

Zimbabwe's Civic Space in Crisis: New Report Details Growing Operational Obstacles and Legal Threats to Civil Society

- The ouster of President Robert Mugabe in 2017 in Zimbabwe was followed by a brief period of cautious optimism for increased civil liberties. Regrettably, that optimism has been overshadowed by persistent restrictions, with recent years marked by heightened repression, harassment, and arrests of human rights defenders.
- The Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights) and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (a joint programme of FIDH and OMCT) launch today a report on the situation of civic space and human rights defenders in Zimbabwe.

Harare, Paris, Geneva, December 20, 2024. In Zimbabwe, a survey administered to 67 civil society organisations (CSOs) by ZimRights and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, shows that in 2024 nearly all surveyed CSOs reported operating with severe restrictions. Out of the 34 national-level organisations surveyed, 94% mentioned facing surveillance, infiltration by state agents, material destruction, and intimidation of staff and members. Community-based organisations also reported demands for bribes, intimidation by local authorities, and barriers to free community engagement. These are only some manifestations of the growing shrinking space for civil society in the country detailed in this new report titled [*"We are coming after them" The 2024 State of Civic Space in Zimbabwe*](#).

"In the last months, Zimbabwe's civic space has faced significant challenges, characterised by restrictive legislation, aggressive government crackdowns, and a pervasive climate of fear that stifles any free expression and civic engagement in the country", said Dzikamai Bere, National Director of ZimRights, a member organisation of FIDH.

Restrictive laws such as the proposed Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Bill pose significant threats to civic space by expanding the authority of law enforcement to interfere with civil society operations, by giving them authority to deregister CSOs they deem as having materially changed their mandate not taking into consideration changing priorities and emerging areas of interest. The PVO Bill also introduces provisions that could classify legitimate human rights activities as unlawful if they are misconstrued as supporting or opposing political candidates in elections or political parties. This risk is heightened by the lack of clear definitions for these terms within the law, leaving room for broad and subjective interpretation. If enacted, this legislation risks undermining freedom of association and expression, directly impacting the work of non-governmental organisations and human rights defenders.

This crackdown on CSOs is happening while public trust in institutions in Zimbabwe remains critically low. According to a survey by Afrobarometer conducted between 2021 and 2023, only 51% of Zimbabweans expressed trust in key public institutions and leaders. This figure highlights a significant trust deficit that undermines the ability of citizens to hold officials accountable.

"The operating environment for civil society in Zimbabwe is highly challenging. There is a disturbing trend of arbitrary arrests and excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, civil society leaders, and human rights defenders," said Alice Mogwe, President of FIDH and Director of DITSHWANELO – the Botswana Centre for Human Rights. *"We all remember and regret the arbitrary arrest of [rights defenders] Robson Chere, and members of ZimRights Namatai Kwekweza and Samuel Gwenzi in July 2024. We keep asking for investigation to be opened in order for those responsible to be prosecuted."*

“We now need to see concrete measures taken by the authorities to actively prevent attacks and harassment of human rights defenders and become part of a discourse that recognizes the role CSOs plays for society,” said Gerald Staberock, Secretary General of OMCT. “A practical first steps would be the creation of a real dialogue by the authorities with human rights defenders.”

Read the full report in English on ZimRights [website](#), FIDH [website](#), and OMCT [website](#).

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