Zimbabwe

Country: Zimbabwe
Year: 2016
Press Freedom Status: Not Free
PFS Score: 74
Legal Environment: 24
Political Environment: 25
Economic Environment: 25

Overview

Freedom of the press is restricted in Zimbabwe. The government has not yet aligned media laws with the country’s new constitution passed in 2013, and, among other violations, media authorities arbitrarily deny licenses to community radio stations. Journalists face harassment, threats, and arbitrary arrests, and increasingly dire economic conditions continue to cause job losses and financial strain in the media sector.

Key Developments

• In March 2015, unknown assailants abducted prominent journalist and government critic Itai Dzamara in Harare, and he remained missing at year’s end.
• Three journalists from the Sunday Mail, a state-owned weekly, were arrested in November and charged under the criminal code with publishing false information in an article that linked state officials to cases of suspected elephant poaching.
• High-level government officials, including President Robert Mugabe, exacerbate to restricted environment by frequently directing hostile rhetoric toward the media.
Legal Environment: 24 / 30 (↓1)

The 2013 constitution provides for freedom of expression and access to information, with some limitations. However, an otherwise draconian legal framework continues to inhibit the activities of journalists and media outlets. The 2002 Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) requires all journalists and media companies to register, and gives the information minister sweeping powers to decide which publications can operate legally and who is able to work as a journalist. Unlicensed journalists can face criminal charges and a sentence of up to two years in prison. In addition, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act severely limit what journalists may publish and mandate harsh penalties—including long prison sentences—for violators. The 2007 Interception of Communications Act allows officials to intercept telephonic and electronic communications and to monitor their content to prevent a “serious offense” or a “threat to national security.” In April 2015, the government announced plans to draft a cybercrime bill, which advocacy groups feared could lead to unchecked surveillance and limitations on free expression online. The bill had not passed by year’s end.

The restrictive legal atmosphere is exacerbated by frequent and hostile rhetoric directed against the media by high-level government officials. In September 2015, President Robert Mugabe accused the press of fomenting discord by spreading lies concerning disputes within Zimbabwe’s political leadership, and threatened to more severely curtail their operations. The information minister issued similar threats in October.

Authorities continued to exploit restrictive laws to harass and punish journalists in 2015. In June, journalist Patrick Chitongo was sentenced to one year in prison for publishing an unregistered newspaper, the Southern Mirror, in violation of the AIPPA. In November, authorities arrested photojournalist Anderson Shadreck Manyere for filming clashes between the police and supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change–Tsvangirai (MDC-T), Zimbabwe’s main opposition party. He was charged with “participating in a gathering with intent to promote public violence, breaches of the peace or bigotry.”

Three journalists from the Sunday Mail, a state-owned weekly, were arrested in November and charged under the criminal code with publishing false information in an article that linked state officials to cases of suspected elephant poaching. These journalists were arrested despite 2013 and 2014 Constitutional Court decisions that the sections of the Criminal Law (Reform and Codification) Act that criminalized defamation and the publication of falsehoods were unconstitutional. However, the court’s decisions were made on the basis of Zimbabwe’s 1980 constitution, leaving journalists vulnerable to criminal prosecution for these offenses under the constitution adopted in 2013. In February 2015, a group of journalists and the local chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) filed an application with the Constitutional Court for a review of the provisions in question within the framework of the new constitution; no decision was reached by year’s end.

The right to information is theoretically provided by the AIPPA, though with a number of exemptions. In practice, the relevant provisions of the law are not operational, and accessing official information remains extremely difficult. The colonial-era Official Secrets Act is also used to keep tight control over information.
The Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC) regulates the licensing of publications and journalists. In 2012, the ZMC announced the creation of the 13-member Zimbabwe Media Council, as provided for under the AIPPA. The council is charged with developing codes of conduct for print media and has the power to impose punishments on media houses that transgress the codes. However, chronic underfunding has greatly constrained its capacity to fulfill this mandate. The independent Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ), a self-regulatory body for all types of media that is supported by a majority of print outlets, has continued to develop its scope of activities, and has heard numerous formal complaints and adjudicated disputes over media content. In 2015, the council registered nearly two dozen complaints from members of the public.

Broadcasting licenses have been consistently denied to independent and community radio stations but granted to government-affiliated organizations. Moreover, independent outlets that campaign for licenses face harassment and persecution from the authorities. Critics allege that the board of the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), which is responsible for granting radio and television licenses, was illegally appointed in 2009 by the information minister and stacked with loyalists of Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party. In early 2014, the government began to move forward with a plan to license 25 new community radio stations. In February 2015, the BAZ granted only eight licenses, having considered a pool of nearly two dozen applicants. Media advocacy groups criticized the process for its complexity, political nature, and prohibitively high fees, which had caused several contenders to withdraw; critics of the process also noted that almost all groups that received licenses were linked to current or former government officials or state-owned enterprises. No community radio stations have been licensed since 2001.

Professional and media-monitoring organizations such as the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists, the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe, and the local chapter of MISA are also occasionally subject to official pressure.

**Political Environment: 25 / 40 (↓2)**

Faced with legal restrictions as well as the threat of extralegal intimidation, some journalists practice self-censorship, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as corruption or factional fighting within ZANU-PF. Official censorship is also a problem. The *Source*, a website focusing on business and financial news, published a series of articles in February and March detailing the banking practices of Steward Bank, a subsidiary of Econet Wireless, a multinational telecommunications company with operations in Zimbabwe. Econet Wireless obtained a court order to have the articles removed and to conduct a joint search of the publication’s offices with local police, alleging that the stories were based on stolen information. The *Source* contested the order unsuccessfully and was forced to remove the articles and submit to the search, during which police extracted information from journalists’ computers.

Despite the government’s efforts to censor online and digital media, online newspapers, news portals, and blogs run by Zimbabweans living abroad are increasingly popular among those with internet access. Diaspora media also distribute news and information via text messaging and social-media platforms.
Steep accreditation fees introduced in 2011 for foreign media bureaus and their local correspondents remain in place. Foreign journalists can encounter restrictions on residing full-time in the country and are sometimes denied visas. Local correspondents for foreign publications have also been refused accreditation or threatened with lawsuits and deportation in the past. However, no such cases were reported in 2015.

Journalists have traditionally faced verbal intimidation, physical attacks, arbitrary arrest and detention, interception of communications, and financial pressure at the hands of the police, government officials, and supporters of the main political parties. They are vulnerable to harassment and violence when attempting to cover sensitive news events or political issues, and have also reported retaliatory attacks and threats. In March 2015, unknown assailants abducted prominent journalist and government critic Itai Dzamara in Harare, and he remained missing at year’s end. In November, photojournalist Chrispen Ndlovu was beaten by police officers after photographing confrontations between the police and taxi drivers in Bulawayo. In Masvingo, police frequently questioned, harassed, and threatened reporters working for the Wezhira community radio station, and raided the station’s office in June.

**Economic Environment: 25 / 30 (↓1)**

The government controls the two main daily newspapers, the *Chronicle* and the *Herald*, whose propagandistic coverage generally favors Mugabe and ZANU-PF. The private Alpha Media Holdings group publishes a number of the country’s independent papers, including *NewsDay*, the *Standard*, and the *Zimbabwe Independent*. The *Daily News*, published by Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe, resumed operations in 2011 after being shuttered in 2003 and is generally aligned with MDC viewpoints. Some foreign newspapers, mainly from South Africa, are available despite a 2012 ZMC directive banning the distribution of unregistered foreign newspapers.

Newspapers typically have poor distribution networks outside urban areas, and they have been buffeted by soaring prices for newsprint in recent years. Vendors and distributors of independent newspapers are occasionally harassed by soldiers or ruling party supporters. According to the 2015 *African Media Barometer* report on Zimbabwe, state-run companies often do not advertise in private papers, and state-run media outlets do not accept advertising from companies thought to be aligned with the opposition.

The state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) runs the vast majority of broadcast media outlets, which are subject to overt political interference and censorship; ZBC coverage overwhelmingly favors ZANU-PF. In 2012, two new private radio stations—Star FM and ZiFM—commenced operation. Despite initial concerns over their owners’ close ties to ZANU-PF, local analysts noted that the stations’ news and talk radio content presented a diversity of views. The Broadcasting Services Act bans foreign funding and investment in this capital-intensive sector, making it very difficult for private players to enter the market. Radio broadcasts are currently the main source of information in rural areas. Access to broadcast media in these districts is hampered by deteriorating equipment and a lack of transmission sites. However, Zimbabwe’s transition from analog to digital broadcasting has provided an opportunity to upgrade the country’s broadcast infrastructure, and in 2015, authorities reached agreements with European and Chinese
companies to facilitate improvements. The transition to digital broadcasting was ongoing in 2015, although funding shortfalls threatened its timely completion.

Zimbabwe had an internet penetration of more than 16 percent of the population in 2015, with most accessing the internet via their mobile phones. Access to the internet is limited by service disruptions caused by frequent power outages, though costs have significantly decreased in recent years due to greater competition in the telecommunications sector.

Local authorities occasionally raid homes in rural areas and confiscate the shortwave radios used to access foreign broadcasts. Radio listeners in Zimbabwe are also required to obtain a license for each radio in their possession, which must be renewed annually, with profits going to the ZBC. The government has also made car radio license renewal a required element of updating vehicle registration. In January 2015, police created roadblocks in Bulawayo to check for updated car radio licenses and charged on-the-spot fines for noncompliance, a practice not within their authority. Satellite television services that carry international and regional news programming remain largely uncensored and are accessed by a rapidly growing share of the population, thanks to new technology such as free-to-air decoders. It is estimated that just over half of the population has a working television at home, and of these, about two-thirds access content via satellite dishes.

Amid continuing financial hardship, some media houses were forced to downsize or close in 2015. Transport Minister Obert Mpofu’s newspaper, the *Zimbabwe Mail*, initially reduced from daily to weekly production in February before shutting down in March, a year after it began publishing. The *Southern Eye* in Bulawayo ceased publication as a daily in April and became a supplement to *NewsDay* in order to cut costs, and the *Zimbabwean*, published since 2005 by MDC affiliates, shut down in October after donors withdrew funding. In addition, dozens of media employees lost their jobs in the wake of a Supreme Court decision in July permitting employers to terminate employees without severance pay by giving three months’ notice.

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