



The Unfreedom Monitor

A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World

ZIMBABWE
COUNTRY REPORT

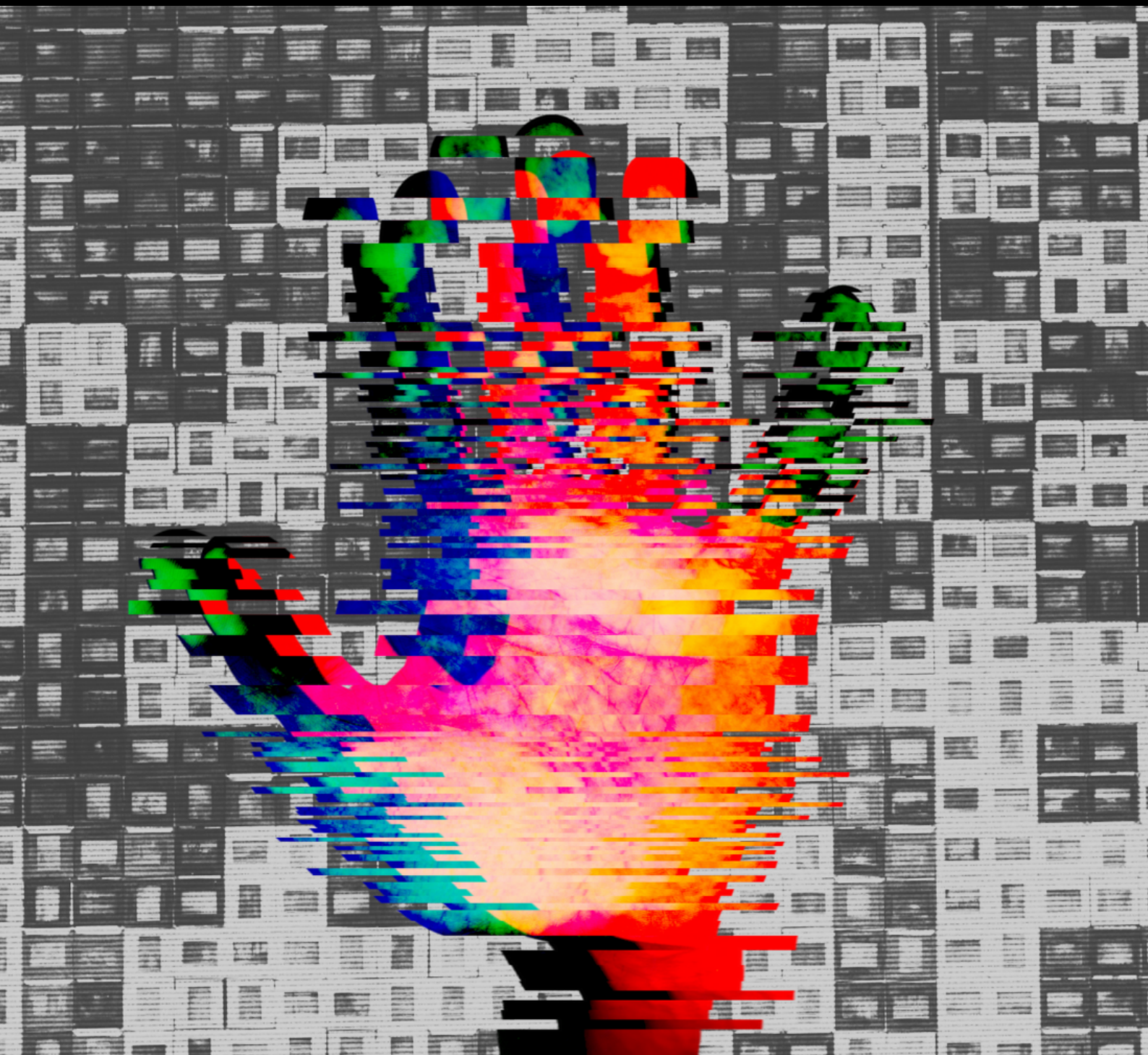


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital authoritarianism in Zimbabwe has roots in the colonial period when the Rhodesian regime implemented communication and media management policies premised on propping up the then government's image. Led by the late Robert Mugabe, the independent government also encouraged a restrictive media environment with laws that sought to regulate and persecute voices of dissent. In the early days of the internet in the country in the mid-90s, the space was not seen as a real threat as most citizens had not yet adopted information and communication technologies. It was only after Facebook became popular as a source of news in 2010, in a highly polarised media environment, that the state took an increasingly keen interest in what media the population was consuming.

A key motive for digital repression identified in the research is based on an overarching desire to maintain the status quo and hegemony, where only a few of the ruling elite feel entitled to ownership of the country. For instance, the threat of revolutionary change inspired by social media mobilisation had to be neutralised. The November 2017 military coup that deposed long time ruler Mugabe did not lead to fundamental change but instead provided fertile ground for a more militarised approach to governance, without much regard for constitutionalism. The current regime continually amends the nationally accepted 2013 constitution, as the president seeks to expand the influence of the executive over the judiciary and the legislature. Realising the strategic importance of both the media and the online digital sphere, the ruling junta views both spaces not as a means of empowering citizens to take part in democratic processes, but more as tools for the consolidation of political power. The political and legal extent to which the Zimbabwean state is willing to use technology to entrench the status quo depends greatly on its national context, and the success of any established digital rights regime depends on their political and country context.

The law has been a major part of this process. Enabling legislation has been passed to undermine legitimate dissent against unpopular policies and political leadership methods. This new legislation impacts digital rights as it enables an oppressive context.

The influence of foreign governments and corporations in shaping Zimbabwe's digital environment is also a pressing issue. As the study will show, the authoritarian regime aggressively seeks to survive in an ever changing political and economic landscape created by globalisation, by resorting to methods such as the use of surveillance technologies, the unmonitored collection of citizens' biometric data, and the promulgation of draconian legislation. The key actors identified as supplying the government with digitally repressive technologies are just as complicit in digital rights violations and the closing of civic space both on online and offline platforms.

BACKGROUND

Mobile telephony and internet use is ubiquitous in Zimbabwe, with a rapidly growing youthful population taking up mobile internet usage in both rural and urban areas. This can be attributed to the mass availability and affordability of mobile phones and a massive government/private sector led telecommunication infrastructure rollout. As far back as 2013, when the late strongman Robert Mugabe ran for yet another term of office, elections were largely influenced by internet and social media activity. The ruling party Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) recognized the potential power of information communication technology (ICT) towards the run up to the 2013 elections.

The independent press, civil society organisations (CSOs), human rights and political activists are regularly subjected to random and extra legal surveillance activities, due to their whistleblowing role and their use of the internet as a mass communication tool. Pro-democracy groups are increasingly subject to repression as the internet is their primary means of expression. People and groups deemed critical of government are routinely targeted for harassment, abduction, torture and at times, forced disappearance.

The 2010 arrest of an opposition party supporter over a Facebook post that the state deemed subversive marked the early signs of digital repression in Zimbabwe. Social media activism gained traction in 2016 when online movements such as the #MugabeMustFall, #ZimShutdown2016 and #ThisFlag shook the government and WhatsApp was temporarily blocked for the first time in Zimbabwe, after the country's leading internet service providers were pressured into shutting down access.

The height of digital and human rights violations, accompanied by a brutal military led clampdown on civil protests, was in January 2019. A social media movement, led by Zimbabweans frustrated by fuel price increases, prompted the government to order a complete shutdown of the internet. Behind this online communication blockade, many civilians were killed, and several more several abducted, tortured and left critically injured after soldiers were sent to crush the protests. It is estimated that the country incurred losses worth millions of US dollars, during the days-long internet shutdown, reflecting how dependent Zimbabwe is on digital transactions. With a high Gini coefficient and rife unemployment, millions of citizens depend on online transactions for daily informal work, diaspora remittances, and other banking business in other economic areas.

“ It is estimated that the country incurred losses worth millions of US dollars during the days-long internet shutdown, reflecting how dependent Zimbabwe is on digital transactions.

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The latest incident of government interference with democratic processes is the throttling of the internet to disrupt the live streaming of a political rally by opposition party Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC.) The service slowdown significantly affected several Internet Service Providers (ISPs), with many reaching low accessibility rates of 50 to 60 percent. This also had the effect of limiting access to online content for all users of services provided by local ISPs. Cyber security watchdog NetBlocks has previously reported on similar

government-initiated internet service disruptions in the country before and during planned protests and opposition political activity in the past, with the objective of limiting mass mobilisation and real-time coverage of such events (“Internet Slowdown”).

It is evident from these and many other accounts of digital repression that technology has a strong bearing upon Zimbabwe’s political, social and economic life. Activists are also concerned with the government’s rapid adoption of biometric technology and other Artificial Intelligence initiatives with Chinese companies, which have terrible human rights records. The government is also increasing its digital footprint in Zimbabwe’s public life, without regard for rights enshrined in the 2013 Constitution nor respect for regional and international protocols to which it is signatory.

ZIMBABWE POLITICAL HISTORY

Before independence in 1980, the Rhodesian government led by Ian Smith ran a system of governance modelled along the lines of South African apartheid, where non-white people were regarded as second-class citizens. The Smith government implemented media and communication policies tailored to broadcast the regime's propaganda to entrench white minority rule, with Smith declaring that black people would never rule Rhodesia in a thousand years. Smith's actions sparked the Second Chimurenga, or war, for Zimbabwean independence, which lasted from the late 1960s to 1979 (Little).

It is important to note that the repressive media policies, and lately digital technology policies, prevailing in present-day Zimbabwe are a mirror of the Rhodesian system of governance, albeit with cosmetic adjustments. The ruling ZANU PF government's main narrative churned out through state media is that it liberated the country from colonialism through guerrilla warfare; hence no entity is justified in removing the party from power.

When ZANU PF won a landslide electoral victory at the 1980 polls, both citizens and the international community were relieved that a bitter and costly war had come to an end. The Lancaster House Agreement that paved the way for a peaceful power transition from white minority rule to black majority rule was the initial basis for Britain's involvement in post-independence Zimbabwe. This agreement obliged Britain to fund the land reform process as land ownership had been one of the key reasons for the war of liberation.

Zimbabwe adopted a constitutional democracy and the form of a unitary republic upon independence, with a legal system based on Roman Dutch law. Every five years, the country conducts presidential, legislative and senate elections. The executive branch is headed by the president who is Head of State, Head of Government, and Commander-in-Chief of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces. After Mugabe assumed power, his popularity slowly faded as his dictatorial grip on Zimbabwe increased. The Leader of Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), the late Joshua Nkomo posed an extraordinary threat to Mugabe's totalitarian rule ambitions. Mugabe quickly changed the political system from parliamentary to presidential; with a powerful executive, and as president, he stopped at nothing to create a one-party state. From 1988, the Mugabe regime was viewed as increasingly autocratic.

In 1999, Mugabe's government initiated a constitutional referendum which sought to increase the powers of the executive. The majority of citizens voted "No" to this proposed constitution, a decision that shocked ZANU PF as the party had overestimated its popularity. After this constitutional defeat, spearheaded by civil society and opposition party campaigns, the state drifted away from democratic governance and resorted to brute force and intimidation. However, on March 16, 2013, a new constitution that included a Bill of Rights was finally adopted after a successful referendum.

History professor Teresa Barnes quoted by Little contends that when Mugabe came to power in 1980, he had a huge amount of legitimacy, and that the 1980 election was free and fair, and really did represent the will of the majority of the people at that time. Mugabe's desire to retain power resulted in illegitimate elections and corruption. Barnes argues that, since 1980, the country's elections have become less free, and over time they have become more and more sham elections.

The legislature is composed of a bicameral parliament comprising the National Assembly and the Senate. The upper house has 80 senators, with six elected through proportional representation from the provinces in the country. Sixteen senators are traditional chiefs, with two from each of the 10 provinces. The lower house comprises 210 members of parliament elected from the various constituencies in the country. Both houses are elected for a five-year term.

“ In full view of global media, which had gathered to cover election results, the army opened live fire on protesting members of the opposition, resulting in the death of innocent civilians.

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The judiciary encompasses the Constitutional Court, the High Court, the Supreme Court, the Labour Court, the magistrate courts, the Administrative Court, and customary law courts. There was a distinct separation between the judiciary, the legislature and the executive in the country's early years of independence. However, in seeking to appease restless war veterans, Mugabe implemented a fast-track land reform program in the early 2000s that violently displaced 4,500 white commercial farmers from 11 million hectares of fertile land. According to the government, this exercise was meant to redress colonial land imbalances. Mugabe fired judges who were critical of his land expropriation policies and replaced them with those who pandered to his whims.

Mugabe was removed from power in a November 2017 coup. Shortly afterwards, former Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa who had gone into exile returned and promised to lead the country towards elections in 2018. He promised a range of reforms including a return to the rule of law, re-engagement with the international community and respect for human rights among other reforms. However, in August of the same year, opposition party supporters took to the streets of Harare protesting the delay by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission in announcing results. A specialised unit of the army was sent to quell the protests but the results were an international disaster. In full view of global media, which had gathered to cover election results, the army opened live fire resulting in the death of innocent civilians. Opposition leader Nelson Chamisa challenged the legitimacy of the elections in the Constitutional Court but lost the appeal.

The World Bank's lending program in Zimbabwe is inactive due to arrears running into billions of USD and the institution is now limited to technical assistance and analytical work. After clearing its debt with the IMF, Zimbabwe received the equivalent of USD 961 million from a IMF Special Drawing Rights allocation, which had the direct impact of boosting the country's gross international reserves. Owing to its pariah state status due to human rights violations, the country has not received multilateral financial assistance. Zimbabwe has therefore adopted a "Look East" foreign policy. Relations with China and Russia both pre- and post-independence have been much closer, so it is not surprising that strong political and economic interaction is the norm. Countries such as Kuwait, Iran, Malaysia, and India also play a fundamental role in Zimbabwe's foreign policy. Some observers have surmised that China has a very strong say in how Zimbabwe is governed, as evident in the November 2017 coup which deposed the late Mugabe.

On February 21, 2022, the European Union (EU) extended a decades-old embargo against Mnangagwa's administration, citing continued rights abuses and the enactment of repressive legislation. On March 4, the United States also renewed its decades-old sanctions legislation ZIDERA, citing continued rights abuses by Mnangagwa's administration and his government's extraordinary threat to America's foreign policy. Numerous rights activists, journalists and opposition party members have been arrested for organising protests or posting comments critical of the government on social media.

ZIMBABWE INTERNET PATTERN AND PENETRATION

In a report titled Digital 2022 Zimbabwe, the country's total population stood at 15.21 million in January 2022, having increased by 234,000 (1.6 percent) between 2021 and 2022.

With 4.65 million internet users in January 2022, Zimbabwe's internet penetration rate stood at 30.6 percent of the total population at the start of 2022. Furthermore, there were 1.55 million social media users in Zimbabwe during the same period. Social media users in Zimbabwe increased by 250,000 (19.2 percent) between 2021 and 2022.

At the start of 2022, 43.7 percent of Facebook's ad audience in Zimbabwe was female, while 56.3 percent was male. Numbers published in Twitter's advertising resources indicate that Twitter had 232,400 users in Zimbabwe in early 2022. This figure means that Twitter's ad reach in Zimbabwe was equivalent to 1.5 percent of the total population at the time.

Data from Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA) Intelligence shows that there were 13.64 million cellular mobile connections in Zimbabwe at the start of 2022. GSMA Intelligence's numbers indicate that mobile connections in Zimbabwe were equivalent to 89.7 percent of the total population in January 2022. These figures can partially explain the fact that most people in the country connect to the internet via mobile telephones ("Digital 2022").

Zimbabwe's first internet service provider (ISP), Data Control & Systems, was established in 1994. In 1997, the national Posts and Telecommunication Corporation (PTC) built a national internet backbone to sell bandwidth to private ISPs ("Internet Zimbabwe").

There is a slight rural/urban divide in internet use in terms of access to services as the data infrastructure is not sufficient to cover all areas of the country. Low literacy levels and limited access to the internet continue to pose hindrances for women in rural areas.

The majority of Zimbabwe's population communicate in Shona and Ndebele, and an added layer of difficulty with internet use is this language barrier, as most of the content and information is in English ("Internet Access").

In early March 2022, Econet Wireless Zimbabwe partnered with NASDAQ listed company Ericsson to launch 5G services in Harare. Under the partnership, Ericsson will support Econet with its latest energy-efficient and high-performing Radio Access Network (RAN) and 5G Evolved Packet Core (EPC) solutions for 5G deployment in the capital city. The solutions are anticipated to boost Econet's capacity and user experience with significantly faster network speeds ("Econet and Ericsson"). 5G technology will enhance seamless interconnectivity and communication between smart devices, otherwise known as the Internet of Things.

In March 2021, state owned mobile network operator NetOne partnered with Chinese technology company Huawei to improve mobile broadband services. The goal of the project was to introduce 5G into Zimbabwe. The deal, worth USD 400,000, also aims to upgrade the network speed and improve mobile broadband speed, especially in remote areas (Muhamba).

With regard to disruptions, in January 2019, authorities shut down the internet in the whole country during protests over fuel price increases (“Zimbabwe Imposes”). Zimbabwe is one among many countries with extremely restrictive social media and internet policies, especially during elections and in the run ups to planned political protests. On February 20, 2022, when opposition leader Nelson Chamisa drew thousands of supporters to his maiden election rally in the capital city, Harare, internet watchdog NetBlocks reported a significant throttling of internet services, which disrupted live streaming of Chamisa’s CCC rally (“Statement On”).

Liquid Telecom, a subsidiary of Econet Wireless, is the leading internet player in Zimbabwe. Their local fibre network is the largest in the country and, since early 2013, they also operate the largest fibre network in Africa. All but 2 of the top 12 ISPs are privately owned, and those two are only partly owned by the government. Government-owned communications company TelOne is another major ISP; it provides bandwidth to most other ISPs in the country.

Multimedia journalism in Zimbabwe has increasingly become the new method of news reporting in the country. The advent of citizen journalism and declining advertising revenues due to a poorly performing economy and the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed mainstream media to incorporate the internet into their digital strategies. All publicly and privately owned media have Twitter handles and Facebook links. Social media sites WhatsApp and Twitter remain two of the most popular communication methods for Zimbabweans. Blogging is not as popular throughout the country, as it remains confined to the young urban elite. Popular blogging sites include Three Men on a Boat run by Larry Kwirirai and P.J, TechZim run by Limbikani S.K Makhani, 263 Chat by Nigel Mugamu and Her Zimbabwe by Fungai Machirori. Her Zimbabwe focuses on shedding light on Zimbabwean women’s

“ The advent of citizen journalism and declining advertising revenues due to a poorly performing economy and the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed mainstream media to incorporate the internet into their digital strategies

experiences, sharing gender views and stories, as well as nurturing young women’s participation in digital activism. 263Chat is a Zimbabwean media organisation focused on encouraging and participating in progressive national dialogue. Alternative media sites include Open Parly, Pachedu, Magamba TV and Pindula.

WhatsApp remains the most popular and ubiquitous social networking site in both rural and urban areas of Zimbabwe, because better connectivity makes it a cheaper and faster means of communication than most others. However, the platform is susceptible to misinformation, disinformation and mal-information campaigns around protests and elections. It also remains vulnerable to government ordered internet shutdowns whenever there is political activity that threatens the status quo.



METHODOLOGY

Country and Style of government	Style of government	CPJ Press Freedom Rankings 2020 (Out of 180)	Freedom House Ranking	Digital Authoritarian practices
Zimbabwe <i>Independence party controls the public sphere, deteriorating economic conditions</i>	Independence party (ZANU PF) controls the public sphere, deteriorating economic conditions	130	Not Free, 28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet shutdown • Social media access restrictions • Social media shutdown • Bandwidth throttling • Punitive internet taxes • ISP controls • Public digital surveillance • Internet of things • Physical surveillance • Informants • Online tracking • Information manipulation • Influence campaign • Misinformation and disinformation • Coordinated inauthentic behaviour • Information ecosystem shaping (creating propaganda outlets, e.g.) • Device-based surveillance • Network interference • Violations of freedoms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Privacy - Data - Expression - Movement - Media

KEY

LIST OF PRACTICES

- Internet controls
- Surveillance
- Information manipulation
- Technology controls
- Freedom restrictions
- Systems attacks

MAPPING COUNTRY CHALLENGE

A. WHAT ARE THE MAIN EVENTS THAT SHOW THAT DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM EXISTS

Digital authoritarianism in Zimbabwe is hardly a new phenomenon as it goes back many years ago to when the late President Robert Mugabe was in power. The ruling party ZANU PF has, since independence in 1980, used a police state apparatus to run the country as the rank and file in the leadership emerged from a bush war with Rhodesian security forces. Much of the repressive and state led hegemony media policies applied in the colonial era still find expression digitally in contemporary Zimbabwe.

On February 24, 2010, police arrested Vikas Mavhudzi, an internet user interested in the Arab spring, after he suggested that the then Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai should match pro-democracy protests that had occurred in Egypt, also commonly referred to as the Arab Spring. In January 2014, a Facebook user, Gumisai Manduwa was arrested over a Facebook post alleging that Robert Mugabe had died. Although the magistrate dismissed the latter case for lack of substance, this incident marked the growth of digital repression as the state remained paranoid about preserving the status quo.

An account appeared on Facebook in January of the same year using the name "Baba Jukwa." The accurate posts from this anonymous account, thought to have been run by a ZANU PF insider, immediately became a reputable source of online political news in Zimbabwe. Many of the posts revealed unparalleled state corruption, violence and the assassinations of senior government officials. While state security agents sought to find the person behind the posts, they found it impossible to arrest them as they communicated using a number of layers of encryption.

So worried was the government that the Minister of State Security announced that Zimbabwe was under cyber attack, in apparent reference to the Baba Jukwa account. The government offered a reward of USD 300,000 for the identity of the person behind the account. On the one hand, this period marks the government's foray into investment in technologies that would enhance its ability to conduct digital surveillance. On the other hand, the ruling party used this incident to conflate state and party interests. Taking a leaf from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), ZANU PF considers its political behaviour and interests as national interests, which must be respected without debate or question.

In July 2014, the Baba Jukwa page was deleted under unclear circumstances following the arrest of a journalist for allegedly running the page. An intimidatory political environment was created, which has consequently cultivated an ethos of self-censorship among the majority of the online community in the country. Only a negligible number of local citizens, opposition activists, citizens in the diaspora, and the independent media remain defiant by expressing themselves freely.

Social media activism gained traction in 2016 when online movements such as the #MugabeMustFall, #ZimShutdown2016 and #This Flag shook the government. On July 6, the streets of the capital city Harare resembled a ghost town as people abided by a call to stay away from work. The main ISPs were reportedly instructed by the authorities to shut

down access (“Zimbabwe becomes”). Frustrated Zimbabweans became the victims of an online communications shutdown in a context of protests against rising corruption and abuse of taxpayers' money by the Mugabe regime.

For the first time in Zimbabwe, WhatsApp was temporarily blocked and was unavailable for several hours after the country's leading Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were pressured into shutting down access. The ISPs did not explain why WhatsApp had been shut down, nor did the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) hold them to account for service disruption. Instead, the POTRAZ threatened arrests of those who engaged in irresponsible use of social media, and dealing with them in the “national interest.” Social media played a big part in publicising and mobilising people to take part in the July 6 shutdown (“Zimbabwe becomes”).

In the same year, the government also attempted to curb internet use by unilaterally hiking mobile data prices. Zimbabwe's three main mobile network operators announced that they had been ordered to wind down cheap mobile data promotions by August 31, 2016. The promotions had allowed call, data, SMS, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter bundles for as low as USD 5 (“Zimbabwe's tightening”).

Such moves reveal how the government in Zimbabwe tramples on digital rights. In the year 2016, up to 27 people were either arrested or charged for political views deemed subversive and undermining the President's authority. All this is indicative of a growing trend of state-led digital repression. A culture of self-censorship and anxiety over surveillance in Zimbabwe's online space curbs the potential of digital media to increase citizen participation in democratic processes and discourse.

“ A culture of self-censorship and anxiety over surveillance in Zimbabwe's online space curbs the potential of digital media to increase citizen participation in democratic processes and discourse ”

The November 2017 mass uprising and street protests against Mugabe were seen as definitive evidence of how state and ruling party actors could manipulate digital media to suit certain political ends. The successful removal of Mugabe from office after masses of people poured into the streets reflected the potential of social media for revolutionary change, and politicians took note. The state allowed citizens to mobilise, protest in the streets and march to State House, all with military backing. Yet, in a short space, the new President Emmerson Mnangagwa clamped down on digital rights more than his predecessor, revealing how digital technology had been used as part of broader political scheming to grab power.

The height of digital and human rights violations, accompanied by a brutal military-led clampdown on civil protests against fuel price increases, came in January 2019. The government under Mnangagwa imposed a total internet blackout, which critics called an attempt to hide reports of a violent crackdown. Internet access was stopped and social media applications like WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook were blocked.

Zimbabweans experienced a significant throttling of internet speeds on February 20, 2022, when opposition leader Nelson Chamisa drew thousands of supporters to his maiden election rally in the capital city, Harare. The CCC is opposing the ruling party ZANU- PF in the 2023 General elections.

DATA GOVERNANCE

Surveillance

Zimbabwe has in place an Interception of Communications Act (ICA) which legitimises surveillance. A particularly contentious provision in this law obliges ISPs to facilitate the interception of user information by installing hardware or software that would provide call-related information in real time, and after the phone call. The law also requires ISPs to allow access to decrypted user data flowing through their networks. The ICA criminalises non-compliance by the service providers. This effectively means that designated persons, in particular dissenting voices can be targeted for surveillance and persecution by state authorities.

Surveillance also goes beyond the boundaries set out by the ICA as deals made by the government with foreign firms can facilitate unregulated surveillance. For example, the government of Zimbabwe in 2018 entered into a biometric voter registration exercise deal with Chinese firm, CloudWalk Technology. In return, CloudWalk gets to harvest Zimbabwean citizens' data in order to train its algorithms to identify darker skinned tones. More importantly, there is no policy on how the data harvested will be used, stored and disposed of, posing great risk to persons that the authorities perceive as a threat to the state.

Surveillance projects in Zimbabwe include the government's acquisition of spyware from Israel's NSO Group, importation of cellphone tower simulators (IMSI catchers) from Iran, the Smart Cities initiative being piloted by Chinese firm Hikivision in Mutare, and Chinese/Russian assistance in setting up a National Security Agency type of surveillance centre (Mushekwe).

Zimbabwe's surveillance landscape clearly reflects a covert embedding of political intentions mainly in the use of technologies. In an article, Briggs points out that evidence suggests Chinese companies have engaged in deals which allow them to access sensitive and critical data, highlighting the potential for an erosion of state sovereignty. He adds that there have also been allegations that China has used its privileged position as a leading digital technology supplier to advance its own intelligence objectives.

Privacy and data protection

Under first generation rights normative theory, the state is obliged to protect individuals' privacy or personal data from public scrutiny, thus ensuring that people must provide their consent for their information to be collected and processed by any entity. However, the government of Zimbabwe has enacted legislation that enables digital authoritarianism.

Chinese-led Smart City projects, such as the pilot project being implemented in Mutare by Hikivision, are vulnerable to data colonialism. Data harvested from this project may be used for other intentions than the stated purpose. Zimbabwean citizens' rights to privacy stand to be violated under this project. Also of particular concern is the fact that Chinese company Huawei is deeply involved in setting up base stations and rolling out national broadband, in partnership with state owned telecommunication state-owned enterprises. The privacy rights of citizens are threatened as a recent report (Kharpal) reveals that Chinese companies would have to give data to the Chinese government if required. China's 2017 National Intelligence Law from 2017 obliges organisations and citizens to "support, assist and cooperate with the state intelligence work." This lends credence to assertions that the existence of data traps plays into wider narratives and concerns.

“ As noted from the Civic Media Observatory (CMO), public hearings about the proposed amendment were violently quashed by ruling party supporters, who threatened any member of the public questioning this law's contents

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Access

Typical of growing authoritarianism in Zimbabwe, legislation has been passed to undermine legitimate dissent against unpopular policies and ZANU PF's political leadership methods. The section on data protection discusses this in more detail. A contentious Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) amendment seeks to criminalise the work of civil society organisations involved in what government terms "politics." The PVO amendment exposes the government's explicit intention to avail legal tools that enable it to control and suppress civil society, both online and offline. As noted from the Civic Media Observatory (CMO), public hearings about the proposed amendment were violently quashed by ruling party supporters, who threatened any member of the public questioning this law's contents.

In a paper, Allen and Kelly argue that, paradoxically, while often justified as necessary to enhance security, the embrace of digital repression has failed to improve African security. Instead, digitally repressive tactics, technologies, and policies are proving to be damaging to national security and harmful to citizens.

In its determination to stifle online activity, the government enforced a new 10 percent excise duty on internet service providers in February 2022. Ordinarily, excise duty is used to discourage the consumption of certain goods and services like tobacco and alcohol. Critics of the new tax argue that it weighs down on service provider operations and drives up the cost of access to the internet (Karombo).

Mnangagwa's administration is also mulling taxing subscriptions for Netflix and other digital platforms such as Google, YouTube and Facebook (Karombo). Internet shutdowns witnessed during the #MugabeMustGo protests of 2016, the total internet shutdown witnessed in 2019, where soldiers killed civilians during protests, and the throttling of the internet on February 20, 2022 to disrupt live coverage of an opposition rally, are indicative of a strengthening authoritarian trajectory.

Information

The media in Zimbabwe has been polarised since independence in 1980. State media produce media reports biased in favour of the government and the ruling ZANU PF party, while the private press supports the opposition. In order to avoid state-led harassment and backlash, the private press practises self-censorship. An information gap has inevitably been created and, to fill in that void, the main news sources for Zimbabweans have become Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. Thus, with an unreliable government propaganda mouthpiece in the form of public media and a restricted private press, social media is a treasure trove for purveyors of fake news.

In the heat of the 2019 military led crackdown on protests against a fuel price increase, certain WhatsApp voice notes went viral. On January 21, Mnangagwa had made an announcement that fuel prices would go up by at least 150 percent. This was a trigger for citizens already reeling from rising inflation, partly attributed to Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube's "austerity measures" (Mberi).

Presidential spokesman George Charamba stated that the government would not hesitate to shut down the internet if more violent protests erupted in future. Zimbabwe's rapid adoption of social media applications as news sources has presented fertile ground for coordinated inauthentic behaviour, disinformation and influence campaigns. At a campaign rally in May 2018, President Mnangagwa called upon young members of the ruling party to jump into the social media fray describing it as the new war room. The faceless group, termed Varakashi (a Shona word for "destroyers") has a clear-cut mission, namely to disrupt online debates and stymie criticism of Mnangagwa and his government (Mwareya).

Speech

Freedom of expression, information and opinion remain seemingly unattainable in Zimbabwe. As evident from the CMO, persecution of the media continues unabated as the ruling party pursues the objective of establishing a one-party state. The government is also seeking to create an imperial presidency through amendments to the Constitution that increase power in the executive. Free expression by citizens, the press, activists and the opposition is fettered by the existence of institutional impediments such as authoritarian legislation and security forces which clampdown on voices of dissent with impunity.

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), which has been accused by opposition parties in the past of being biased in favour of the ruling ZANU PF and manned by army personnel, announced that it would be monitoring the media. This was meant to intimidate journalists

into reporting in a favourable manner about the institution and its activities, as well as encourage self-censorship. Furthermore, the government, through provisions in the Data Protection Act, set up a cyber security monitoring team housed in the office of the president, which has only served to restrict liberties and free expression online.

The divisive politics created by bitter and often violent contestations between the ruling and opposition parties in Zimbabwe has led to an environment of media polarisation. This scenario has subsequently led to identity politics, as people either identify with an aggrieved liberation party fighting Western hegemony or an anti-corruption, democratic and human rights-oriented opposition movement. Marshall argues that the instrumentalisation of identity politics inevitably serves to exacerbate mistrust and polarisation by playing into widespread fears, prejudices and stereotypes, particularly when combined with widespread distrust of traditional state-run media outlets, leading voters to seek alternative sources of information. With the proliferation of digital technologies across the content, the challenges posed by viral disinformation have multiplied.

Media watchdogs in southern Africa are calling on the governments of Angola, Eswatini and Zimbabwe to do more to protect press freedom following the publication of the Freedom in the World 2022 Report, which says those countries are among the most oppressive authorities to media in the region.

In its Freedom in the World 2022 report, the Media Institute of Southern Africa said it was concerned that the governments of Eswatini, Zimbabwe and Angola were strangling the media (Mavhunga). The report noted that Zimbabwe is mainly not free considering issues around proposals on the regulation of the internet. Furthermore, Zimbabwe is in the process of introducing an amendment to the Criminal Law Codification Reforms Act which seeks to criminalise the engagement of citizens with foreign embassies.

MOTIVES

Following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, the ruling ZANU PF party, under the stewardship of the late Robert Mugabe sought to consolidate a strong grip on power by establishing a one-party state. Opposition party activities that threatened such a political stronghold could not be countenanced. One specific, yet sinister political strategy involved clamping down on another liberation party Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) through the use of the military, under the guise of restoring order in the south of the country in the 1980s. The result was a brutal massacre of just over 20,000 civilians from the Ndebele tribe, in the Matabeleland Province in the south of the country. The leader of ZAPU, the late Joshua Nkomo hailed from the same province. The broader strategy entailed the adoption of communication and media policies aimed at propping up the image of Mugabe and the government, as saviours and rightful rulers of the country. Any opposing voices met a vicious backlash that involved arbitrary arrests, detention, torture and forced disappearance. The bitter and protracted war of liberation is what drove and still motivates the current leadership to remain in war mode and clamp down on any perceived channels of dissent, including traditional mainstream media and, lately, the digital sphere.

The country already has a documented history of abusing legislative processes to target opposition activists, non-governmental organisations and independent journalists who express themselves on social media. Zimbabwe is currently experiencing democratic regression and authoritarian consolidation.

Mass mobilisation and organised protests have also served to motivate Zimbabwe's political leaders to clamp down on social media and the internet. The 2016 and 2019 protests, which were largely planned and organised on WhatsApp and Twitter proved to be an Achilles heel to the government's plans to control the population. The CCC poses an existential threat to the ruling ZANU PF party, as it commands huge numbers of followers. Although the ruling party has always had a stranglehold in rural areas through the intimidation of voters, the advent of digital communication platforms where people in urban and rural areas can communicate with ease implies that the political dynamics can change anytime. Imposing digital restrictions is the natural next step to consolidate political survival for the governing party.

The predominant narrative on state media is that the governing party (ZANU PF) is the rightful ruler and owner of the country, under the argument that its members liberated the country from racist Rhodesian rule through guerrilla warfare (Netsianda). Under this narrative, Western-imposed sanctions are the main cause of socio-economic and political implosion following the execution of a widely condemned land reform program. Additionally, leading opposition parties, civil society organisations and pro-democracy activists are purportedly agents of the West bent on illegal regime change. No other narrative is acceptable under the current regime — this propaganda has eventually become an infallible truth to both the leadership and their supporters.

“ The state initiated the internet, releasing it to the private sector, but always keeping an open eye on the network, which grew, unpredictably, into a multinational network of networks, challenging the state's ability to govern

According to Elkin-Koren, the state has a complex and dynamic relationship with the digital environment. Even though the internet is often dissociated from the state, the state never really abandoned it. The state initiated the internet, releasing it to the private sector, but always keeping an open eye on the network, which grew, unpredictably, into a multinational network of networks, challenging the state's ability to govern. This has proved to be the case in Zimbabwe, where the state has passed laws and regulatory frameworks governing the operations of players in the ICT sector.

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The ruling ZANU PF party promotes a narrative that it is a victim of Western machinations and “illegal sanctions” bent on effecting a regime change. The authoritarian tactics employed are basically a response to what the government terms aggressive foreign policies by Western governments and a political survival method against a background of growing discord within the population concerning corruption and a deteriorating economic environment.

Soon after Mnangagwa assumed temporary political leadership in the year 2017, after a military coup that deposed long time dictator Robert Mugabe, he pledged to restore ties with the international community. However, his rhetoric proved inconsistent as he instructed his youth militia to enter social media and cause mayhem, describing the digital field as the new war room. Besides the fact that the ruling party still remains in war mode 42 years after independence, Western embassies remain the principal targets of attacks on social media by the youth militia. The embassies of the United States, the United Kingdom and European Union member states continue to be attacked on social media with vitriolic language, reminded to stay in their diplomatic lane and not interfere in Zimbabwe's political affairs. The main opposition political party the CCC, opposition party activists, human rights defenders, NGOs and independent journalists remain the other group of targets for attacks on social media. Sachikonye aptly posits that, under a neo-patrimonial system, the president and his inner circle undermine the effectiveness of a nominally modern state administration by using it for systematic patronage and clientelism in order to maintain political order and perpetuate their hold on power.

Mnangagwa has increasingly turned his attention and focus on consolidating power by any means necessary, including the use of digital authoritarianism. The economy continues to flounder after 37 years of the previous Robert Mugabe led administration. After the 2017 military coup, the leaders shared the spoils of the dangerous undertaking and mandated themselves to rule the country before and after the July 2018 elections. The military has in the past declared that it would never salute or support anybody without liberation war credentials, therefore this gives liberation stalwarts with the mandate to rule Zimbabwe in perpetuity. The removal of Mugabe from office in 2017 was justified as a realignment of power structures within the ruling party, with government spokespersons battling to portray the coup as a natural political transition.

Zimbabwe's military is a fundamental part of the ruling party architecture, although it is overtly absent from ZANU PF's political structures. Both organisations morphed from the same centre during the liberation struggle of the 1970s. Hence, the military is also on record justifying its involvement in the country's politics by boldly declaring that it will never hesitate to defend the gains of the liberation struggle, in the face of a Western onslaught against government excesses.

An interesting feature of liberation movements in Southern Africa, such as ZANU PF, is their public denunciation of colonialism, imperialism and the injustices that are generally associated with these practices, while they themselves have little regard for justice and the observance of human rights (Melber). This narrative, regularly shared on state-owned press, radio and television outlets, has been used to justify the actions of the government in controlling several aspects of the country's socio-economic and political architecture. Mnangagwa is perfecting a system of patronage developed by the late Mugabe where all appointments to key civil service posts including the police and defence, remain his sole and unilateral prerogative. The post-coup elite have been permitted to scramble and retain resources such as gold and diamond mines, farms, and business contracts with Middle Eastern companies.

The executive branch of government exercises control over essential elements of the judiciary, although the courts sometimes pass unfavourable judgements upon the ruling party's excesses. The fact that the 2017 coup was justified when the High Court ruled that the actions by the military were constitutional proved beyond doubt that the judiciary had become a surrogate of the executive and ruling elite. Furthermore, concern has been raised over Mnangagwa's growing influence over the judiciary, which violates international and regional standards, threatening the integrity of the judiciary, and advancing public distrust in the system. In May 2021, Mnangagwa signed into law Constitutional Amendment No. 2, which permits him to unilaterally extend the tenure of the Chief Justice (who was set to reach retirement age later that month), giving him power and control over the judiciary. Additionally, he gave himself unfettered authority to fill the seats of the three most senior judges in Zimbabwe. Up to 27 clauses of the amendment were designed to weaken the powers of the judiciary and legislature. In a paper, Muringi argues that a hegemonic interplay of consensual and forceful power based on an ethos of liberation entitlement that was accepted by the public, in part due to colonial resentment, enabled ZANU PF to maintain a monopoly on political office under the façade of democratic governance. The Mnangagwa regime is successfully creating an imperial presidency above constitutionalism.

Zimbabwe has maintained strong diplomatic relations with Russia and China, both which supplied the country with military and logistical support during the 1970s war of liberation. In the year 2000, Zimbabwe pursued a chaotic land reform program, under which about 4500 white commercial farmers were violently evicted from their farms without compensation. This move invited international condemnation and sanctions from the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the European Union. Even after this international ostracisation, Russia and China continued to support Zimbabwe, including at the United Nations level by vetoing any resolutions to take action on Mugabe's administration. Subsequently, Zimbabwe turned its foreign policy towards China, Russia and other Asian countries in a policy dubbed "Look East."

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It is important to note that this background in relations forms the basis of continued cooperation between Zimbabwe and these two foreign governments. Both Russia and China have found a willing partner in ZANU PF for the export of digital authoritarianism. This includes the export of surveillance technologies, spyware and military equipment. Chinese corporations like Huawei, Hikivision and CloudWalk Technology among others have partnered with the government of Zimbabwe to enable digital authoritarianism with technology. The Islamic Republic of Iran has also been reported to have supplied the government with IMSI catchers, as ZANU PF seeks to thwart any prospects of mass protests and to track the movements of political dissidents.

METHODS

In 2018, Zimbabwe entered into a strategic cooperation partnership with Chinese start-up CloudWalk Technology, under which the government would gain access to a facial recognition database that it could use for all kinds of purposes. These uses would range from easier policing under the Smart Cities initiative to tracking down political dissidents among others. In return, China gains access to this database of Zimbabwean citizens in order to train its algorithms and improve the ability of its surveillance systems to recognize darker skin tones. The agreement is being implemented in stages and will soon reach development of camera and network infrastructure in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwean state-owned telecoms operator TelOne and Huawei entered into an agreement to develop two new colocation and cloud facilities. The facilities reportedly meet Tier III standards and offer 99.98 percent uptime (Hiscox).

The launch is part of a USD 98 million network modernization project, the National Broadband (NBB) initiative, funded by a loan from China Export-Import Bank. Huawei is already banned in a number of countries over privacy and surveillance concerns around its products and services. Furthermore, in 2021, Huawei entered into a strategic cooperation agreement to carry out the modernization of state-owned telecom network, NetOne. The project being financed by China to the tune of USD 400,000 will lead to a Huawei-built broadband infrastructure rollout at national level, posing further risk to human rights.

Coupled with enabling legislation such the Interception of Communications Act, Zimbabwe acquired invasive spyware from Israeli telecoms company Circles. This technology is sold to nation-states only. It intercepts data from 3G networks, allowing the infiltrator to read messages, emails, and listen in on phone calls as they occur. Using only a telephone number, a Circles platform can also identify the location of a phone (Dadoo). Zimbabwe has long used surveillance technology to track and target its opponents. In 2020, investigative journalist Hopewell Chin'ono and opposition politician Jacob Ngarivhume were detained ahead of anti-government protests and it is believed that Circles technology may have facilitated this repressive act.

The government of Zimbabwe also entered into a facial recognition agreement with another Chinese company with a bad human rights record, Hikivision. The facial recognition AI will be used for surveillance at international border posts, state points of entry, and airports. Hikivision software will also be integrated with locally developed technology to drive a national facial recognition and AI system in the east of the country (Mutare). The deal is shrouded in secrecy, raising fears about how this technology will be used to track down activists and voices of dissent.

The government is also using spyware from the Islamic Republic of Iran, known as IMSI catchers, which are being used to track and monitor the movements of opposition party members and political activists.

The government always ensures that acquisition and deployment of digital technologies used for repression are kept under a veil of secrecy. Incumbent President Mnangagwa was a minister in charge of state security under Mugabe's tutelage for years, hence espionage

and secrecy remain his specialisation. However, with increased cooperation between Zimbabwe and China, the latter is eager to showcase their bilateral engagement with African countries as part of broader geopolitical posturing. The Chinese were involved in building and setting up the National Data Centre, the National Defence College and the Robert Mugabe School of Intelligence. At the official level, the government announces such arrangements as part of economic cooperation agreements, yet, covertly, these technologies are used to enhance the state's mass surveillance capabilities. For example, in June 2013, the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) announced that it had signed a Memorandum Of Understanding with Hikivision to pilot a Smart City project in Mutare and to build a national Artificial Intelligence database. This was all done without public consultation or parliamentary approval.

In another case of arbitrary action, controversy was sparked in 2011 when China gave Zimbabwe a USD 98 million loan to build a defence and surveillance college. This deal was also to be funded by Harare's share of revenues from a diamond mining deal with a Chinese mining firm. Despite misgivings and concern by the public over the transaction, the deal went through anyway with the Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group building the college at the expense of local companies.

Due to the fact that acquisition of such technologies is mired in secrecy, it is difficult to ascertain the exact money used. However, the government, in conjunction with the military has been previously accused of siphoning funds from diamond mining operations and tax revenues to buy these technologies. Mortgaging natural resources to acquire spyware cannot be ruled out either, as many Chinese and Russian companies own gold mines in the country. Most of the technology is from abroad and is purchased as part of military investments; hence the absence of public scrutiny or parliamentary oversight.

RESPONSES

Citizens of Zimbabwe have generally pushed back against digital authoritarianism, albeit passively, riding on the belligerent and outspoken opposition party. There is a general sense of dismay and an anti-government sentiment in response to posts made by the government spokespersons on Twitter and Facebook, for example. The CCC regularly speaks out against the ruling ZANU PF party, and a general overview of reactions on social media by citizens shows that they are refusing to accept the autocracy practised by the government. Independent journalists, activists, and human rights defenders regularly publish exposes about government corruption, at the risk of detention and arrest.

There isn't sufficient investigation and follow up by the local media on digital authoritarianism practices; hence only some sections of the public, with an interest in ICT matters, have knowledge of them. Journalists remain highly exposed as the media environment is not free and conducive to the fair coverage of such issues.

“ Zimbabwe has not yet witnessed any coordinated protests or civil society action against these practices, except regular press statements by regional media bodies condemning internet shutdowns

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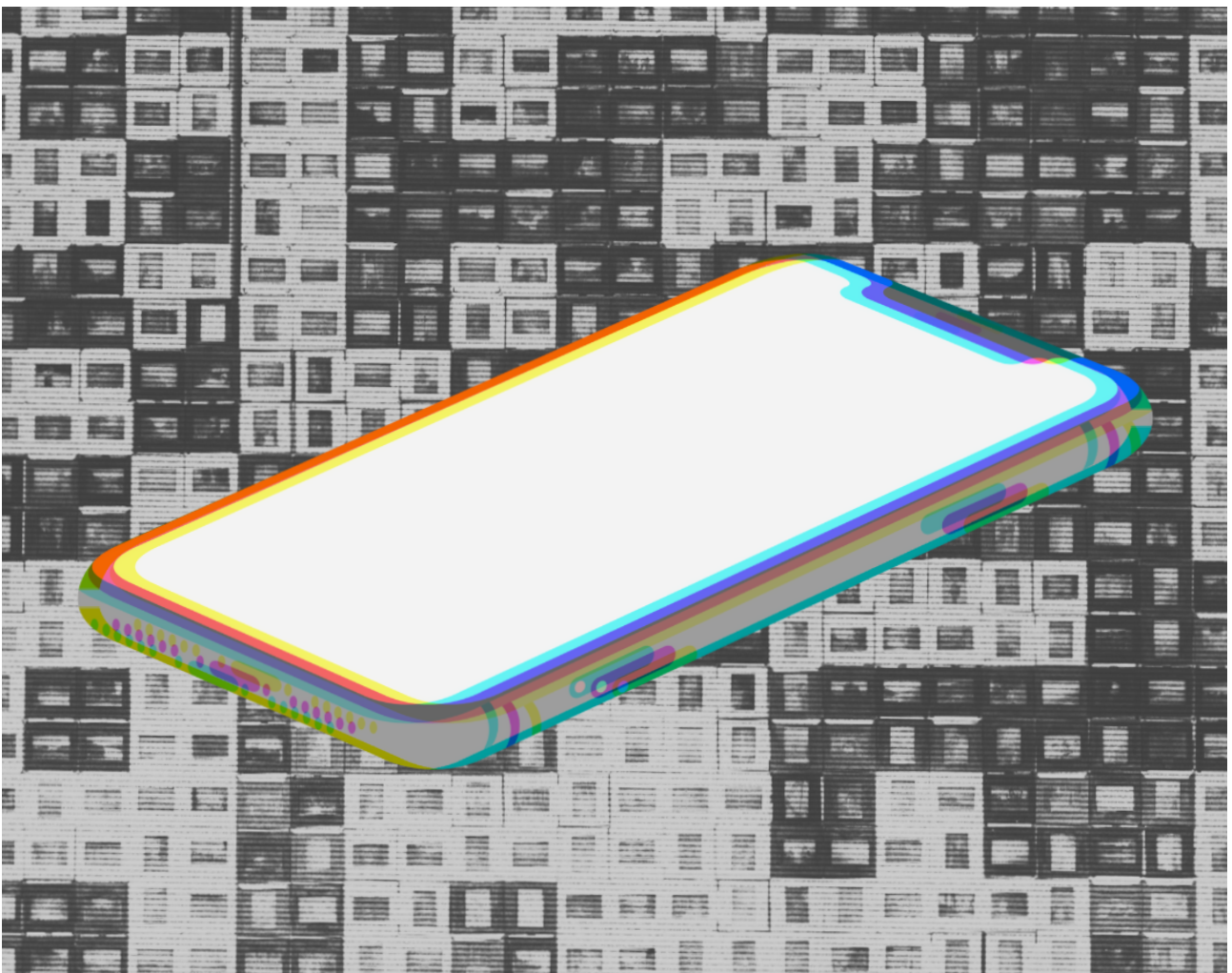
The Criminal Codification Act, the Data Protection Act and the Interception of Communications Act pose great risk to journalists who report on these practices. Zimbabwe has not yet witnessed any coordinated protests or civil society action against these practices, except regular press statements by regional media bodies condemning internet shutdowns. Much like the abundant civil society action on human rights issues, a lot of opportunity abounds for coordinated campaigns against such practices in Zimbabwe.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) heads of government met in Mozambique's capital, Maputo, in August 2020 and adopted a resolution. It was unanimously resolved that member states would have to take "pre-emptive measures against external interference, the impact of fake news and abuse of social media particularly in electoral processes." This has set a dangerous consensus at a regional level to crack down on civic space online, thereby compromising democratic practices such as accountability, responsibility and transparency. Rather than censure each other for digital rights abuses, most SADC member states are drawing up harsh cyber security laws. The proliferation of digital technology has given SADC authorities a lot of choice with regard to who they work with and to what ends they use the technology they receive or develop. Furthermore, as the politics of dissent encroach and occupy more space online, governments in SADC are making policy changes to contest them. The European Union and the USA have adopted a stance of encouraging moderation in the regulation of online spaces while emphasising a respect for digital rights.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The government of Zimbabwe and the ruling ZANU PF party are bent on ensuring that the status quo is preserved at all costs. As evidenced by findings in the Civic Media Observatory, the digital sphere has been identified as a threat to the country's national security, insofar as deposing the current political junta from power is concerned. The Arab Spring, which led to the deposing of leaders in the MENA region through social-media-organised protests certainly placed a lot of African governments on high alert about the potential transformative power of digital space. This has led to more governments, including that of Zimbabwe, enacting digitally repressive legislation aimed at curbing any form of political mobilisation on social media.

Zimbabwe's engagement with Russia, China, Iran and Israel for the acquisition of invasive spyware and biometric technology for mass surveillance purposes is premised on the ruling party's overarching desire to control the population and retain political power. The fact that almost all deals are shrouded in a dark veil of secrecy bodes badly for civil society, human rights defenders, independent journalists, and opposition party members as the ends to which such technology will be applied are not publicised. The identification and tracking of journalists who expose corruption within government circles and their subsequent detention implies that digital technologies are being used as part of what Dragu and Lapu term preventive repression.



Electoral outcomes are increasingly being manipulated by digital means in the country, as the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), which has sole access to voter information in its servers, has been accused by civil society and opposition parties of favouring the ruling party during elections. Manned by members of the military, who are aligned to the ruling party, there is no direct oversight and accountability in how biometric voter information is processed and stored. China's CloudWalk Technology reportedly has access to these servers, and is harvesting information to train its algorithms how to recognise Zimbabwean faces with darker skin tones. All this is being done without oversight mechanisms or the consent of Zimbabwean citizens who have registered to vote using the biometric voter system. This scenario has dire consequences for citizens' digital privacy rights.

The influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on Zimbabwe's technological trajectory and political affairs will serve to entrench the current digital authoritarian regime. Regular cultural and political exchanges between the CCP-led one-party state and Zimbabwe's ZANU PF has led to conjectures being made about how more technology to control the population will continue to be imported by the government of Zimbabwe. It is in the investment interests of China to preserve Zimbabwe's authoritarian regime, as Beijing has poured billions of dollars into Zimbabwe's economy through major ICT rollout projects and other infrastructure development projects such as roads, bridges and energy development. It can be argued that the rapid adoption and use of digital technologies enhances a state's capacity for preventative repression. A paper by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (IFEX) posits that Civil Society Organisations need to focus on solidarity, collaboration and people-centred advocacy. This requires them to take proactive steps to bring free online expression within the broader human rights discourse, while targeting new players that have the power to influence decision-making by wayward regimes in the Southern African region. A lot more coordinated research and advocacy at a policy level highlighting the digital rights dimension will be needed to draw back on the culture of digital authoritarianism taking root in Zimbabwe.

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