



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Zimbabwe

July 2025

Context

Zimbabwe's civic space remains severely constrained by escalating state repression, restrictive legislation, and political intolerance. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) operate under constant surveillance, harassment, and threats. According to the [2024 State of Civic Space in Zimbabwe Report](#), over 94% of national CSOs and 84% of grassroots CBOs reported facing obstruction, intimidation, and extortion.

The proposed Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill, widely [criticised](#) as a tool for political control, was enacted as the [Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Act](#) in April 2025, granting the government sweeping powers to deregister organisations and monitor civic activity. Attendant police presence at CSO community meetings has further eroded trust and safety in local engagement.

Major political developments have compounded these pressures. The [August 2024 SADC Summit](#) in Harare was heavily securitised, with civil society voices excluded and activists targeted. Meanwhile, ZANU PF's post-election [agenda](#) to extend President Mnangagwa's rule until 2030 has intensified repression.

The [Choked by Fear](#) Report documents the chilling effect of hate speech, threats, and violence on civic participation in the 31 March protests. Despite these challenges, a few CSOs have managed to sustain limited engagement, demonstrating resilience in an increasingly hostile environment. However, the broader trajectory points to deepening democratic backsliding and a [repressed](#) civic space for rights-based advocacy.

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Zimbabwe's civic space continues to deteriorate, with fundamental freedoms—expression, association, and peaceful assembly—under sustained assault. Despite constitutional guarantees under Sections 58, 61, and 66 of the [2013 Constitution](#), the government has systematically undermined these rights through [intimidation](#), [arbitrary arrests](#), and [disruption of peaceful gatherings](#).

Freedom of expression remains heavily curtailed. CSOs and human rights defenders face constant surveillance and threats. In the period of June 2024 to July 2025, ZimRights and GALZ (an Association of LGBTI People in Zimbabwe) [reported](#) repeated vandalism of their advocacy banners—acts widely believed to be state-linked attempts to silence dissent. The [attempted break-in](#) at Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (CiZC) offices on 8 August 2024 further exemplifies the hostile climate for free expression.

Freedom of association has been violated through targeted harassment of CSO leaders. On 31 July 2024, four civil society leaders—including Robson Chere, Namatai Kwekweza, and Samuel Gwenzi—were [forcibly removed from a flight](#), arrested and subjected to torture and degrading treatment by state agents. UN experts [raised alarm](#) over these abuses, including threats of sexual violence and physical assault, underscoring the extreme risks faced by those engaging in civic work.

Freedom of assembly and protest have been aggressively suppressed. Ahead of the 44th SADC Summit, Minister Kazembe Kazembe [issued public threats](#) against protestors. Days later, anti-riot police [raided](#) a private Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) meeting, arresting 44 students and injuring 10. Robson Chere of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers

Union of Zimbabwe was reportedly beaten with an iron bar on the soles of his feet, buttocks, and lower back. His dreadlocks were forcibly cut with a knife, and he was threatened with sexual violence against himself and his wife should any protests occur ahead of the SADC Summit. The intensified crackdown and the dismantling of fundamental freedoms were directly linked to the government's hosting of the SADC summit in Harare, as it feared peaceful protests during the summit. Critics of the government's "[2030 Agenda](#)" have faced persecution, including the [arrest](#) of journalist Blessed Mhlanga and the police [pursuit](#) of war veteran Blessed Geza, organiser of the [31 March 2025 protests](#). These actions reflect a broader strategy to preempt peaceful dissent and criminalise gatherings perceived as critical of the state.

Together, these incidents reveal a deliberate dismantling of civic freedoms, creating a climate of fear that stifles public participation and undermines democratic accountability. Civil society actors operate under siege, with little recourse for protection or justice.

2. Supportive Legal Framework for the Work of Civil Society Actors

Zimbabwe's legal framework for civil society is increasingly restrictive, undermining constitutional guarantees of freedom of association and expression. The [Private Voluntary Organisations \(PVO\) Amendment Act](#), enacted in April 2025, mandates registration for all entities engaged in charitable, legal, or social work. Registration is not only compulsory—it is burdensome, intrusive, and weaponised to curtail civic autonomy.

The Act grants sweeping powers to the Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, including the ability to suspend or revoke registration without due process. Vague prohibitions on "political support or opposition" expose governance and rights-based organisations to arbitrary sanction. Criminal liability provisions further deter civic engagement, framing civil society as a security threat rather than a democratic partner.

Beyond formal law, informal regulatory practices compound these constraints. District Development Coordinators (DDCs) impose extra-legal requirements such as board resolutions, financial statements, and political vetting without a statutory basis. In Gwanda and Goromonzi, CSOs face delays or denials unless they secure local Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), even when nationally registered. ZimRights' October 2024 roundtable in Beitbridge was blocked for lacking such an MoU, exemplifying how local gatekeeping obstructs lawful activity. Such practices function as de facto restrictions, enabling authorities to delay or deny CSO operations without formally rejecting them.

These practices create a hostile environment where civil society cannot operate freely or independently. The legal and administrative framework not only discourages the emergence of new organisations but also jeopardises the autonomy and safety of existing ones. Rather than protecting civil society from interference, the current system enables it—eroding trust and shrinking civic space.

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Funding for civil society actors in Zimbabwe remains relatively accessible, with continued support from international donors, private foundations, and some local contributions. Many

organisations are still able to mobilise resources to implement impactful programmes, and there have been no major instances of government interference in the flow of funding. While administrative requirements exist, they are generally manageable and do not significantly hinder the ability of organisations to raise and utilise funds for their operations.

However, the implementation of the PVO Amendment Act has introduced a layer of uncertainty regarding future access to funding. Although the Act provides a transitional period of ninety days from the date (11 April 2025) it came into force, allowing organisations to continue operating while lodging their registration applications, there has been a noticeable shift in donor behaviour. International partners are increasingly requiring compliance with the Act as a precondition for continued or new funding. This has placed considerable pressure on civil society organisations to initiate the registration process promptly despite ongoing [court challenges](#) against the Act. For many, particularly smaller or community-based organisations, the compliance requirements are complex and burdensome, often exceeding their administrative capacity or technical know-how. Consequently, failure to comply may result in the loss of critical funding, making the Act a potential barrier to resource mobilisation for a significant segment of the sector.

Further complicating the funding environment is the U.S. 2025 [Executive Order 14169](#), signed by U.S. President Donald Trump. The order has triggered a significant reduction in U.S. foreign assistance, particularly through USAID, which has adversely affected numerous CSOs in Zimbabwe. Several organisations have been forced to scale down operations, terminate projects, lay off staff, or shut down entirely. This shift has also influenced other international donors, some of whom have followed suit by reducing funding levels or redirecting resources to other regions or programmatic priorities, exacerbating the strain on civil society.

Compounding these challenges is Zimbabwe's ongoing economic crisis, characterised by hyperinflation and severe currency volatility. These conditions have drastically diminished the availability of local funding. Most domestic businesses are either unable or unwilling to support civil society initiatives due to financial constraints and the perceived political risks. For organisations working in the areas of human rights, democracy, and governance, the situation is even more acute. Local support for such groups is virtually non-existent, as association with them is often viewed as politically sensitive and potentially dangerous, deterring potential donors from offering assistance.

In sum, while external funding remains a critical lifeline for Zimbabwean civil society, recent legal, political, and economic developments have created a more precarious and restrictive funding landscape, especially for smaller organisations and those engaged in governance and rights-based work.

4. State Openness and Responsiveness

Government engagement with civil society in Zimbabwe remains uneven, marked by selective consultation and limited responsiveness. While the Constitution guarantees participatory governance, civil society is rarely involved in major decision-making processes in a systematic or institutionalised manner. There is no formal legal framework mandating civil society consultation, leaving participation largely at the discretion of individual ministries or institutions.

Some positive examples exist. The CSO ZimRights maintains MOUs with the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and the Gender Commission, enabling joint programming and case referrals. Engagements with Parliament have also yielded modest gains—such as ZimRights’ [petition](#) to [repeal the Vagrancy Act](#) and advocacy meetings with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Defence, Home Affairs, Security Services, and War Veterans’ Affairs since 2024. These interactions reflect growing recognition of civil society’s role, though they remain ad hoc and issue-specific.

The government’s consultation during the PVO Amendment Act review was extensive but ultimately symbolic. Despite civil society objections, the Act passed with minimal substantive changes, indicating limited government accountability or feedback mechanisms. Even when concessions were made—such as retaining the PVO Board—they did not reflect genuine compromise. There have also been examples of more successful advocacy. In December 2024, following years of persistent lobbying by organisations such as Amnesty International, the government responded positively to civil society demands when President Emmerson Mnangagwa [signed](#) the [Death Penalty Abolition Act \[Chapter 9:26\]](#) into law. This marked a significant human rights milestone and demonstrated the potential of sustained civil society engagement to bring about meaningful legal reform.

Zimbabwe’s access to information framework is governed by the [Freedom of Information Act \[Chapter 10:33\]](#), enacted in 2020 to operationalise Section 62 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to access information held by the state. While the Act represents a step forward in formalising this right, its implementation has been uneven and its provisions fall short of international best practices. The law requires that every public entity, public commercial entity or holder of a statutory office have a written information disclosure policy through which it discloses information in the interests of public accountability or that is required for the exercise or protection of a right. However [reportedly](#) at least 26 national institutions, comprising ministries, commissions, and parastatals do not have such policies and did not have plans to have these as of September 2024. The law allows individuals and organisations to request information from public entities, but excludes private bodies unless they perform public functions or receive public funds—limiting its scope. Moreover, the Act grants wide discretion to information officers to deny requests on grounds such as national security, public interest, or commercial confidentiality, often without clear criteria or oversight. These broad exemptions weaken transparency and accountability. Procedurally, the Act requires that requests be processed within 21 days, but delays are common, and appeals mechanisms are weak or inaccessible. Civil society organisations frequently report that requests are ignored, indefinitely delayed, or rejected without substantive justification—discouraging meaningful engagement and oversight.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

In Zimbabwe, civil society actors operate within a hostile political culture shaped by negative public discourse and official vilification. Senior government officials frequently portray CSOs as threats to national sovereignty, often accusing them of advancing foreign agendas or supporting regime change. In June 2024, Minister Jenfan Muswere publicly labelled civic actors as “[evil-minded](#)” and “[reckless regime-change agents](#),” warning of arrests for those deemed disruptive to state institutions. Such rhetoric fosters public mistrust, delegitimises civil society’s work, and reinforces a climate of fear.

This adversarial framing limits CSOs’ access to resources, infrastructure, and networks, particularly in rural communities where government narratives dominate. While some communities recognise and support civil society efforts—especially in service delivery and rights education—this support is fragmented and often overshadowed by political suspicion. The absence of a consistent, enabling political culture undermines civil society’s effectiveness and reach.

Although civic engagement and the role of civil society have been integrated into Zimbabwe’s formal education curriculum through [Heritage-Social Studies](#) at the primary level, [Heritage Studies](#) at secondary and high school levels, and various university courses, this inclusion remains relatively recent, following the 2015 curriculum review. While this marks a positive step toward fostering civic awareness, the implementation has [reportedly](#) encountered several challenges, including weak institutional support, limited human resource capacity, and poor remuneration and training of educators tasked with delivering the curriculum, thereby undermining its ability to fully emphasise the importance of civic engagement. As a result, the potential of civic education to counter politicised narratives and promote a deeper understanding of civil society’s role in governance, accountability, and human rights remains underutilised. Without sustained investment and commitment, the broader population continues to be susceptible to misinformation and negative portrayals of civil society actors.

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Access to a secure digital environment in Zimbabwe remains a significant challenge for civil society, shaped by restrictive legislation, uneven internet access, and pervasive surveillance. However, internet shutdowns and blackouts have become very rare. Although digital technologies offer immense potential for civic engagement and organisational growth, the current landscape is marked by systemic barriers that undermine their utility and safety.

Internet penetration in Zimbabwe stands at approximately 38.4% as of 2025, with [around 6.45 million users](#) online. While the government has set ambitious targets to [increase connectivity to 75%](#), progress has been uneven, with a pronounced [rural–urban divide](#). Urban centres such as Harare and Bulawayo benefit from relatively stable infrastructure and access, whereas rural communities continue to face significant limitations due to poor network coverage, unreliable electricity, and prohibitively high data costs. These disparities restrict the ability of CSOs to engage with marginalised populations, disseminate information, and mobilise grassroots support effectively.

The legal framework governing digital spaces, particularly the [Cyber and Data Protection Act of 2021](#), has raised concerns about the erosion of digital freedoms. Although the Act was introduced under the guise of enhancing cybersecurity and protecting personal data, its enforcement has [largely targeted](#) dissenting voices, independent media, and civil society actors. Government surveillance remains widespread, with both state and non-state actors implicated in digital repression. The ruling party's faction known as "Varakashi" has [reportedly](#) engaged in coordinated cyberattacks and online harassment against individuals and organisations within civil society. A notable incident occurred in April 2025, following the 31 March protests, when ZimRights was falsely linked to protest organisers through a publicly circulated [video](#). The resulting threats from unidentified state agencies led to the temporary closure of ZimRights' offices, illustrating the vulnerability of CSOs in the digital sphere.

In terms of digital and AI literacy, Zimbabwe has made some strides through curriculum reforms. Since 2021, the government has introduced coding, robotics, and AI education, with plans [to train 10,000 teachers](#) annually in partnership with international institutions. However, these initiatives are still in their infancy and face considerable implementation challenges, particularly in under-resourced schools and rural areas. The lack of infrastructure, skilled educators, and consistent policy support has limited the reach and impact of these programmes. For civil society, low levels of digital and AI literacy among the general population and within their own ranks constrain the adoption of innovative tools and technologies that could enhance advocacy, research, and community engagement.

Challenges and Opportunities

Over the next four months, civil society in Zimbabwe is expected to navigate a complex and evolving landscape marked by both persistent challenges and emerging opportunities. The country's continued reliance on humanitarian assistance, particularly in response to the ongoing drought, places increased pressure on non-state actors, including churches and community-based organisations, to deliver essential services. However, the implementation of the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Act threatens to constrain these efforts. Its broad regulatory scope may hinder the ability of humanitarian organisations to operate freely, especially in vulnerable communities where timely intervention is critical.

Despite these constraints, there are promising developments that could signal a shift toward a more enabling environment. Ongoing debt restructuring [discussions](#) present a potential opening, particularly since one of the reform tracks focuses on governance. If pursued in good faith, this process could pave the way for meaningful reforms, including commitments to protect civic space, enhance public participation, and improve government transparency and accountability. Civil society must be prepared to seize this opportunity by strengthening its advocacy capacity, building strategic alliances, and ensuring representation in key policy dialogues.

Furthermore, the early implementation phase of the PVO Amendment Act presents a window for constructive engagement. Civil society actors can play a vital role in shaping the interpretation and operationalisation of the law, advocating for safeguards that preserve organisational autonomy and prevent abuse. Transparent, good-faith dialogue between government and civil society will be essential to mitigate risks and promote a regulatory framework that balances oversight with democratic freedoms.

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