



ZIMBABWE 2023 ELECTIONS

*A Risk Assessment of the
Online Information Space*



Zimbabwe 2023 Elections: A Risk Assessment of the Online Information Space

July 2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Executive Summary.....1
- Country Profile.....3
- Political and Electoral Systems.....5
- Upcoming Election.....6
- Elections in 2018.....7
- Internet Freedom and the Online Regulatory Landscape.....8
- Platform Policies.....9
 - WhatsApp.....9
 - Facebook.....10
 - Instagram.....10
 - Twitter.....10
 - TikTok.....10
- Candidate Behavior.....11
- Malign Trends Online.....11
- Citizens Most Likely to Be Targeted.....11
 - Attacks on Journalists.....11
 - Attacks on Human Rights Defenders.....12
 - Vulnerable Groups.....12
- Information Integrity.....12
- Risks for Offline Violence.....13
- Conclusion.....14
- Appendix.....14
 - Methodology.....14

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Zimbabwe will hold general elections on August 23, 2023, for president and members of both houses of parliament.¹ If the election requires a runoff between the top two presidential candidates, it will be held on October 2, 2023.²

There are 11 candidates registered for the presidential race,³ though two candidates have long been identified as top runners through polls conducted in January-February 2023.⁴ In an Afrobarometer survey released in July 2023, **Nelson Chamisa**, has polled to have 27 percent of the vote and nearly beat the current president in the 2018 elections, is a current leader of the newly emerged Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party and a former leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).⁵ The other top candidate, with 35 percent support, is current President **Emmerson Mnangagwa**, who is seeking reelection from the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF).⁶ Saviour Kasukuwere, a former minister who has emerged as an independent candidate, is believed to be a third top challenger, although polls are yet to determine his approval rating.⁷

With the long-awaited election reform on hold, the 2023 election process and results will likely be disputed.⁸ There are concerns about the independence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) as well as the government's misuse of power to target, intimidate and undermine the president's opponents. Corruption and impunity remain severe issues for the country, with the government using aid distribution as a "soft-intimidation" mechanism in the pre-election period.⁹

WhatsApp is the leading online media platform in Zimbabwe, used by 3.7 million people—almost half of Zimbabweans with access to the internet.¹⁰ Its low data use has made the platform a leading communication tool for social and political discourse. Although the platform has restrictions on its political use, both the ruling party and the opposition are actively utilizing WhatsApp to spread their message. **Facebook** is next with 1.3 million users.¹¹ The platform is actively used for political campaigning and information exchange.¹² Although **Twitter** does not enjoy the same popularity, with only 232,200 users, it is still an active space for social discussions and political campaigning.¹³

Information Integrity, which refers to the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of information, is of concern in Zimbabwe, especially during the pre-election period.¹⁴ Main narratives spread through social media have two dimensions: issues concentrated on transparency, accountability, and corruption, and targeted attacks toward opposing figures, including hate speech, name calling, and discrediting of individuals.

1 Harbath, Katie, and Khizanishvili, Ana. "Election Cycle Tracker." Anchor Change, 2023, anchorchange.com/election-cycle-calendar

2 "Election Watch 14-2023—Consequences of Proclamation of General Election." Veritas, 1 Jun. 2023, veritaszim.net/node/6364

3 Chingono, Nyasha. "Eleven candidates to run for president in Zimbabwe." Reuters, 23 Jun. 2023, reuters.com/world/africa/eleven-candidates-run-president-zimbabwe-2023-06-23/

4 "Survey of Voter Opinion Zimbabwe—January/February 2023." The Brenthurst Foundation, 2023, thebrenthurstfoundation.org/downloads/zimbabwe-survey_media.pdf

5 "Survey: Zanu PF Will Win Presidential Poll If Election Held Today." Voice of America, 10 Jul. 2023, <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/7174276.html>

6 "Survey: Zanu PF Will Win Presidential Poll If Election Held Today."

7 "Eleven candidates to run for president in Zimbabwe."

8 "Election Watch 14-2023—Consequences of Proclamation of General Election."

9 Gavin, Michelle. "Zimbabwe Limp Toward Elections." Council on Foreign Relations, 21 Mar. 2023, cfr.org/blog/zimbabwe-limps-toward-elections; "IRI/NDI Zimbabwe International Election Observation Mission Final Report." International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), Oct. 2018, ndi.org/sites/default/files/Zimbabwe%20ZIEOM%20FINAL%20REPORT%20Printer_updated.pdf

10 Sengere, Leonard. "95.2% of Zimbabweans Still Rely on Phone Calls, Besting WhatsApp's 38.3%." TechZim, 29 Sep. 2021, techzim.co.zw/2021/09/phone-calls-beat-out-whatsapp-texts-and-calls-in-popularity/

11 Kemp, Simon. "Digital 2023: Zimbabwe." Datareportal, 14 Feb. 2023, datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-zimbabwe

12 IRI Zimbabwe staff. Personal interview. 19 Jan. 2023.

13 Kemp. "Digital 2023: Zimbabwe."; IRI Zimbabwe staff. Personal interview. 19 Jan. 2023.

14 "Information Integrity on Digital Platforms." United Nations, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-information-integrity-en.pdf>

The ruling party and the government are known to spread propaganda aimed at Western ideals (equality, freedom of expression, human rights, etc.) labeling sides as “patriots” and “sell-outs.” **Online hate speech is primarily targeted at journalists, human-rights defenders, women, the LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex) community, and tribal communities.**¹⁵

Although the Constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees **freedom of expression and media**, Zimbabwe has implemented laws that target online expression.¹⁶ Journalists and activists have faced criminal charges for exposing corruption and abuse of power.¹⁷ Internet access, especially in rural areas of the country, is significantly low, which makes a large percentage of the population dependent on state-controlled media. Internet shutdowns have occurred around political events such as protests and post-election periods.¹⁸

Zimbabwe’s political landscape has a troubling history of **offline violence**, especially around elections. The country’s security forces, backed by ZANU-PF, have consistently engaged in acts of unlawful violence, exhibiting a sense of impunity. These acts often result in police brutality and further victimization of vulnerable groups.¹⁹

This assessment has revealed the country’s vulnerabilities in the pre-election and post-election periods. From failing to pass election reform to misuse of power, election results will be under incredible scrutiny. The challenges at hand serve as a reminder of the crucial need to support the country’s civil society and other groups fighting to ensure a free and fair election process.

15 Anonymous. Personal interview. 9 May 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 10 May 2023; Personal interview 15 May 2023; Personal interview 24 May 2023. Note: IRI has opted not to name interviewees to protect the privacy and security of in-country partners.

16 “The Constitution of Zimbabwe.” Veritas, 7 May 2021, veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Constitution%20Updated%20to%202021.pdf; “Freedom on the Net.” Freedom House, 2021, freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-net/2021

17 “East and Southern Africa: Attacks on Journalists on the Rise as Authorities Seek to Suppress Press Freedom.” Amnesty International, 2 May 2023, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/east-and-southern-africa-attacks-on-journalists-on-the-rise/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/east-and-southern-africa-attacks-on-journalists-on-the-rise/)

18 “Freedom on the Net.”

19 “Freedom in the World.” Freedom House, 2023, freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-world/2023

COUNTRY PROFILE

Population

16,622,698²⁰

Voting Age (18)

8,602,412²¹ (as of 2023)

Registered Voters

6,147,517²² (as of May 31, 2023)

Mobile-Phone Owners

14.08 million²³

Internet Users

5.74 million²⁴

45.67%

Average
Turnout²⁵

5

Political
Parties²⁶

32.5%

Population in
Urban Area²⁷

9.1%

Social Media
Users²⁸

Population with Access to the Internet

Disputed internet-penetration rate. Government reports **61.3 percent**, but Digital 2023: Zimbabwe report found only **34.8 percent**.²⁹

20 "Zimbabwe Population (Live)." World Bank, Accessed 19 May 2023, worldpopulationreview.com/countries/zimbabwe-population

21 Ibid.

22 "Election Guide-Republic of Zimbabwe." International Foundation for Election System, Accessed 22 Jun. 2023, electionguide.org/countries/id/240/

23 Kemp. "Digital 2023: Zimbabwe."

24 Ibid.

25 "Election Guide-Republic of Zimbabwe."

26 "The World Factbook Zimbabwe." CIA, 13 Jun. 2023, cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/zimbabwe/

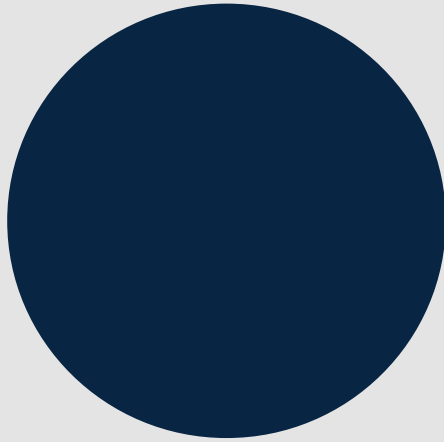
27 Kemp. "Digital 2023: Zimbabwe."

28 Ibid.

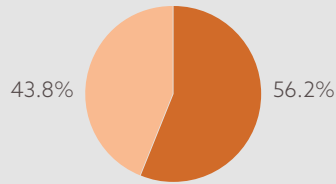
29 Zimbabwe: 50 Percent of Zimbabwe's Population Has No Access to the Internet—Minister." New Zimbabwe, 16 Nov. 2022, allafrika.com/stories/202211160380.html; Kemp, Simon. "Digital 2023: Zimbabwe."

Social Media Use in Zimbabwe

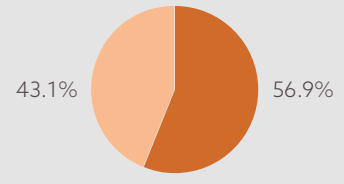
MALE FEMALE DATA N/A



WhatsApp
3.7 million³⁰



Facebook
1.3 million³¹



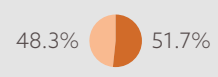
LinkedIn
760,000



Instagram
381,700³²



Twitter
232,200³³



TikTok
71,761³⁴



Map of Africa, with Zimbabwe highlighted.

30 Sengere. "95.2% of Zimbabweans Still Rely on Phone Calls, Besting WhatsApp's 38.3%."

31 Kemp. "Digital 2023: Zimbabwe."

32 Ibid

33 Ibid

34 "TikTok Users in Zimbabwe." Start.io, Mar. 2023, start.io/audience/tiktok-users-in-zimbabwe

POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Following the landmark amendments of May 9, 2013 that codified changes to the 1980 constitution, Zimbabwe established a new legislative standard including civil and political rights and new funding regulations for political parties, with the goal of promoting multiparty democracy.³⁵ The 2013 constitution vests executive power in a president, two vice presidents, and a presidential cabinet. Zimbabwe's legislative branch is a bicameral parliament consisting of a lower house with 270 members (the National Assembly) and an upper house with 80 members (the Senate). Members of both houses serve five-year terms.³⁶ Zimbabwe's judicial branch encompasses several key courts. At the apex is the Constitutional Court, which holds jurisdiction over constitutional matters. The Supreme Court serves as the ultimate court of appeal for all other legal matters, ensuring the highest level of judicial review. Additionally, the High Court holds original jurisdiction in civil and criminal cases and plays a supervisory role over the magistrates' courts and other subordinate courts. Zimbabwe's judicial system also includes specialized courts to address specific areas of law.³⁷ Freedom House's Freedom in the World report, which assesses the state of civil and political rights, rates Zimbabwe as not free, with the lowest score (1/4) in all three criteria of the electoral process.³⁸

Zimbabwe's election process is primarily governed by the 2013 constitution, the Zimbabwe Electoral Act of 2008, and the Electoral Regulations of 2005.^{39/40} The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) manages elections in Zimbabwe. It prepares for, conducts, and supervises elections and referendums, undertakes research on electoral matters, promotes technology in elections, keeps the public informed about electoral processes, and fosters cooperation among the government, political parties, and civil society regarding elections. It can provide recommendations to parliament regarding public financing for political parties. The ZEC consists of a chairperson and eight commissioners, who serve a maximum of two six-year terms. At least four of the commissioners must be women. The president appoints the chairperson in consultation with the Judicial Service Commission and the Parliamentary Committee on Standing Rules and Orders. The chairperson must have a background as a judge or be qualified for such an appointment. The president appoints the remaining eight members from a list of nominees submitted by the Parliamentary Committee on Standing Rules and Orders, with one member designated as the deputy chairperson.⁴¹

Zimbabwe is also part of regional election frameworks such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Norms and Standards for Elections, the Principles for Election Management, Management, Monitoring, and Observation in the SADC Region, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. In 2018, Zimbabwe also signed the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance.

The president of Zimbabwe is elected to a five-year term and can serve no more than two terms. The electoral procedure follows a two-round system. The candidates are elected by majority votes (at least 50 percent plus one). In the event that no candidate achieves a majority, the election moves to a runoff between the two top candidates from the first round. After assuming office, the president shall name not more than two vice presidents right after the assumption of office.⁴²

35 "EU EOM Zimbabwe Harmonised Elections 2018 Final Report." European Union Election Observation Mission, Oct. 2018, europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212506/Zimbabwe-General-Elections_2018_final-report.pdf

36 "Freedom in the World.;" Sanger, W. Clyde, Ingham, Kenneth, and Bradley, Kenneth. "Zimbabwe." *Britannica*, 15 Jun. 2023, britannica.com/place/Zimbabwe/Administration-and-social-conditions

37 *Ibid.*

38 "Freedom in the World."

39 "The Constitution of Zimbabwe."

40 "Zimbabwe: Electoral Act consolidated(2008)" Aceproject, 2008, aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/africa/ZW/zimbabwe-electoral-act-consolidated-2008/view

41 "Elections in Zimbabwe 2018 General Elections Frequently Asked Questions." International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 23 Jul. 2018, ifes.org/tools-resources/faqs/elections-zimbabwe-2018-general-elections

42 The dual vice presidency in Zimbabwe was negotiated in 1987 as part of the Unity Accord, which also merged Zanu-PF and Zapu parties into one Zanu-PF. It was designed to accommodate powers within the party by having one vice president from each faction of the new party.

Two hundred and ten of the National Assembly's 270 members are directly elected, while the remaining 60 seats are distributed among women elected through proportional representation. The composition of the Senate includes members elected by a party list system, of whom 60 are representatives of eight provinces and two cities with provincial status (six each), with men and women listed alternately. Additionally, 16 traditional chiefs are elected by the provincial assemblies of chiefs from the eight provinces. The Senate also reserves two seats for the president and deputy president of the National Council of Chiefs, which serves as the administrative body for traditional chiefs. The Senate also has two representatives of persons with disabilities.⁴³

The voting age in Zimbabwe is 18, with voting eligible through citizenship. Before the 2018 elections, the High Court of Zimbabwe also granted dual citizens the right to vote. In 2017, ZEC adopted a biometric voter-registration (BVR) method that uses fingerprints and photographs to register and verify voters and prevent fraud.⁴⁴

Corruption, impunity, and misuse of state and aid resources for political gain remain major issues in the country. The lack of ZEC independence has been identified as a major threat to the free and fair election process. In June 2023, the Zimbabwe government issued "house loans" amounting to \$400,000 to federal judges, a decision that has raised concerns among experts who perceive it as a form of bribery. This is particularly problematic because these judges are the very individuals who may be called upon to make critical judgments regarding election results.⁴⁵ In addition to these issues, the election process is challenged by voter intimidation, persecution of the opposition and poor human-rights standards, making it easier for malign forces to target vulnerable groups.⁴⁶

UPCOMING ELECTIONS

As in 2018, Zimbabweans will be casting ballots to elect a president and members of Parliament in both houses this year. The elections are set to take place on August 23, 2023.

The Nomination Day, which took place on June 21, determined 11 candidates for the presidential race.⁴⁷ The election commission has said that some aspiring candidates were denied registration due to the failure to raise the \$20,000 required for appearing on the ballot. A female candidate Linda Masarira, who was among those who were denied the registration, has spoken out against the decision, highlighting the discriminatory nature of the rule.⁴⁸ The leading political contenders for the upcoming 2023 elections are the current president seeking reelection, Emmerson Mnangagwa from the Zanu-PF party, which has held power since the country's independence in 1980, and Nelson Chamisa of the CCC, an opposition group founded in early 2022 and headed by Chamisa, who finished second in the 2018 elections with his former party Movement for Democratic Change.⁴⁹ The Nomination Day also revealed an independent candidate, Saviour Kasukuwere, who is projected to draw considerable voter attention. He is a "self-exiled" former minister who served under the notorious government of Robert Mugabe.⁵⁰

43 Sanger, et al. "Zimbabwe.;" "Freedom in the World."

44 "Elections in Zimbabwe 2018 General Elections Frequently Asked Questions."

45 "Judges Get US\$400k Loans, Lawyers Say Payments Are Bribes." The Zimbabwe Mail, 9 Jun. 2023, [thezimbabwemail.com/law-crime/judges-get-us400k-loans-lawyers-say-payments-are-bribes/](https://www.thezimbabwemail.com/law-crime/judges-get-us400k-loans-lawyers-say-payments-are-bribes/)

46 Gavin. "Zimbabwe Limp Toward Elections."

47 Nomination Day refers to the day when parties should formally nominate their candidates by presenting nomination papers to the Nomination Court. The list of all candidates should be published the day after Nomination Day.

48 "Eleven candidates to run for president in Zimbabwe."

49 Ehl. "A New Hope for Zimbabwe's Opposition."

50 "Eleven candidates to run for president in Zimbabwe."

An Afrobarometer survey released in July 2023 on the two leading presidential candidates shows:⁵¹

- **Nelson Chamisa, CCC:** 27 percent
- **Emmerson Mnangagwa, Zanu-PF:** 35 percent

The rest of the percentages are split between survey respondents who refused to answer, would not vote, and do not know who they will vote for.



Long-anticipated election reform, calls for which election observers made in 2018, was put on hold. Although the bill has reached the National Assembly, it cannot influence 2023 elections even if the amendments pass before August 23, due to the provision in the constitution, *"After an election has been called, no change to the Electoral Law or to any other law relating to elections has effect for the purposes of that election."*⁵³ Whether the presidential proclamation setting the election date was published to avoid passage of the reform, experts worry that the move might trigger the results being disputed once again.⁵⁴

ELECTIONS IN 2018

The former president of 37 years, Robert Mugabe, was removed through a military coup in 2017, which resulted in Emmerson Mnangagwa assuming power. However, the 2018 elections failed to make significant strides toward achieving a democratic transition. The lack of transparency in the decision-making process of the ZEC, coupled with inadequate consultation with opposition parties prior to the elections, undermined trust in the commission's impartiality. Although the international community held high hopes for the 2018 elections as a new beginning for a democratic Zimbabwe, an election observation mission report by the European Union and a joint report by IRI and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) found an array of irregularities that raise questions about the freedom and fairness of the process.⁵⁵ The opposition MDC party challenged the election results, with a petition to the Constitutional Court. Still, the court's rejection further eroded public confidence in the political autonomy of electoral institutions.⁵⁶

⁵¹ "Survey: Zanu PF Will Win Presidential Poll If Election Held Today."

⁵² "Election Watch 14-2023—Consequences of Proclamation of General Election."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Chingono, Nyasha. "Zimbabwe to Hold General Election on Aug. 23." Reuters, 31 May 2023, reuters.com/world/africa/zimbabwe-hold-general-election-aug-23-2023-05-31

⁵⁵ "IRI/NDI Zimbabwe International Election Observation Mission Final Report"

⁵⁶ "Election Watch for the Digital Age." Freedom House, 2023, freedomhouse.org/report/election-watch-digital-age#zimbabwe-2023

INTERNET FREEDOM AND THE ONLINE REGULATORY LANDSCAPE

The 2022 Freedom House “Freedom on the Net” assessment rates Zimbabwe at 49/100 and partly free. Although the country’s score has slightly improved since 2021, it has seen disturbing developments toward internet restrictions and targeting activists online.

Zimbabwe faces significant challenges in terms of internet access, which were worsened by an escalating economic crisis and insufficient electrical infrastructure. Despite the government’s claims of favorable internet penetration, the practical reality reveals restricted availability and poor quality of connections. In rural and peri-urban areas, internet penetration remains notably lower than urban areas, due to the high costs involved and the absence of adequate infrastructure.⁵⁷

Zimbabwe’s elections are expected to experience network disruptions and deliberate degradation of internet quality. On various occasions, internet speeds have been intentionally slowed by Zimbabwean authorities in response to political events. These include opposition rallies in February 2022, protests in 2020 related to economic conditions and government handling of COVID-19, as well as fuel-price protests in 2019, during which the government enforced a nationwide shutdown.⁵⁸

Internet shutdowns were also experienced during the 2018 elections, as the state-owned internet provider TelOne restricted access to the website that distributed voters’ roll online.⁵⁹

Zimbabwe has implemented several laws that target online expression, including one law aimed at criminalizing the dissemination of false information.⁶⁰

In December 2021, the Zimbabwean government passed the Cyber and Data Protection Act, which introduced amendments to the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, codifying the prohibition of distributing messages through computers or information systems intending to incite violence against individuals or cause property damage.

Journalists and social media activists have been arrested and detained under the pretext of the law due to their their critical views of political figures. In certain instances, avid critics of the government had to accept government-imposed limitations on their social media use in exchange for their release.⁶¹ Although the High Court invalidated the provision, the Constitutional Court reversed that decision.⁶²

The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act also defines online and offline speech “undermining the authority of or insulting the President” through any printed or electronic medium as a crime against the state. It establishes fines, penalties of up to one year of imprisonment, or a combination of both as punishment for such offenses.⁶³

57 “Freedom on the Net.”

58 Ibid.

59 “Election Watch for the Digital Age.”

60 “Freedom on the Net.”

61 “Election Watch in the Digital Age.”

62 “Freedom on the Net.”

63 Ibid.

Another disturbing initiative is the “Patriot Bill,” passed by the parliament on June 2, 2023, which could become law if signed by the president and which aims to criminalize activities that the government deems to be campaigns against the nation and engagement with foreign governments.⁶⁴ This proposed law has raised concerns among human-rights defenders who fear it will be used to silence government critics, including online activists.

Although the postal and telecommunications regulatory authority is said to be prohibited from monitoring content, communications laws in Zimbabwe grant state security personnel the power to engage in eavesdropping and call interception. These laws enable authorities to seek warrants, without judicial oversight, from the responsible minister or director of the Cybersecurity and Monitoring of Interception of Communications Center, which operates within the Office of the President. These warrants authorize the interception of various forms of communication, such as calls, emails and digital message. Although instances of such warrant applications being made haven't been reported, such power vested within the Office of the President especially without judicial oversight, poses risk for misuse of power and threatens right to privacy and expression.⁶⁵

PLATFORM POLICIES

1 WHATSAPP

WhatsApp has emerged as a vital tool for information sharing and communication at the community level in Zimbabwe. It serves as a platform for discussions on various topics, including politics and personal matters. It is a dominant social media platform in Zimbabwe, accounting for nearly half (44 percent) of all mobile internet users in the country. Facebook, by comparison, accounts for only 1 percent. Particularly in rural areas with poor internet coverage, WhatsApp has gained immense popularity. Its low data consumption sets it apart, making it an affordable option for sharing and consuming news.

Notably, all three mobile-network operators in Zimbabwe offer WhatsApp-specific data bundles, further fueling its widespread usage. In Zimbabwe, as in many sub-Saharan African countries, WhatsApp has become a comprehensive solution, serving as a “one-stop shop” for news, entertainment and socializing. This trend is driven by the fact that independent media outlets in Zimbabwe increasingly rely on WhatsApp as a primary channel for distributing news, filling the void left by the dominant state broadcasters and newspapers.⁶⁶

Although the WhatsApp business platform does not permit political campaigning and the platform uses spam-detection technology to address misinformation and abnormal behavior such as mass messaging, IRI local stakeholders interviewed for this report have confirmed that WhatsApp is widely used by politicians, especially the ruling party, to disseminate false information and conspiracies.⁶⁷

64 Mavhunga, Columbus. “Zimbabwe Opposition, Rights Groups Bemoan Passing of ‘Patriotic Bill.’” Voice of America, 2 Jun. 2023, voanews.com/a/zimbabwe-opposition-rights-groups-bemoan-passing-of-patriotic-bill-/7120292.html; “Bill Watch 01-2023—The Patriot Bill.” Veritas, 11 Jan. 2023, veritaszim.net/node/6100

65 “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Zimbabwe.” U.S Department of State, 2022, state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/zimbabwe/

66 IRI Zimbabwe staff. Personal interview. 19 Jan. 2023.

67 Anonymous. Personal interview. 9 May 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 10 May 2023. Personal interview 15 May 2023, Personal interview 24 May 2023.

Note: IRI has opted not to name our interviewees to protect the privacy and security of our in-country partners.

2 FACEBOOK

With 1.3 million users, Facebook is the second most popular platform in Zimbabwe. Spreading disinformation through the platform has been identified as an issue, as it has significant influence over the pre-election environment.⁶⁸ In contrast to many countries, Facebook does not have a fact-checking partner in Zimbabwe.⁶⁹

3 INSTAGRAM

With an estimated reach of 381,700 users in Zimbabwe in early 2023, Instagram's ad reach in Zimbabwe is equivalent to 2.3 percent of the total population.⁷⁰ While political actors use the platform to disseminate campaign material and messages, most users on the platform engage more in social issues than in political content.

4 TWITTER

Twitter has emerged as an important platform for discussions of national issues in Zimbabwe, despite the widespread presence of misinformation and disinformation. Political parties, civil society organizations, and the Elections Commission have all demonstrated a preference for using Twitter, recognizing its influence in shaping public opinion. Twitter has become a vital political meeting point for Zimbabweans, fostering an established community of political commentators. Despite the consequences that come with expressing criticism toward the ruling party, Twitter is used for critical discourse, allowing citizens to openly express their opinions about the country's affairs. Moreover, the concise nature of most tweets minimizes data usage, making it a more affordable option than image- or video-heavy applications.⁷¹ One of the stakeholders interviewed for this report underlined that it has become harder to identify and block inauthentic actors on Twitter since the recent changes in Twitter leadership.⁷²

5 TIKTOK

Characteristic of the platform, TikTok is popular with Zimbabwean youth. The platform is primarily used for social, rather than political, exchange. Nevertheless, as the population in Zimbabwe is relatively young, both the government and the opposition still use the platform for political discourse.⁷³

68 Anonymous. Personal interview. 9 May 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 10 May 2023. Personal interview 15 May 2023, Personal interview 24 May 2023.

69 "About Fact-Checking on Facebook and Instagram." Meta, Accessed 23 Jun. 2023, facebook.com/business/help/2593586717571940?id=673052479947730

70 Kemp. "Digital 2023: Zimbabwe."

71 Fairbanks, Eve. "We're in Denial About the True Cost of a Twitter Implosion." Wired, 2 Dec. 2022, wired.com/story/musk-denial-true-cost-twitter-implosion/

72 Personal interview. 24 May 2023.

73 Ureke, Oswelled. "Why Tik Tok Matters as Zimbabwe Edges Closer To Elections." Eyewitness News, 5 May 2023, ewn.co.za/2023/05/05/oswelled-ureke-why-tiktok-matters-as-zimbabwe-edges-closer-to-elections

CANDIDATE BEHAVIOR

Spreading disinformation and falsehoods online is a tactic used by both the ruling party and the opposition. According to the IRI stakeholders interviewed for this report, pre-election narratives lack real issues and are focused on party agendas. Ruling-party messaging mainly focuses on whitewashing, praising the president, and portraying the opposition as “Western sellouts” and unpatriotic. Opposition narratives, on the other hand, concentrate on ruling party criticism instead of addressing issues of concern to the Zimbabwean people. The opposition also disseminates information to undermine trust in election systems and discourage voters. The ruling party and the opposition share information attacking vulnerable groups that do not align with their visions.⁷⁴

MALIGN TRENDS ONLINE

According to the V-Dem “Democracy Report” and “Country Graph,” government and party disinformation and false information increased in 2022.⁷⁵ Hate speech by political parties in Zimbabwe is also significantly high.⁷⁶ These trends are exacerbated by the upcoming elections, with candidates from both sides spreading disinformation and hate toward their critics. Malign behavior online primarily targets journalists, women, and activists. The ruling party misuses its power to crack down on its opposition and rile up supporters online toward harassment and hate. The use of trolls and bot farms to control the narrative, whether through harassment or promoting a specific agenda, has become a well-established trend within the online space in Zimbabwe. This strategy is employed by both the ruling party and the opposition to exert influence.⁷⁷

CITIZENS MOST LIKELY TO BE TARGETED

Attacks on Journalists

Journalists in Zimbabwe frequently faced harassment from security forces, officials, and ruling party supporters. Authorities often use legislation criminalizing insults against the president and his family to target journalists exposing the regime. On May 26, 2022, law enforcement raided the house of the publisher and editor of ZimLive.com and arrested him, following his social media post accusing the president of conducting his responsibilities under the influence of alcohol. In 2022, reporters also exposed the arrests of 80 opposition supporters made during 2022 by-elections.⁷⁸

Arrests, detentions, and denials of a fair trial are the government’s signature tactics. Local activists interviewed by IRI have also highlighted arbitrary arrests and issues preventing fair trials.⁷⁹

74 Anonymous. Personal interview. 9 May 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 10 May 2023; Personal interview. 15 May 2023; Personal interview. 24 May 2023.

75 “Democracy Report 2023 Defiance in the Face of Autocratization.” V-Dem, 2023, v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

76 “Country Graph.” V-Dem, Accessed 22 Jun. 2023, /v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/

77 Anonymous. Personal interview. 9 May 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 10 May 2023; Personal interview. 15 May 2023; Personal interview. 24 May 2023.

78 “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Zimbabwe.”

79 Anonymous. Personal interview. 9 May 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 10 May 2023; Personal interview. 15 May 2023; Personal interview. 24 May 2023.

The government exploited accreditation laws to closely monitor the entry of international media journalists into the country. Foreign journalists were required to obtain permits 60 days prior to their arrival, subjecting them to additional scrutiny. Furthermore, foreign reporters had to pay higher permits and accreditation fees than their local counterparts.

Targeting and harassment of journalists have also caused self-censorship amid safety concerns for those attacked and their families.⁸⁰ As mentioned earlier, after the adoption of the Cyber and Data Protection Act, journalists were the first to be targeted and charged under the new law.⁸¹

Attacks on Human-Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders have been targeted, attacked, arrested, and tortured under the Mnangagwa regime.⁸² The pre-election period has seen increased instances of hate speech weaponized by the ruling party to antagonize opposition, civil society organizations and pro-democracy activities. Human rights defenders often face prolonged periods of pretrial detention in Zimbabwe. In cases involving these defenders, judges often postpone announcing bail rulings until after the court cashier closes on Fridays. This deliberate delay is intended to ensure that political detainees remain imprisoned over the weekend, further exacerbating the already lengthy detentions they endure.⁸³ The so-called "Patriot Bill," passed by the parliament in early June and awaiting the president's signature, is also designed to target and suppress nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), especially ones receiving funding from the West.

Vulnerable Groups

Women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and specific tribal communities are among the most vulnerable persons targeted by hate speech and harassment online and offline.⁸⁴ Hate speech targeted at women seeking political office is prevalent. Sexual terms and name calling are commonly used to demean female candidates, undermine their integrity, and cast them in a bad light.⁸⁵ Violence against women has also been linked to women's lack of willingness to participate in the elections.⁸⁶ Activist interviews by IRI have also highlighted that the society's deep-seated sexism and disapproval of homosexuality ensure that once someone is labeled as "gay" or a "prostitute," their credibility is instantly undermined. Political leaders in Zimbabwe have consistently labeled women "prostitutes" and men as "gay," using those terms as insults. There have been instances in which a presidential spokesperson teased and abused activists, mocking them with questions like "How are your scars healing?" This behavior extends to the opposition as well, as it employs similar tactics such as using troll accounts and hurling terms like "gay," "primitive" or "prostitute" to attack their targets.

INFORMATION INTEGRITY

Disinformation and state-controlled online information are scored at two out of four by Freedom House's "Election Vulnerability Index." That number, in combination with other issues in Zimbabwe's digital sphere, puts the country at number six among 14 states currently tracked by the index, in which a higher rank suggests greater vulnerability.⁸⁷ Disinformation and false narratives have been identified as the key concern for the pre-election environment. These narratives are widespread on social media platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp.

80 "Zimbabwe: Journalists Threatened, Harassed Online." International Press Institute, 30 Mar. 2023, ipi.media/zimbabwe-journalists-threatened-harassed-online

81 "East and Southern Africa: Attacks on Journalists on the Rise as Authorities Seek to Suppress Press Freedom."

82 "Zimbabwe: Authorities Escalate Attack on Human Rights Defenders." Amnesty International, 27 May 2019, [amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/05/zimbabwe-authorities-escalate-attack-on-human-rights-defenders/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/05/zimbabwe-authorities-escalate-attack-on-human-rights-defenders/)

83 "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Zimbabwe."

84 Anonymous. Personal interview. 9 May 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 10 May 2023; Personal interview. 15 May 2023; Personal interview. 24 May 2023.

85 IRI Zimbabwe staff. Personal interview. 19 Jan. 2023.

86 "IRI/NDI Zimbabwe International Election Observation Mission Final Report."

87 "Election Watch for the Digital Age."

The situation is exacerbated by the public broadcaster maintaining a biased stance favoring the ruling party, resulting in extensive and favorable coverage across print, radio, and television stations. This is significant due to the country's limited internet penetration and mobile-data coverage, making the public broadcaster the primary and most accessible source of information for most of the population. Consequently, accurate and unbiased information is lacking, and false narratives and propaganda can quickly spread, influencing public opinion, and shaping the discourse.⁸⁸ False narratives and disinformation are also used to undermine Western powers, especially the United States, and activists connected to Western organizations, labeling them as "unpatriotic." In contrast, China has been promoted as an ally and a friend of Zimbabwe. WhatsApp has also been identified as one of the most vulnerable platforms for spreading disinformation, as the encryption of the messaging app offers limited control over the information shared. Organizations such as the Center for Innovation & Technology, Veritas, the Legal Resources Foundation, and Zimfact provide fact-checking and disseminate findings online. Nevertheless, due to the nature of the false information, it is extremely challenging to successfully counter already embedded falsehoods.⁸⁹

RISKS OF OFFLINE VIOLENCE

Offline violence has long been part of Zimbabwe's political environment. Security forces in Zimbabwe, supported by ZANU-PF, have been involved in acts of extralegal violence with impunity, targeting opposition party members, detainees, and protesters, who frequently become victims of police brutality. These instances of violence often lead to death. The absence of accountability for these acts perpetuates a cycle of impunity, allows security forces to operate outside the boundaries of the law and subjects individuals to severe harm and abuse.⁹⁰ The 2000 elections were stained by extreme violence, with more than 3,000 incidents reported by independent violence monitors.

Most recently, the aftermath of the 2018 elections was tumultuous, as six individuals were killed and numerous others were injured during a post-election protest, demanding the prompt release of elections results amidst concerns of potential manipulation. State-sponsored violent attacks resulting in 17 deaths also occurred in 2019.⁹¹ This connection between hate speech and politically motivated violence remains concerning and raises the likelihood of similar occurrences in 2023. The escalating political violence and intimidation targeted toward opposition politicians and their supporters further contribute to the apprehension surrounding the election period. These indicators collectively paint a troubling picture, suggesting that violence may persist and intensify during the upcoming elections.

Local activists highlighted fears of offline violence. Their concerns included human rights violations, voter suppression, and undermining democratic processes. Civil society organizations have also highlighted causal connections between online and offline violence.

According to local NGOs, there is a concerning trend in Zimbabwe in which traditional leaders and government officials distribute food aid in a manner influenced by political affiliation. Reports emerged in 2022 indicating that officials widely engaged in the partisan distribution of benefits from the president's agricultural scheme. These "soft-intimidation" tactics through manipulation of aid and politicized approach to food distribution undermine the principles of fairness and impartiality, perpetuating a system that punishes opposition-leaning communities while favoring those aligned with the ruling party.⁹²

88 IRI Zimbabwe staff. Personal interview. 19 Jan. 2023; "Slim Chance that Zimbabwe's 2023 Elections Will Be Competitive." Institute for Security Studies, 23 May 2022, issafrica.org/iss-today/slim-chance-that-zimbabwes-2023-elections-will-be-competitive

89 Anonymous. Personal interview. 9 May 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 10 May 2023; Personal interview. 15 May 2023; Personal interview. 24 May 2023.

90 "Freedom in the World."

91 "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Zimbabwe."

92 "IRI/NDI Zimbabwe International Election Observation Mission Final Report."

CONCLUSION

This assessment brought to light Zimbabwe's systemic vulnerabilities amid the 2023 elections. Challenges have been revealed concerning corruption, impunity, misuse of power, blatant attacks on activists and vulnerable groups, an unhealthy online environment, and possible threats of offline violence.

A lack of independence of the election administration, and misuse of political power by the ruling party and the government, have been identified as one of the challenges amid this year's elections. The president's announcement of the election date before the passing of election reform leaves the process to a flawed and weak election system. The process is further threatened by the government's history of voter intimidation and politically motivated aid distribution.

Attacks on vulnerable groups such as journalists, human-rights defenders, women, LGBTQI+ persons, and tribal communities pose an additional threat to election integrity. These attacks, including the arrest of activists and journalists, as well as hate speech, further exacerbate issues of free expression, independent media, and human rights.

Information Integrity is another issue creating risks for the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe. Both the ruling party and the opposition actively use disinformation and online attacks to discredit opponents through hate speech, name calling, and personal assaults. While civil society organizations work toward countering disinformation, debunking widespread falsehoods is extremely challenging in an environment with internet access at 30 percent and dominated by traditional state-controlled media.

Zimbabwe's political environment has a deeply concerning track record of **offline violence**, particularly during electoral periods. The security forces, supported by ZANU-PF, have committed unlawful acts of violence, showcasing a distressing sense of impunity. As a result, incidents of police brutality and the continued victimization of vulnerable populations are an active threat in the pre-election and post-election periods. The lack of accountability further exacerbates the situation, causing voter disenfranchisement, especially among vulnerable groups.

The assessment findings paint a challenging picture for Zimbabwe's upcoming elections. The identified risks present a substantial danger to the integrity of the electoral process—particularly in the online realm, where vigilance will be paramount. These difficulties highlight the necessity for a collective effort, including civil society organizations, activists, journalists, and international actors to address vulnerabilities to advance truly free and fair elections.

APPENDIX

Methodology

To ensure accurate and evidence-based information on Zimbabwe's pre-election political environment and digital landscape, IRI conducted an assessment between April and June 2023. The assessment involved a comprehensive desk review and interviews with IRI's country team and local stakeholders. The desk research included examining relevant documents such as country reports, previous human-rights situation analyses, election-legislation assessments, and demographic datasets.

To address any gaps identified during the desk review, the assessment team conducted structured interviews with local partners, including civil society organizations, activists, and journalists. These interviews aimed to cover all relevant issues and validate the information gathered during the desk research for increased accuracy.

Based on the findings from the desk review and interviews, the assessment team performed thematic and content analysis to evaluate existing data and incorporate new information received from partners. These findings were used to develop a comprehensive report identifying valuable and reliable information on Zimbabwe's pre-election information environment and digital ecosystem. The report provides an overview of political systems, online trends, potential risks, the state of information integrity, and the most vulnerable groups affected by the electoral process.



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