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Enabling Environment Snapshot

Zimbabwe

2026

Context

Reporting period: December 2025 - August 2026

Zimbabwe's civic space remained severely constrained between December 2025 and August 2026 by political repression, restrictive regulation, funding contraction and growing digital-security risks. Across its monthly monitoring reports covering December to August, the Zimbabwe Peace Project documented 1,040 human-rights violations affecting an aggregate of 25,820 victims. Recurring violations included intimidation, political violence, surveillance, restrictions on expression, association and peaceful assembly, discriminatory access to public services, and digital harassment. Women accounted for approximately 51.5% of the aggregate victim count, while persons with disabilities continued to face both direct violations and barriers to civic participation.

The regulatory environment became more demanding as implementation of the PVO Amendment Act progressed. Statutory Instrument 97 and Statutory Instrument 98, issued in June, provided greater procedural detail but introduced extensive registration, reporting, inspection and risk-classification requirements. Registration delays, locally imposed conditions and expanding data-protection obligations increased uncertainty and compliance costs, particularly for small, rural, women-led and youth-led organisations. These pressures coincided with declining donor support, weakening organisational resilience and continuity.

The dominant political development was Constitutional Amendment Bill No. 3 (CAB3), which was subjected to nationwide public hearings before being enacted on 7 July. The process generated extensive public mobilisation but was marred by intimidation, violence, partisan mobilisation and unequal opportunities to participate. Although coordinated advocacy secured the retention of the Zimbabwe Gender Commission, the broader amendment that was signed into law raised concerns about electoral accountability, institutional independence and concentration of political power.

These pressures unfolded within a difficult economic environment marked by currency instability, rising operating costs and donor fatigue, which reduced access to flexible and long-term funding and forced many CSOs to scale back programmes, lose experienced staff or divert scarce resources from advocacy and community work towards institutional survival and regulatory compliance.

Despite these constraints, civil society sustained cross-sector coalitions, strategic litigation, community advocacy and digital organising. Limited openings emerged around local service delivery, intersex recognition and ethical artificial-intelligence policy. However, the broader trajectory remained one of democratic regression, unequal participation and increasing pressure on independent, rights-based civic activity.

1. Respect for and protection of fundamental freedoms.

Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms remained weak during the reporting period. Although freedoms of expression, assembly and association are constitutionally protected, civic actors continued to face arrests, intimidation, surveillance and restrictions when expressing dissent or participating in public affairs. Constitutional Amendment Bill No. 3 (CAB3) exposed and intensified these trends, particularly for activists, journalists, students and opposition supporters. Evidence from the reporting period is as shown below:

Period/Date	Violation	Event Detail
February-July 2026	Restrictions on fundamental freedoms, political violence, intimidation, surveillance and digital harassment	The Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) recorded 1,040 human-rights violations affecting 25,820 victims. Violations peaked at 291 cases in March 2026 during CAB3 consultations and remained elevated throughout the reporting period. Women accounted for 13,310 victims (51.5%), men 12,510, while 243 persons with disabilities were affected.
March 2026	Surveillance, arbitrary arrests and alleged abductions	Human-rights defenders, lawyers and student leaders opposing CAB3 reported heightened surveillance and arrests. Constitutional Defenders Forum members, including Tendai Biti, were arrested during a private meeting in Mutare, and student leader Delan Cole was reportedly abducted after attending a CAB3-related meeting.
March-April 2026	Restrictions on freedom of assembly, expression and access to information	CAB3 public hearings were marked by intimidation, violence and disruption. Human-rights lawyer Doug Coltart was assaulted after a hearing in Harare, while journalists reported harassment, obstruction of filming and pressure to delete footage documenting attacks and disturbances. Activist Sheilla Mujakachi was among those intimidated.
April 2026	Repression of student activism and freedom of association	Human Rights Watch documented attacks against student leaders opposing CAB3, including arrests, alleged abductions and assaults. Police also raided Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) offices following anti-CAB3 mobilisation activities and blocked Blessing Brendon Dube's planned one-person demonstration in Beitbridge.
July-August 2026	Criminalisation of peaceful dissent and protest	Activists opposing CAB3 faced arrest and prosecution for distributing campaign materials or calling for demonstrations. Cases included the arrest and prosecution of Bhekimpilo Mbedzi for allegedly mobilising protests against the constitutional amendment. Also, Joelson Mugari, Sabatine Tendaupenyu and Albert Magunje were arrested and charged for distributing anti-CAB3 flyers and posters or mobilising opposition through social media; the latter two were later released on bail.
Throughout the reporting period	Pressure on media freedom and freedom of expression	Journalists continued to face legal harassment, intimidation and restrictions linked to reporting on politically sensitive issues. Zimbabwe dropped from 106th to 124th place in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index, signalling a deteriorating media environment. Information Minister Jenfan Muswere warned media practitioners and citizens over online speech, while Justice Minister Ziyambi Ziyambi urged ZANU-PF supporters to report anti-CAB3 activists and planned protests to the police.

These developments indicate a continued contraction of civic space and an increasingly restrictive environment for the exercise of fundamental freedoms. The scale of violations recorded by ZPP suggests that restrictions were not isolated incidents linked only to CAB3, but part of a broader pattern affecting civic participation, dissent and public accountability. Journalists, human-rights defenders, students and opposition actors faced heightened risks, contributing to self-censorship and reduced participation in public decision-making processes.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

Zimbabwe's legal framework for civil society remained restrictive despite some procedural clarification during the reporting period. The implementation of the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Act and related regulations increased registration, reporting and oversight requirements, while persistent administrative barriers and legal uncertainty continued to limit CSO autonomy. The NANGO Compliance Summary of S.I. 97 identifies extensive governance, identity, financial and reporting documentation, as well as wide inspection authority. Although some positive legal developments emerged, the overall trend points to a more regulated and closely scrutinised operating environment. Key events during this period were as shown below.

Period/Date	Development	Event Detail
February 2026	Registration uncertainty	Youth organisations in Manicaland reported uncertainty over whether to register as PVOs or through the Zimbabwe National Youth Council, creating barriers to accessing funding, partnerships and public engagement opportunities.
February 2026	Constitutional challenge dismissed	The Constitutional Court dismissed Fuza and Another v Parliament of Zimbabwe, upholding the legislative process used to enact the PVO Amendment Act while leaving substantive constitutional challenges unresolved.
2025-2026	Registration delays	The NANGO-ZimRights State of Civil Society Operating Environment Watch Report found that at least 325 PVO registration applications remained pending nine months after enactment of the PVO Amendment Act, leaving many organisations in legal limbo.
June 2026	New PVO regulations introduced	Government gazetted the PVO Board and General Regulations, 2026 (SI 97/2026), requiring registration, governance and audit documentation, granting broad inspection powers, and establishing a 90-day registration decision period with appeals to the Minister and Administrative Court.
June 2026	Risk-based oversight framework	Government gazetted the PVO (Risk Assessment) Regulations, 2026 (SI 98/2026), establishing low-, medium- and high-risk classifications, with enhanced scrutiny and reporting obligations for higher-risk organisations.
July 2026	Constitutional reform enacted	Constitutional Amendment Bill No. 3 (CAB3) was signed into law, introducing broader constitutional changes affecting governance, accountability institutions and the operating context for civic actors. Retention of the Gender Commission was an important gain for women's rights and demonstrated that coordinated advocacy could influence a defined issue.
August 2026	Positive legal reform initiative	Justice Minister Ziyambi Ziyambi announced that government had initiated legal reforms aimed at improving recognition and protection of intersex persons.
Throughout reporting period	Local administrative restrictions	Some District Administrators continued requiring CSOs to obtain MOUs or additional approvals before operating, while police reportedly treated notification requirements for meetings as permission requests.

The evidence suggests that procedural clarity increased, but the legal environment remained restrictive in substance. Registration delays, extensive compliance obligations and broad oversight powers continued to create uncertainty, particularly for smaller, women-led, youth-led and community-based organisations. These requirements increased administrative costs, reduced organisational flexibility and risked limiting access to funding, partnerships and public participation processes. Overall, civil society space remained constrained by these regulatory burdens and uneven implementation of legal requirements.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Access to sustainable resources deteriorated during the reporting period, as declining donor support, increased regulatory compliance costs and growing administrative requirements placed additional pressure on civil society organisations. In March 2026, a Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) analysis reported declining international support for Zimbabwean CSOs due to donor fatigue, shifting priorities and increased compliance requirements, particularly affecting human rights, governance and women's rights organisations. Donors reportedly became more cautious about funding organisations whose legal status remained unclear following the implementation of the PVO Amendment Act, affecting access to funding for some CSOs. While CSOs continued to access funding, legal and regulatory obligations increasingly diverted resources away from programming, particularly for small, rural, women-led and youth-led organisations. Some key events during this period were as shown below.

Period/Date	Development	Event Detail
June 2026	Increased registration costs	The PVO Board and General Regulations, 2026 (SI 97/2026) introduced registration fees of US$150 for local PVOs and US$250 for international PVOs, alongside costs for police clearances, audits and compliance documentation.
June 2026	Enhanced compliance requirements	The PVO Risk Assessment Regulations, 2026 (SI 98/2026) introduced risk-based classifications, with higher-risk organisations subject to additional audits, reporting and due-diligence requirements.
July 2026	Data protection compliance costs	POTRAZ confirmed annual licensing requirements for data controllers under the Cyber and Data Protection framework, with licensing fees ranging from US$50 to US$2,500, depending on the number of data subjects processed.
July-August 2026	Mandatory Data Protection Officers	Organisations processing personal data became subject to Data Protection Officer requirements, with certification costs estimated at approximately US$1,250, in addition to licensing and compliance expenses.
September 2026 (announced)	Regulatory inspections	POTRAZ announced that mandatory risk-based inspections of NGOs and PVOs would commence on 1 September 2026, increasing pressure on organisations to meet regulatory compliance requirements.
February 2026	External funding vulnerability	Negotiations over a proposed US$350 million US health-funding arrangement failed, highlighting the risks associated with dependence on external financing for programmes implemented by local civil society and community organisations.

The evidence points to an increasingly challenging resource environment for civil society. Declining donor support and rising compliance costs reduced the resources available for community programmes, advocacy and service delivery. Smaller, grassroots, women-led and youth-led organisations faced the greatest risks, as administrative and regulatory expenses consumed a growing share of limited funding. Without more flexible funding and compliance support, these pressures are likely to undermine the sustainability and independence of civil society actors.

4. State openness and responsiveness

State openness and responsiveness remained mixed during the reporting period. While legal and institutional mechanisms for public participation exist, concerns persisted regarding the transparency, inclusiveness and influence of consultation processes. Opportunities for engagement were available, but evidence suggests that participation was not always meaningful or equally accessible, particularly on politically sensitive issues.

From March-May 2026, parliament conducted public hearings across the country, received 540,037 written submissions and 54,231 participants including CSOs during CAB3 consultations with CSOs. However, civil society monitors and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) reported intimidation, violence, unequal speaking opportunities and the exclusion of some dissenting voices. However, on 10 April 2026, President Mnangagwa reassigned ZHRC Chairperson Jessie Majome to the Public Service Commission shortly after the Commission issued this report, prompting a Constitutional Court challenge and raising concerns about the independence of oversight institutions. Despite these concerns, advocacy by women's rights groups and CSOs contributed to the retention of the Zimbabwe Gender Commission in the final version of CAB3. Key events during this period are shown below.

Period/Date	Issue	Event Detail
February 2026	Government-CSO dialogue	Social welfare officials participated in stakeholder engagements on PVO registration in Manicaland and considered proposals for improved guidance, registration support and coordination mechanisms.
Throughout reporting period	Inclusion of marginalised groups	Reports indicated that women, young people, persons with disabilities and citizens expressing dissenting views faced barriers to effective participation, including inaccessible venues, intimidation and limited opportunities to contribute. (ZHRC Assessment; ACBOs Monitoring Report)

The evidence points to formal participation mechanisms but uneven responsiveness and inclusion. While the retention of the Zimbabwe Gender Commission demonstrated that coordinated advocacy can influence policy outcomes, concerns about intimidation, unequal participation and limited transparency regarding how public input informed decision-making weakened confidence in these processes. Women, young people, persons with disabilities and dissenting voices appeared least able to participate on an equal footing. Overall, the trend suggests stagnation rather than meaningful improvement in state openness and responsiveness.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Political culture remained hostile towards civil society actors who challenged government policy. Public discourse during the reporting period was dominated by CAB3 and became highly polarised. Government and ruling-party advocates framed the Bill as necessary for stability, policy continuity and national development. A state-media argument in favour of CAB3 characterised criticism as distortion and defeatism. By associating opposition to CAB3 with hostility to national development, such narratives risked delegitimising civil society and narrowing its recognised role as an independent constitutional stakeholder.

Hostile rhetoric was accompanied by intimidation. ZANU-PF treasurer Patrick Chinamasa reportedly blamed opposition participants for disruptions during the public hearings and characterised attendance for the purpose of expressing dissent as provocative. Human-rights lawyer Douglas Coltart also reported receiving threats on social media from a pro-presidential vigilante group that portrayed him as a foreign agent. Labels such as “spy”, “traitor” and “foreign agent” increase the reputational and physical risks faced by human-rights defenders, encourage public mistrust of civil society and can discourage citizens from associating openly with critical organisations.

Nevertheless, civil society maintained a visible counter-discourse centred on constitutionalism, public accountability and peaceful participation. A People’s Summit held in Harare in June brought together civic groups, labour unions, students, faith organisations, war veterans and community activists and called for a referendum on the proposed amendments. Women’s-rights groups, lawyers, journalists and other civic actors also used public statements, monitoring, litigation and civic education to challenge the Bill. International legal organisations expressed solidarity with Coltart following his assault, while press-freedom organisations documented and condemned interference with journalists. This cross-sector mobilisation challenged attempts to portray opposition to CAB3 as narrow or partisan. Overall, political culture remained antagonistic towards critical civil society, but broad civic coalitions kept constitutionalism visible as a shared public concern.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Access to a secure digital environment remained mixed and uneven during the reporting period. While digital platforms continued to provide important channels for civic engagement, significant connectivity gaps, digital inequalities, surveillance concerns and cyber-related enforcement actions constrained safe and equal participation. According to DataReportal, Zimbabwe had an estimated 6.54 million internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of 38.4%, meaning that approximately 61.6% of the population remained offline. The data also highlights a persistent gender digital divide: although women constituted 52.3% of the population, they accounted for only 46.2% of social media user identities, suggesting lower visibility and participation of women in online civic and public discourse. Throughout the reporting period, the Cyber and Data Protection Act and the Interception of Communications Act remained in force, continuing to raise concerns among civil society actors about online privacy, surveillance and the potential restriction of digital expression through broad cyber-offence provisions and interception powers. The overall trend points to stagnation, with limited progress in expanding inclusive digital access and persistent risks to online civic freedoms. Key developments during this period are shown below.

Period/Date	Issue	Event Detail
February 2026	Enforcement affecting online journalism	Female journalist Pellagia Mupurwa of Zimbo Live was arrested and charged with transmitting false data messages after publishing online interviews relating to a property dispute. Charges were later withdrawn, but the case highlighted the risks facing journalists and digital media practitioners.
March-July 2026	Digital intimidation and content suppression	During CAB3 consultations, journalists were reportedly pressured to delete photographs and video recordings documenting events at public hearings, restricting the documentation and dissemination of information.
June 2026	Online harassment of civic actors	The Zimbabwe Peace Project reported increasing digital harassment and intimidation targeting human-rights defenders, students, political actors and civic activists.
March 2026	Emerging technology and participation	Government launched the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2026-2030, developed through consultations that included civil society and youth representatives and incorporating principles of inclusion, transparency and non-discrimination.

The evidence suggests that digital participation remained constrained by both structural and regulatory barriers. Limited internet access, particularly among rural communities and women, reduced equal access to online civic engagement, while journalists, activists and human-rights defenders faced heightened risks of digital harassment and cyber-related enforcement. Although initiatives such as the National AI Strategy signal opportunities for more inclusive digital governance, progress during the reporting period was outweighed by persistent inequalities and concerns over privacy, surveillance and online expression.

Challenges and Opportunities

Zimbabwe's civil society enabling environment continued to deteriorate between December 2025 and August 2026. Restrictions on civic freedoms, the implementation of CAB3, expanding regulatory requirements and declining funding collectively increased pressure on CSOs. These impacts were most acute for women, youth, persons with disabilities and rural organisations. The following challenges going forward were identified:

1. Following the enactment of CAB3 (7 July 2026) and the introduction of SI 97 and SI 98, CSOs face increased scrutiny through registration, reporting, inspection and risk-classification requirements, with implications for civic participation and organisational independence.
2. New PVO and data-protection requirements have increased operational costs at a time when civil society is already facing reduced donor support, placing particular strain on smaller, rural, women-led and youth-led organisations.
3. Reports of intimidation, arrests, surveillance and harassment during the reporting period suggest that human rights defenders, journalists, activists and community organisers will continue to face challenges in exercising fundamental freedoms safely.
4. With only 38.4% internet penetration and growing reports of digital harassment, many citizens remain excluded from online civic participation while digitally active CSOs face continued privacy and security risks.

However, there are the following opportunities:

1. Civil society can build on the coalitions formed around CAB3 to monitor implementation, document impacts and pursue advocacy and strategic litigation where necessary.
2. The 90-day registration timeline, appeal provisions and other procedural requirements under SI 97/2026 provide measurable standards against which CSOs can assess government compliance.
3. The retention of the Zimbabwe Gender Commission in CAB3 demonstrates that coordinated advocacy can influence policy outcomes, even within a constrained environment.
4. Ongoing reforms relating to intersex rights and implementation of the National AI Strategy 2026-2030 present opportunities for civil society engagement on inclusion, rights protection and digital governance.
5. Continued engagement on service delivery, livelihoods, water, health and local governance issues offers practical entry points for expanding participation by women, youth and other marginalised groups.

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