-mp/#:~:text=Zimbabwe%20lacks%20plurality%20of%20voices,broadcaster%20James%20Maridadi%20has%20said>

76 Lance Guma and Nyashadzashe Ndoro, “Leaked document [roves army control of recently licensed TV stations”, November 24, 2020 <https://nehandaradio.com/2020/11/24/leaked-document-proves-army-control-of-recently-licensed-tv-stations/>

77 Temba Dube, “Qhubani Moyo’s Skyz Metro FM wins Bulawayo radio license race” March 4, 2015, <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-local-byo-63716.html>

78 Amnesty International, “Zimbabwe: radio license stranglehold gagging freedom of expression,” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/05/zimbabwe-radio-stranglehold-gagging-freedom-of-expression/#:~:text=However%2C%20its%20independence%20and%20impartiality,links%20to%20the%20ruling%20party>

FINANCIAL RUIN: POOR SALARIES AND DEPLORABLE WORKING CONDITIONS

Different stakeholders interviewed by *Intelwatch* revealed a profession in crisis, where meagre salaries and precarious working conditions have reduced many journalists to a state of destitution.

Zimbabwe's mainstream media – be it private or state-controlled or print, digital or electronic – is also struggling to generate funds and this has affected its ability to pay salaries.⁷⁹

The emergence of digital platforms has resulted in the disruption of traditional news consumption habits with many readers and viewers using digital platforms. Business models have also been disrupted, resulting in the shrinking of advertising revenue and copy sales which have been traditionally the mainstay of the Zimbabwean media. The country's protracted economic crisis has drastically reduced disposable incomes and crippled traditional media revenue streams.

A research by media scholars Admire Mare and Peter Chiridza shows that digital platforms such as X, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram have become indispensable to Zimbabwe's news publishers' routines of producing and distributing news to audiences. Yet, these media organisations struggle to develop sustainable business models to monetise their news work on these platforms. The findings conclude that in Zimbabwe, digital platforms have no meaningful revenue-sharing partnerships with news organisations. As a result, mainstream news publishers are

forced to rely on traditional revenue streams like advertising, subscriptions, paywalls, and licensing fees. But in a struggling economy, these sources are unstable, inconsistent, and highly unpredictable, resulting in an unhealthy media industry.⁸⁰

To aggravate the situation, traditional print titles in Zimbabwe have seen steep circulation declines.⁸¹

The majority of Zimbabwe's media houses are therefore struggling to pay journalists, particularly private media houses. Some journalists told *Intelwatch* they were owed up to a year's salaries, forcing them to survive on writing for foreign publications and the few available grants for journalistic work from various international funders. Many admitted to taking bribes with one journalist saying his employer was aware of this.

"I have not been paid for eight months, but my employer still expects stories from me. I have obligations like rentals and school fees to pay. When my editor sees me at work, where does he think I would have got transport money from? It's obvious they know we are getting bribes. We don't write big stories anymore and everyone knows what is going on, but no one is willing to have an open conversation about it," the journalist told *Intelwatch*.

ZINEF national coordinator Njabulo Ncube told *Intelwatch*, "One private media house has had staff resign en-mass due to non-payment of salaries while others are known to be dabbling in extortion. I don't see any local journalists refusing to take a bribe

79 Nigel Nyamutumbu, The nexus between Zimbabwe's advertising trends and media industry sustainability, *NewsDay*, September 22, 2024, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/thestandard/standard-people/article/200032630/the-nexus-between-zimbabwes-advertising-trends-and-media-industry-sustainability>

80 Peter Chiridza and Admire Mare, Digital platforms and revenue generation strategies adopted by Zimbabwean mainstream publishers, *Researchgate*, June 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393034110_Digital_platforms_and_revenue_generation_strategies_adopted_by_Zimbabwean_mainstream_news_publishers#:~:text=daily%20operations,media%20industry%20in%20the%20country

81 Internews, Emerging revenue strategies for independent news organisations in Africa, December 4, 2024, <https://internews.org/blog/emerging-revenue-strategies-for-independent-news-organizations-in-africa/>

due to poor remuneration. Journalists are not only grappling with delayed wages, the working conditions are appalling. There are cases where journalists foot to work and assignments while others are bungled into newspaper delivery vans or trucks”.

Ncube said some journalists have resorted to crime, to make ends meet.

Nigel Nyamutumbu, who coordinates Media Alliance Zimbabwe, said Zimbabwe’s economic crisis has crippled the media, with some organisations scaling down and shedding jobs.

“So you would have outdated equipment, tools of trade that makes it very difficult for the traditional media to compete with new and forms of media, be there podcasting or commercial online content creation,” Nyamutumbu told *Intelwatch*.

Young Journalists Association of Zimbabwe President, Leo Munhende, said young journalists bear the brunt of a dysfunctional, unrewarding and poor media industry; earning the worst salaries across any sector. “I know of young journalists who earn US\$100, a figure that is not enough to cover basic expenses such as transport, food and accommodation,” Munhende said, adding that poor salaries resulted in the juniorisation of newsrooms.

Zimbabwe Union of Journalists president, George Maponga, said the poor salary and working conditions pose an existential threat to the media profession.

Maponga said ZUJ was also pushing for non-monetary incentives for journalists. He said the union had initiated discussions with a private developer to provide affordable housing at flexible payment terms for journalists across Zimbabwe.

“However, we cannot wait indefinitely; we must actively work on improving

salaries and working conditions. There are instances where journalists, upon retirement, do not receive any pension. We aim to address this with media houses and encourage them to establish retirement schemes and other benefits, such as medical aid,” Maponga told *Intelwatch*.

SOCIETAL AND EXTRA LEGAL THREATS

Gendered Online Harassment

While all journalists face online harassment, threats and surveillance, female journalists appear to be disproportionately affected, more than their male counterparts. A report by the Gender and Media Coalition of Zimbabwe (GMC Zimbabwe) shows that 63% of female journalists in Zimbabwe have experienced technology facilitated gender-based violence.⁸² The violence has had a severe effect on the safety, freedom and professional participation of women in media. The report says female journalists are often driven from online platforms and social media because of attacks, leading to self-censorship and silencing.

In an interview with *Intelwatch*, NewsDay reporter, Miriam Mangwaya, said she had been forced to avoid social media due to cyber-bullying by sources and politicians. She said in 2021 she was singled out for harassment over a story she co-authored with a male colleague, Blessed Mhlanga. The story was about schools re-opening during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the story, it was reported that President Mnangagwa had ordered schools to prepare for reopening. However, Zanu PF’s then Director of Information, Tafadzwa Mugwadi, accused her of publishing falsehoods.

“Mugwadi went on the X platform and insulted me for writing a “fake story”. He called me ‘a news rapist’ and put my picture to his X post. I was just an assistant to my colleague Blessed Mhlanga. But it appears he picked

82 Peter Moyo, Matabeleland Pulse August 2025-New report reveals 63% of women journalists in Zimbabwe face technology-facilitated GBV - Matabeleland Pulse <https://share.google/GHKEHLNOOIVyhASoz>

on me because I am a woman. He knew I was not as powerful. He chose me because he perceived that I was weak and he could do anything to me without me fighting back.”

She described the torrent of abuse from Mugwadi’s followers as frightening and demoralising.

“Since then I am rarely active on social media. Sometimes I lose confidence due to those (social media) comments. I lose confidence because I start thinking of how people might react to whatever I post,” Mugwadi said.

In December 2022, fellow female journalist, Mary Taruvinga, also received threats and a warning not to pursue a story on foreign investment in Zimbabwe’s lithium sector by Chinese-owned lithium company, Prospect Lithium. Taruvinga was threatened on X by one Tafara Shumba who often posts in support of the Mnangagwa regime. Shumba told her to abandon the story or face unstated consequences.

Shumba’s message to Taruvinga stated: “You better abandon the so-called investigative journalism you are set to conduct.” Given that Taruvinga had not even pitched the story to her editors, the threats suggest possible surveillance of her digital gadgets.⁸³

Taruvinga was later summoned to the Chinese Embassy, where some officials who claimed to be in charge of media intimidated her and accused her of lying in the story she had written. They also wrote to her via their legal practitioners demanding a retraction of her story and threatening a lawsuit. Up to now, there has not been any legal action against her.

MEDIA ATTACKS BY ZANU PF-ALIGNED GROUPS

Mugwadi and Taruvinga’s cases not only illustrate the gendered harassment of journalists, they also exemplify the threats posed by Zanu PF-linked groups that have been given a free rein to attack the media and any other critics of the ruling party and government.

One such storm trooper group is known as *varakashi* (a Shona word meaning destroyers). This group has become a serious threat to journalists and it also patrols cyber space, specifically tasked with defending the ruling party and its leadership. It is run by several youths who are paid for their services and it emerged in response to active encouragement by President Mnangagwa’s call to Zanu PF youths to engage and “thrash the opposition on social media,” ahead of the 2018 elections.⁸⁴ The directive has accelerated the production and distribution of political communication, including fake news and disinformation. Journalists who have written stories critical of government are often viciously attacked on social media. The combined effect of trolling and cyber bullying by *varakashi* and government officials, some of whom also use pseudonyms, has resulted in some journalists, dropping some stories. Prominent media houses such as *NewsHawks* are often targeted by the online trolls.⁸⁵ *Varakashi* employ a diverse toolkit of psychological and informational warfare to achieve their objectives. Their tactics include:

Trolling and delegitimisation: Using anonymous and fake accounts on social media platforms, particularly X. The *varakashi* engage in mockery, name-calling and

83 Tafara Shumba, X, December 21 2022. Available at: <https://x.com/Tafiez/status/1605521022437928961?t=9BxrJNuekL-nDLcs2lu-jw&s=03>

84 ZimEye, Mnangagwa unleashes social media cyber-attack dogs against opponents, March 9, 2018, <https://www.zimeye.net/2018/03/09/mnangagwa-unleashes-social-media-cyber-attack-dogs-against-opponents/>

85 International Press Institute, Zimbabwe: Journalists threatened, harassed online, March, 30, 2023, <https://ipi.media/zimbabwe-journalists-threatened-harassed-online/>

ridiculing of journalists, opposition politicians and human rights defenders. A primary method of attack is delegitimising journalists and activists by labelling them as foreign agents or unpatriotic for criticising the government.⁸⁶

Mudslinging and disinformation: The deliberate spread of misinformation is used to create irrational debates and smear campaigns, undermining the credibility of journalists and media organisations.

Targeted threats: Beyond insults, *varakashi* issue explicit and chilling threats of physical and sexual violence. This targeted intimidation is designed to instil a personal sense of fear in journalists, opposition party officials and human rights defenders. The attacks have been more severe on women.⁸⁷

Another vigilante outfit of Zanu PF zealots calling itself 'The Zimbabwe Anti-Presidential Criticism Team' announced itself to Zimbabweans in December 2025. As the name suggests, the group's mission is to fight any criticism of the president and his regime. The group has come out on social media, claiming authority to police the thoughts, speech, and opinions of Zimbabwean citizens, especially on social media.

Reacting to the formation of the group, online news outlet, *ZimLive*, said this showed that Zimbabwe had taken "a dangerous step closer to author George Orwell's predicted authoritarian state in which round-the-clock surveillance virtually destroys all human freedoms."⁸⁸

"What these zealots announced is not politics. It is not patriotism. It is the institutionalisation of fear. It is an attempt to drag Zimbabwe into a political darkness where citizens whisper in markets, watch their backs in kombis, and think twice before speaking their minds. This is the birth of a modern Thought Police – and it is being introduced with the arrogance of those who believe they will never be held accountable.

"The creation of this vigilante group represents a direct and hostile assault on democratic space. In a functioning democracy, the right to criticise leadership is sacrosanct. It is the oxygen that keeps a nation alive. When those in power begin to criminalise dissent, when they deploy foot soldiers to monitor and attack citizens for expressing their views, the message is unmistakable: democracy is no longer a system of governance, but an obstacle to be eliminated," *ZimLive* stated.⁸⁹

As with other vigilante outfits, this groups' activities and scrutiny will likely extend to spying and harassing journalists, with chilling effects on media freedom.

CHINESE EMBASSY PRESSURE

Normally, diplomats and embassies do not directly attack journalists but as shown by the Taruvinga issue, the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe has applied pressure on journalists who expose corruption, unfair labour practices and environmental damage caused by Chinese companies in Zimbabwe. Another case is that of journalist, Tawanda

86 Global Voices.org, Varakashi: Zimbabwe's online brigade targets activists and dissidents, November 28, 2019, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2019/11/28/varakashi-zimbabwes-online-brigade-targets-activists-and-dissidents/>

87 Andrew Mambondiani, Zimbabwe: Emmerson Mnangagwa's online storm troopers target women who speak out, Index on Censorship, 30 July 2025, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2025/07/zimbabwe-emmerson-mnangagwas-online-stormtroopers-target-women-who-speak-out/>

88 <https://www.zimlive.com/mbares-thought-police-zimbabwes-descent-into-an-orwellian-nightmare/> accessed on 27 January 2026

89 Ibid

Majoni, a columnist at *The Standard*. In August 2020, the Chinese Embassy launched a personal attack on Majoni through an official statement.⁹⁰ The embassy accused him of harbouring political ambitions and seeking to make money through attacking Chinese investments. Majoni had questioned the re-entry of a Chinese mining company,

Anjin, which was stopped from operating in the Marange diamond fields alongside other diamond mining companies because of looting allegations by then President Mugabe's regime. The unprecedented attack on Majoni was condemned by the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists and journalists nationwide.⁹¹

90 Forum on China Africa Cooperation, August 26, 2020, http://www.focac.org/eng/zfgx_4/zzjw/202008/t20200825_7942295.htm

91 Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, Zimbabwe: journalists union angered by Chinese embassy statement over diamond mining company, September 2, 2020, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/es/últimas-noticias/zimbabwe-journalist-union-angered-by-chinese-embassy-statement-over-diamond-mining-company/>

IMPACT ANALYSIS

The pervasive threats facing the Zimbabwean media landscape have had devastating consequences for journalistic independence, integrity, and the media's ability to perform its essential watchdog role.

EROSION OF MEDIA INDEPENDENCE AND PLURALITY

The historical trajectory of media in Zimbabwe, established during the colonial era to advance political and economic interests of whites, continues to manifest today, with editorial lines in state controlled media outlets openly supporting Zanu PF elites. In addition, the distinction between private and state-owned media is increasingly blurred. Many private outlets are directly owned or indirectly controlled by politically connected elites and the military.

Regulatory capture is also pervasive, with BAZ denying broadcasting licenses to genuinely independent applicants. Zanu PF or military-linked entities have been awarded broadcasting licenses leading to pluralism without diversity and a resultant homogeneity of news.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS, ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES AND THE CULTURE OF FEAR

Zimbabwean journalists operate in a hostile environment because of severe legal and political threats. Laws are frequently weaponised to criminalise journalism, suppress dissent and restrict critical reporting deemed injurious to the national interest or insulting to the president. This legal arsenal provides justification for arbitrary arrests, detention and harassment of journalists.

Many journalists have faced arbitrary arrests and detention, often on flimsy or unconstitutional charges such as

“communicating falsehoods” or “inciting violence”. As a result, there has been widespread self-censorship which has also seen a decline in investigative journalism.

State security agencies, including CIO and the police, use sophisticated surveillance tools under the guise of national interest to monitor and track journalists, stifling free expression and intimidating dissenting voices. Moreover, journalists, particularly women, face gendered online harassment and cyberbullying from political figures and state-sponsored actors known as *varakashi*. The harassment includes insults, smear campaigns and threats of physical and sexual violence. As a result of this, some female journalists have abandoned social media and practice self-censorship.

Even more chillingly, the unresolved enforced disappearance of journalist and activist Itai Dzamara in 2015, allegedly at the hands of state agents, continues to cast a dark shadow on Zimbabwean journalism.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND COMPROMISED INTEGRITY

Dire economic conditions and meagre salaries pose an existential threat to journalism while impacting journalistic independence and integrity. The financial strain has led to instances where some journalists accept bribes and gifts. The economic crisis has also resulted in the scaling down of media organisations, job cuts and a failure to invest in investigative journalism, leading to a decrease in the quality of media products. Prohibitive annual licensing fees for new outlets further limit media diversity and solidify state control over the sector.

RESPONSES

Media stakeholders, including journalists, media unions, legal practitioners, have responded to the systemic challenges facing the Zimbabwean media in various ways although the responses often encounter significant political and institutional resistance.

LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL ADVOCACY

Media rights advocates utilise the constitutional framework, particularly Section 61 of the Constitution which explicitly protects media freedom, to formulate legal arguments against anti-media freedom practices. However, these constitutional changes have failed to prevent the promulgation of new repressive laws and the perpetuation of repressive practices against journalists. Journalists have actively challenged the legality of the state's actions and legislation. In the past, the Supreme Court quashed charges against journalists Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto, finding the underlying LOMA law "too vague and too draconian". The Constitutional Court outlawed Section 31 (criminal defamation) of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act in 2014, although the law is continuously used against journalists. Blessed Mhlanga has filed a Constitutional Court application challenging his arrest under the Criminal Law Act. Similarly, AMH editors are challenging the charges levied against them for "insulting" the President. However, the challenges have not yielded the desired results as the courts keep postponing the cases.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND WELFARE INITIATIVES

Journalists' unions are actively engaged in advocacy and welfare improvements:

- ZUJ is pushing for improved working conditions and salaries of media workers by among other things calling for the establishment of a National Employment Council for the media.
- ZUJ is also proactively seeking non-monetary incentives for journalists, including initiating discussions with a private developer to provide housing at flexible payment terms. The union is also urging media houses to establish retirement schemes and medical aid benefits. However, these responses have yielded limited success, largely because of the prevailing economic challenges media houses are facing as they fight to stay afloat.
- Media stakeholders like ZINEF are demanding that authorities respect constitutional rights and call for the repeal of laws that criminalise journalism, such as the Patriot Act, Cyber law, and the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act.
- ZUJ appeals to authorities to use established structures or parameters, such as the Zimbabwe Media Commission, for addressing grievances against the media, rather than resorting to arrests and criminal detentions. Again these responses have not yielded the desired outcomes, partly because the authoritarian regime has scant regard for the media and its role as the Fourth Estate. If anything, the regime's attitude is that the media is a mere appendage of the state, useful for amplifying government's so-called developmental agenda. Nowhere has this been demonstrated than in President Mnangagwa's own speeches threatening to deal with what he considers to be rogue media. In May 2025, the President said, "The past trends where media practitioners competed for prominence on the degree to which they demonised our country, has no place in the Zimbabwe we fought for, we are building and we all want".⁹²

⁹² <https://www.zanupf.org.zw/news/president-mnangagwa-launches-the-zimbabwe-media-policy> accessed on 27 January 2026

GOVERNMENT AND REGULATORY RESPONSES

As a result of its authoritarian inclinations, the government has maintained a repressive stance towards the media and where there have been calls for reforms to ensure greater media freedom, it has generally answered these with changes that have, at best been cosmetic and superficial. Among others:

- AIPPA was repealed in 2020 and replaced by the Freedom of Information Act , but critics argue the replacement retains significant executive discretion.
- POSA was replaced in 2019 by MOPA, which critics deem equally restrictive.

- The government by licensed six new broadcasting stations, creating a veneer of reform in 2020. However, this response was undermined by the fact that the licenses were awarded to entities linked to the ruling party and the military.

New repressive laws have also been enacted, while arbitrary arrests, detentions and online harassment of journalists have continued. These include the cyber laws which facilitate surveillance-led repression and the stifling of media freedom. All these highlight a hardening government stance against democratic norms in general and media freedoms specifically.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the environment for journalistic freedom, integrity, and independence in Zimbabwe, the following recommendations are crucial:

Repeal repressive laws: the government, working in conjunction with media stakeholders, should immediately repeal or significantly amend sections of the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021), the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (including the “Patriot Act” amendments of 2023), and the Interception of Communications Act (ICA) of 2007 that are weaponised to criminalise journalism and suppress free expression.

Genuine access to information: The government and media stakeholders should work together to rectify the superficial nature of the Freedom of Information Act to enhance public access to information and reduce executive discretion in its application.

Establish independent regulatory oversight: Ensure the establishment of independent regulatory oversight mechanisms and transparency in all media licensing processes, independent of political and ruling elite influence.

Enforce transparent licensing: The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) must adopt clear, non-partisan criteria, specified timelines, and effective appeal mechanisms for licensing, thereby ceasing the practice of favouring government-linked applicants.

Guarantee journalist safety: The authorities must robustly protect journalists from physical violence, harassment, arbitrary arrests, detentions, and surveillance, upholding their constitutional rights to report freely and critically.

End impunity: End all attacks against journalists and ensure that perpetrators, including state agents involved in cases such as the disappearance of Itai Dzamara and the

torture of Ray Choto and Mark Chavunduka, are thoroughly investigated and brought to justice.

Increase journalist compensation and welfare benefits: Media houses, supported by unions and stakeholders, must urgently improve the economic conditions, salaries, and benefits of journalists to enhance their independence and reduce their vulnerability to corruption and bribery. .

Reduce structural censorship barriers: Address and significantly reduce prohibitive annual licensing fees for media outlets to remove structural censorship and encourage the emergence of diverse, independent media voices.

Combat online harassment: The government should institute measures to actively combat and prosecute online harassment, cyberbullying, and technology-facilitated gender-based violence. When journalists report cases of cyber-bullying, especially by government elites and political figures and state-sponsored actors (*varakashi*), law enforcement should refrain from being partisan and uphold their constitutional obligations to stop cyber-bullying.

Protect sources: The government should enforce legislation that protects journalistic sources, especially concerning investigative reporting on corruption and the security sector.

Ensure judicial oversight: Judicial independence in cases related to the media should be safeguarded. Rigorous judicial oversight should be applied before any surveillance warrants or interception of communications of journalists are issued.

Utilise established grievance structures:

The government and the security sector should use established structures recommended for addressing grievances against the media, such as the Zimbabwe Media Commission, instead of criminalising the profession through arrests and detentions.

Promote ethical standards: Journalists, through their professional bodies, must continue pushing for heightened ethical standards and accountability mechanisms to counter the erosion of public trust caused by economic vulnerabilities.

Invest in investigative journalism: Media houses, through strategic funding, must increase investment in investigative journalism, providing the necessary resources and protection to reverse the decline in critical reporting capacity.

Liberalise community radio: The government should remove regulatory restrictions that bar community radio stations from covering politics and controversial subjects, allowing them to fulfil a genuine watchdog function.

Strengthen constitutional adherence:

The executive and legislative branches must commit to upholding Section 61 of the Constitution and eliminate the practice of creating new laws that undermine established press freedoms.

Demand transparency in spyware:

Journalists, human rights activists and media stakeholders should demand full transparency regarding the government's acquisition and deployment of advanced surveillance technology, such as Circles and Pegasus spyware, while ensuring adherence to data protection laws.

CONCLUSION

The Zimbabwean media landscape is characterised by a deeply entrenched history of state control and manipulation going back to the establishment of colonial rule in 1890.

This control has evolved from outright colonial propaganda to an equally powerful and pervasive post-independence system of state and elite capture, where an illusion of media plurality masks the absence of genuine media freedom.

Despite the promises of reform following independence in 1980 and later after the removal of Robert Mugabe in 2017, the fundamental nature of state ideology of shackling and using the media as a tool for political and military elites to maintain power has remained constant.

As a result, journalists in Zimbabwe face a hostile operating environment, grappling with a confluence of severe contemporary threats. These include pervasive legal restrictions that criminalise journalism, direct political interference, extensive surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and physical violence.

Laws such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, are frequently weaponised to curtail reportage deemed to injure national interest or insult the president, effectively suppressing dissent while the colonial-era Official Secrets Act also continues to intimidate reporters reliant on leaked information, irrespective of public interest.

Beyond legal threats, state security agencies, including the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) and Zimbabwe Republic Police, employ sophisticated surveillance tools, such as Circles spyware, to monitor journalists, human rights activists, and opposition politicians, stifling free expression and creating a culture of fear.

The unchecked digital spying stifles journalism and free expression while

intimidating dissenting voices. The digital threats have been worsened by societal threats, including the rise of Zanu PF aligned storm troopers, who target the media through trolling, delegitimisation, mudslinging and disinformation. This online warfare has been particularly severe against women journalists, forcing many to abandon social media and engage in self-censorship.

The dire economic conditions and structural censorship have eroded sustainability and integrity of Zimbabwean journalism. Many journalists face extreme financial precarity, a situation that drastically increases their vulnerability to corruption, bribery and external pressures. This has inevitably led to compromised ethical standards and a crisis of integrity, with many journalists taking bribes for survival, ultimately diminishing public trust. Media organisations are scaling down operations and failing to invest in investigative journalism due to the economic crisis, leading to a demonstrable decline in the quality of media products.

The prevailing regulatory capture, weaponised legislation, pervasive surveillance, and economic vulnerability have resulted in widespread self-censorship and degradation of the media's essential role as a public watchdog.

Yet, the situation is not beyond redemption.

To foster genuine journalistic freedom, integrity and independence, media stakeholders, legal advocates and journalists are demanding urgent and decisive reform. This imperative requires all stakeholders to work together to pressure any unwilling government to repeal repressive statutes that criminalise the journalism profession. Authorities must also be pressured to

guarantee the safety of media workers, cease arbitrary arrests and end impunity.

Zimbabwean journalists, unions, human rights lawyers and other local and international stakeholders should therefore join hands to lobby for the repealing of laws that criminalise journalism and the enactment of positive laws. There is also an urgent need to intensify training programmes for journalists on digital and cybersecurity to eliminate or reduce their susceptibility to digital threats and surveillance which are on the rise.



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