



Liaison, Dialogue and Research

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Policy Brief

6 May 2021, Zoom Platform

# SALO Public Civil Society Briefing on Zimbabwe

- By Milis'uthando Mbete

## SALO Briefing from Zimbabwean Civil Society

Thursday  
6th of May 2021  
11:00 - 13:00 (SAST)

SALO invites a virtual Civil Society Briefing on Zimbabwe, where leaders of Zimbabwean civil society will give an update on the political, socio-economic and human rights situation in the country. The panel will speak on recent arrests of activists, the current political situation in Zimbabwe and recent amendments to the constitution. SALO aims to bring various stakeholders together to build consensus on the situation in Zimbabwe.

Meeting ID: 943 9075 2455

Passcode: 519143

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## PANELISTS



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## Executive Summary

The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) hosted a public multi-stakeholder dialogue to gain an up to date understanding of the political, economic, and social developments in the country. The Civil Society Briefing aimed to share and give a platform to a variety of civil society voices. Civil society organisations and activists have worked tirelessly to keep Zimbabwe on the regional and international agenda and to hold the governing party ZANU-PF to account for its human rights violations and governance failures.

## Context/Importance of the Problem

Since the November 2017 military-imposed transition from the Mugabe regime, civil society cautioned against the early celebrations of the takeover. They feared that the incumbent, President Emmerson Mnangagwa, would become more ambitious in his approach to control the narrative of a new democratic Zimbabwe, whilst narrowing the democratic space for civil society, opposition parties, and government critics. Various formations and individuals highlighted the heavy hand of the security forces and that the conflation of state institutions and party rule would polarise the democratic space in Zimbabwe. While others hoped there would be a cooperative relationship between civil society and government, there was in fact a growing disconnect.

## Abuse of Power and the Weakening of the Rule of Law

Four years on, and with further national restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society reported ongoing abuses by the government and state security of the rule of law to target and prosecute activists. The sentiment is that the Mnangagwa government has been focused on using the law and state institutions to abuse human rights and achieve a political end of silencing opposers and opposition groups.<sup>1</sup> It is further claimed that security forces continuously play a role in abductions, torture, and harassment of activists which has intensified over the years.

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<sup>1</sup> SALO Civil Society Briefing on Zimbabwe, 6 May 2021.

Victims of abductions such as Joana Mambombe, Cecilia Chimberi, Netsai Marova and Takudzwa Ngadziore have further been targeted by the state and face charges for allegedly faking their abductions. Research has found that the biggest human rights violators in the country are the military and the police - the securocrats.<sup>2</sup> The impunity of the security forces as culprits of human rights abuses is an ongoing cause for concern. One participant added *“It is easy for organised activists to be arrested by the authorities and yet, ordinary Zimbabweans do not take over the baton to continue the struggle because of fear. How do we get people to understand that they have [a] power greater than the government and the army?”*<sup>3</sup>

The brazen efforts to weaken the judiciary and centralise the power of the executive are some of the concerted decisions carried out to limit democratic participation and human rights. Proposed amendments to the constitution are viewed as a push toward authoritarianism, to justify the interference and capture of the judiciary, and to settle political scores. The ZANU-PF government rolled out several consultations across the country on Constitutional Amendment Bill I and II during the restricted national lockdown with limited participation from citizens. While civil society organisations noted the flawed consultation processes, they believe that there still needed to be work done by both government and civil society to capacitate citizens to effectively contribute to these processes without fear or intimidation.

In 2020 alone, more than 270 statutory instruments were gazetted by the government.<sup>4</sup> *“These highlights how the consolidation of power by the executive has compromised the active participation of citizens whilst they are also at the receiving end of most of these processes”*. Clause 11 of the Constitutional Amendment Bill II looks at extending the women's quota and also introducing 10 seats for young people in Parliament. The Clause has no mention of candidates who are not affiliated with any political parties nor any mention of people living with disabilities. The limitation of seats for women and youth is rejected as it is seen as a deliberate effort to limit and control voices from various groupings.

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<sup>2</sup> SALO Civil Society Briefing on Zimbabwe, 6 May 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

These amendments are widely viewed as an effort designed to concentrate power in the hands of the President and to strip and weaken the judiciary while stripping citizens of their agency. The capture of institutions such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, the Zimbabwe Gender Commission, and the Anti-corruption Commission are but some of the institutions that have been compromised by state interference. These institutions are meant to uphold democracy but their role and impartiality are being diminished by the political elite. This is a worrying trend as Zimbabwe approaches the 2023 election.

The proposed Patriotic Bill also comes as a threat to the civic space as it is viewed as an effort to criminalise any criticism of the government and further frustrate the work of opposition parties and civil society and activists in the run-up to the 2023 election. The Patriotic Bill, as proposed in the Parliament of Zimbabwe, suggests that individuals or entities that are not in agreement with the government will be persecuted. This Bill targets not only freedom of speech and expression, but also seeks to target opposition parties, anti-corruption watchdogs, and whistle-blowers in the name of protecting the image of the state and its national interests. *“It is our position that the proposed Patriotic Bill serves a single purpose, which is to criminalise free speech, and ultimately control, intimidate and stifle citizens’ democratic rights and fundamental freedoms as enshrined in the Zimbabwe Constitution Chapter 4 Bill of Rights.”*<sup>5</sup>

### **Is Zimbabwe open for business?**

One contributor further claimed that the government of Zimbabwe had a *“mafia approach”* toward conducting business, in that business opportunities are reserved for those connected to the government and security forces and not the broader citizens of Zimbabwe. *“These are clear indications of the predatory nature of this government that is dependent on the security forces to control, silence and keep the population in check while the political elite benefits and plunders the resources”*. Despite Zimbabwe being *“open to business”*, civil society organisations believe that this is a front designed to present the ZANU-PF dispensation as a reformed

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<sup>5</sup> Elia Ntali, 2021. “Zimbabwe: Patriotic Bill an Attempt to Silence Civic Space”, AllAfrica. 28 April 2021.

government when in reality human rights abuses are worsening. The inflation rate continues to soar at a rate of 161,9% affecting basic life needs such as health and education.

The socio-economic gap continues to increase amid the political crisis. The pervasive corruption has affected the livelihoods of the poor as facilities meant for education and healthcare purposes are misused by senior politicians. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on the informal sector especially. Women and youth were the most affected by the closure of the informal economy, as for many, it is their sole source of income and livelihood. While the government is aware of the challenges concerning the economy, it has not found strategies to cater to and protect women and youth in the informal sector. With a high demographic of unemployed youth and women, it is hard to convince them to go to the polls to vote against ZANU-PF.

### **Targeted Sanctions and the role of the international community**

*“Credible evidence suggests that the sanctions have not constrained the military from escalating human rights violations in Zimbabwe and have [in fact] hardened the generals and made them ideologically unite to the extent of carrying out a military coup”.*<sup>6</sup> However, many civil society organisations are still in support of the targeted sanctions by the UK and US governments against key individuals and businesses in Zimbabwe as they believe the ZANU-PF leaders and businessmen are responsible for the human rights abuses. *“We need to continue to mount pressure so that our government can account to the people of Zimbabwe, the regional bodies, and the international communities that we are members of. They need to continue to meet the standards that they promised to meet when they were becoming members of such institutions”.*<sup>7</sup> One respondent said the ZANU-PF government had appealed to the “*pain*” of the sanctions on the economy and the people of Zimbabwe but they, however, believed that this propaganda was “*largely imaginary*”.<sup>8</sup>

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>6</sup> SALO Civil Society Briefing on Zimbabwe, 6 May 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

This dialogue shared the most pressing current in Zimbabwe. There were concerns over the shrinking democratic space to silence civil society organisations and opposition parties. The weaponisation of the COVID-19 regulations is assisting the ZANU-PF government to become more authoritarian whilst instilling fear. There needs to be a separation between the state and the military and the state and the judiciary as this conflates the power of the state against its citizens. The Patriotic Bill is a threat to freedom of speech and if the Bill goes ahead, no one will be able to hold the government to account. Civil society organisations appeared in support of the targeted sanctions. The international community needs to hold the Zimbabwean government accountable for the mandates they have signed.

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*The analysis and recommendations included in this brief do not necessarily reflect the view of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. The contents of the brief are the sole responsibility of SALO and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors who provided financial assistance for this policy dialogue session.*

#### About the Southern African Liaison Office:



The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) is a South African-based not-for-profit civil society organisation which, through advocacy, dialogue, policy consensus and in-depth research and analysis, influences the current thinking and debates on foreign policy especially regarding African crises and conflicts.

*SALO would like to thank*

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**Norwegian People's Aid**