



Freedom of the Press 2007

Draft Country Report and Ratings

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Zimbabwe

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 29

Political Environment: 33

Economic Environment: 27

Total Score: 89

Press freedom in Zimbabwe remained extremely restricted in 2006, as President Robert Mugabe's government continued to tighten control over domestic media and attempted to block the efforts of foreign outlets to circulate unfiltered news within the country. Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of expression, officials display an openly hostile attitude toward media freedom, and a draconian legislative framework continues to effectively 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 with the government-controlled Media and Information Commission (MIC). It also gives the information minister sweeping powers to decide who is able to work as a journalist, and a 2005 amendment to the law introduced prison sentences of up to two years for journalists working without accreditation. A number of private newspapers have been denied licenses since the AIPPA came into force. The *Daily News*, the country's only independent daily, was shuttered in 2003 for not adhering to the AIPPA, and the MIC continued to deny it a license in 2006. Constitutional challenges to the AIPPA by affiliates of the *Daily News* have proven unsuccessful. However, the high court in February ruled that the July 2005 MIC decision to deny registration to the banned papers must be reconsidered, and in March ruled that the MIC should recuse itself from the decision due to the obvious bias of its chairman.

Authorities continue to employ a range of restrictive legislation—including the Official Secrets Act, the AIPPA, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), and criminal defamation laws—to harass journalists. Section 15 of the POSA and Section 80 of the AIPPA criminalize the publication of "inaccurate" information, and both laws have been used to intimidate, arrest, and prosecute reporters. The 2005 Criminal Law (Codification and Reform Bill) increased prison sentences for similar violations to a maximum of 20 years. The General Laws Amendment Act, which tightened the "presidential insult" and "communication of falsehoods" provisions of the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), was signed into law in February. Several times during the year, the AIPPA was used to

threaten the remaining independent press. In January, the weekly *Financial Gazette* withdrew an article suggesting that the MIC was controlled by intelligence officers after the commission threatened to revoke the paper's license. Later that month, the MIC refused to renew the accreditation of 15 journalists working for the *Zimbabwe Independent* until the paper retracted a similar story. A number of former *Daily News* employees continued to face charges of working without accreditation, although none of those charged under AIPPA so far have been convicted. In January, freelance journalist Sidney Saize was detained for three days on charges of practicing journalism without a license and filing a "false story" for the Voice of America news service. In December 2005, police and government officials had raided the Harare office of the independent Voice of the People (VOP) radio station, which broadcasts locally produced programs into the country from the Netherlands. The authorities confiscated equipment and files, and arrested three employees. Six members of the VOP's board of trustees were also arrested and charged in January 2006 with broadcasting without a license, but after several court appearances, a judge dismissed the case in September.

Professional and media monitoring organizations—such as the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists, the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe, and the local chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Zimbabwe)—were subject to official harassment during 2006. These three groups were jointly involved in advocating for the introduction of an independent media council, intended to replace the MIC as part of a self-regulatory system.

Journalists are routinely subjected to verbal intimidation, physical attacks, arrest and detention, and financial pressure at the hands of the police, government officials, and supporters of the ruling party. In February, freelance journalist Gift Phiri was brutally beaten by attackers who accused him of working for foreign news outlets. Instances of arbitrary arrest and detention occur primarily when reporters are trying to cover politically charged stories. In July, two journalists covering an antigovernment demonstration were arrested, detained, and then released after paying a fine. Mike Saburi, a cameraman with Reuters Television, was assaulted by police officers and jailed in September after he filmed the police beating people involved in a banned trade union march in Harare. During the past several years, dozens of Zimbabwean journalists have fled the country, and according to a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists, more than 90 currently live in exile, predominantly in South Africa and Britain.

Foreign journalists are not allowed to reside full time in the country and are regularly denied visas to file stories from Zimbabwe. Locally based correspondents for foreign publications, particularly those whose reporting has portrayed the regime in an unfavorable light, have been refused accreditation or threatened with lawsuits and deportation. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that in April, police arrested two journalists from BTV, the state broadcaster of neighboring Botswana; they were accused of practicing journalism without a license and violating Zimbabwean immigration law, and in November they were convicted and fined roughly \$20 each. Publisher Trevor Ncube, who owns several newspapers in both Zimbabwe and South Africa, faced repeated harassment, as authorities attempted to strip him of his citizenship and confiscate his passport.

The government, through the Mass Media Trust holding company, controls several major daily newspapers, including the *Chronicle* and the *Herald*; coverage in

these news outlets consists of favorable portrayals of Mugabe and the ruling party, and attacks on perceived critics of the regime. Several independent weeklies such as the *Standard* and the *Zimbabwe Independent* continue to publish, although many journalists practice extensive self-censorship. Others, such as the privately owned *Daily Mirror*, have been effectively bought up and infiltrated by the intelligence service; during 2006, this new ownership engineered the forced dismissal of several journalists. Some foreign newspapers, mostly from South Africa, are available, although the authorities have threatened to restrict their importation. In October, police raided the Harare distribution offices of the *Zimbabwean*, an independent weekly printed in South Africa, and confiscated documents.

In general, newspapers have poor distribution networks outside the urban areas and have become relatively expensive, placing them beyond the reach of most Zimbabweans. Printing expenses have dramatically increased due to soaring prices for newsprint and paper, causing many outlets to restrict their print runs. According to MISA's Africa Media Barometer, state-run companies do not advertise in private papers, and state-run media outlets do not accept advertising from companies known to be aligned with the opposition. Due to poor economic conditions and salaries that do not keep pace with inflation, corruption and cash incentives for coverage have become rampant.

The state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation runs all broadcast media, which are seen as mouthpieces of the regime. 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. In addition, broadcasting licenses have been consistently denied to independently owned radio stations, although a parliamentary committee did call for an opening up of the broadcast sector in 2006. Access to broadcast media in rural areas is hampered by deteriorating equipment and a lack of transmission sites; according to MISA, only 30 percent of the country receives radio and television coverage from the state-controlled broadcaster, although the government has reached an agreement with China to help upgrade this infrastructure. Meanwhile, also using Chinese technology, authorities have begun to focus on jamming the signals of the increasingly popular foreign-based radio stations that broadcast into Zimbabwe. The shortwave signal of SW Radio Africa, a London-based station run by exiled Zimbabwean journalists, was blocked around the time of the March 2005 parliamentary elections; the station then added a medium-wave broadcast, but this was blocked in the Harare area in June 2006. Similarly, the Voice of America's Studio 7 service, although it remains accessible within Zimbabwe, has been periodically blocked on different frequencies. Although satellite television services that provide international news programming remain largely uncensored, their prohibitive cost places them out of reach for most of the population.

Access to the internet is not restricted by the government, but it is limited by the high costs at internet cafes and service disruptions caused by frequent power outages. Nonetheless, almost 10 percent of Zimbabwe's population accessed this new medium in 2006, one of the highest rates of internet access in all of Africa. The law allows the government to monitor e-mail content. In April, the government proposed new legislation, the Interception of Communications Bill, which would allow officials to intercept electronic communications to prevent a "serious offense" or a "threat to national security"; the bill would require internet service providers (ISPs) to pay the cost of

surveillance. In August, media advocates and ISP representatives uniformly opposed the bill at a parliamentary hearing. While technology for implementing the legislation is already undergoing tests, officials said in November that the bill would be amended to reflect the concerns of the parliamentary legal committee. However, a revised version of the bill released that month was also criticized by MISA-Zimbabwe for containing undemocratic provisions. Online newspapers run by Zimbabweans living abroad are popular among those with internet access.