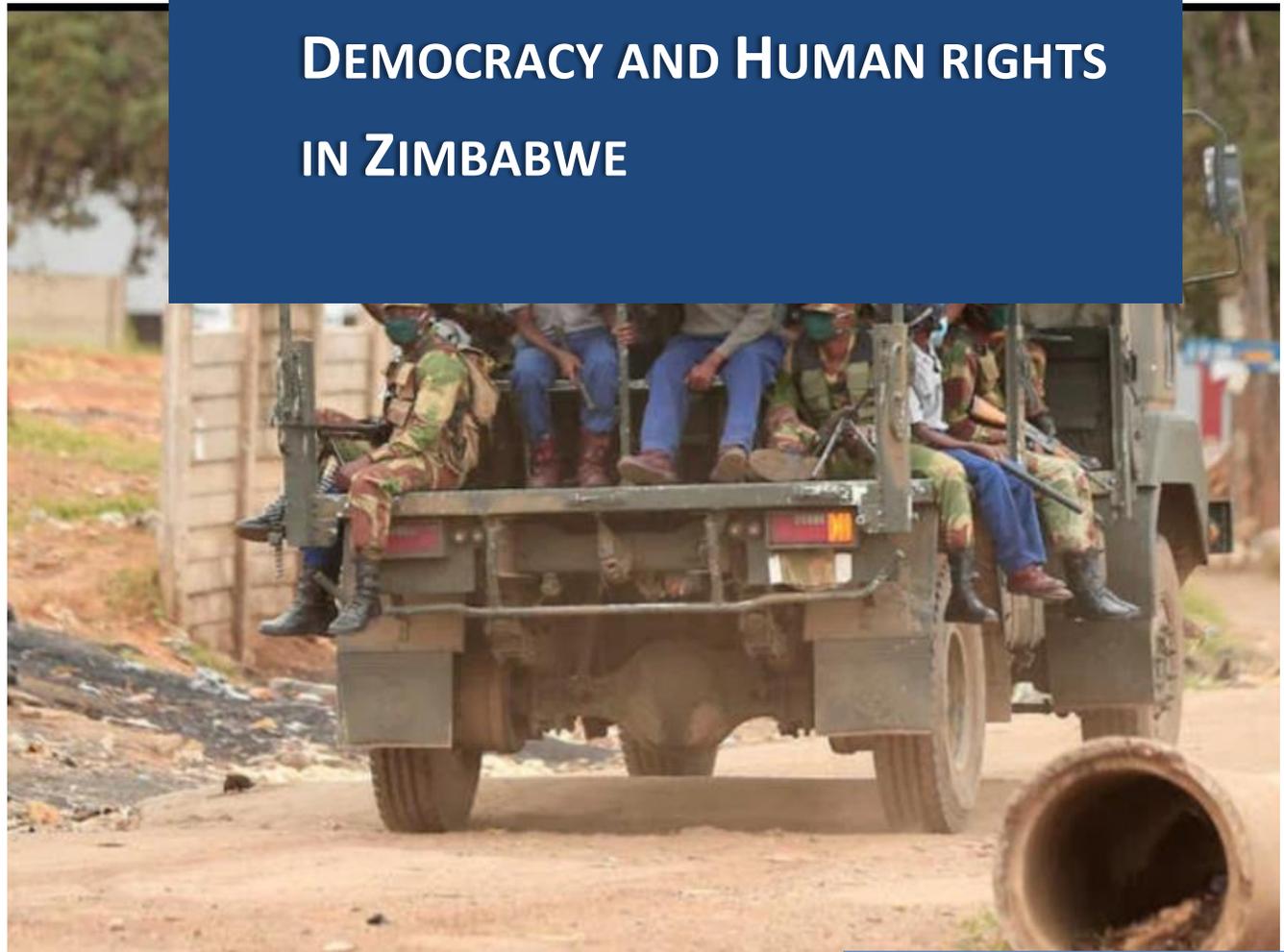


## ABOUT THE ZIMBABWE DEMOCRACY INSTITUTE

The Zimbabwe Democracy Institute (ZDI) is a politically independent and not for profit public policy think-tank based in Zimbabwe. Founded and registered as a trust in terms of the laws of Zimbabwe in November 2012. ZDI serves to generate and disseminate innovative ideas, cutting-edge research and policy analysis to advance democracy, development, good governance and human rights in Zimbabwe. The institute also aims to promote open, informed and evidence-based debate by bringing together pro-democracy experts to platforms for debate. The idea is to offer new ideas to policy makers with the view to entrenching democratic practices in Zimbabwe. The ZDI researches, publishes and conducts national policy debates and conferences in democratization, good governance, public policy, human rights and transitional justice, media and democracy relations, electoral politics and international affairs.

# GOVERNMENT REACTION TO COVID19: IMPLICATIONS ON DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN ZIMBABWE



Quarterly Newsletter, May 2020

## **G**overnment reaction to Covid19: Implications on Democracy and Human rights in Zimbabwe

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Following the Covid19 outbreak, the government of Zimbabwe created a militarised COVID-19 Taskforce in March 2020 to help fight against the pandemic. Given the history of violence and human rights violations whenever such militarised taskforces have been deployed in Zimbabwean communities, many human rights and democracy erosion questions have arisen. The fact that the taskforce is led by a retired general responsible for the military coup in 2017 has sent chills up the spines of many Zimbabwean citizens<sup>1</sup>.

As with other countries, the security forces are not a problem per se. They are doing phenomenal work in many parts of the world as

peacemakers in the protection of civilian sites and in response to natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> However, the security forces in Zimbabwe are always not in sync with the public human rights expectations as there is an historic trust deficit between the military and communities. There is no mutual feeling between the security forces and the communities, which stretches back to the colonial period and this has been intensified by decades of militarization of politics during ZANU PF rule.

The covid-19 pandemic has posed serious problems to communities in Zimbabwe, ranging from economic to political. The lockdown resulted in the government militarizing the streets and this has transmogrified into an open

door for infringement of human rights and democracy in Zimbabwe. It has been a pitiful experience, with people being made to fight the corona virus and the security sector simultaneously.

Since the lockdown began, there has been a worrying trend of state security brutality in communities who are caught roaming around the streets to make ends meet as this has been a typical livelihood for many Zimbabweans. This has triggered a repeat of the traumatic experience which has become a usual output of many army deployments in communities of Zimbabwe. Interview findings from various parts of Zimbabwe have shown an increase in incidents of police harassment targeting people, with the most affected areas being Harare and Bulawayo which are highly populated.

While security forces in some countries are disinfecting communities against the pandemic,

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<sup>1</sup> News story on Herald, Covid-19 provides turning point for Zimbabwe-vp. Available at: <https://www.herald.co.zw/covid-19-provides-turning-point-for-zimbabwe-vp>

<sup>2</sup> International Journal of Security of Security and Development (2007) Security Sector Reform, Local Ownership and Community Engagement. Available at: <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.dx/>

in Zimbabwe particularly in Harare's high density suburbs such as Kuwadzana and Chitungwiza, police officers have been firing teargas in residential areas in order to enforce lockdown.<sup>3</sup> In Bulawayo's Cowdray Park suburb, it has been reported that two women, Nokuthula and Ntombizodwa Mpfu were handcuffed, assaulted, labelled prostitutes and tribally insulted by police officers based at Cowdray Park police station.<sup>4</sup>



Source: Aljazeera

In most parts of Zimbabwe, massive arrests and torture of citizens during lockdown have been a growing trend. For instance, in Harare after holding an unauthorized street protest, three MDC youth leaders were arrested by the police.<sup>5</sup> A few hours later their whereabouts were unknown until they were found in a dumping site in Bindura. The recently fired deputy Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting services in denial of a state sponsored abduction labelled Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chinembiri and Nestai Marova as prostitutes who went to Bindura for sex work.<sup>6</sup>

These incidents are evidence of the brutality of the current regime. The regime is not keen in supporting human rights. Security forces are always running against citizens whom they are supposed to protect. Name shaming of women has become a norm whenever security forces are found at the center of human rights

violations. To note is that journalists have also been arrested while covering coronavirus lockdown. Of recent, two Harare based private media journalists, Frank Chikowore and Samuel Takawira were arrested for talking to abducted MDC activists.<sup>7</sup> This shows that the regime is going on with the modus operandi of abducting, abusing and torturing citizens. It is becoming a threat to freedom of expression and media freedom.



3 Interviews in Harare, 2020

4 Video available on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/qy5otHSPJDU>

5 The herald reported on the story, available at: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.herald.co.zw/mdc-a-legislator-mamombe-2-others-arrested/amp/>

6 Energy Mutodi on tweeter, however, he deleted the tweet after being fired from his deputy ministerial position. A screenshot was saved.

7 Reporters without borders. Five Zimbabwean reporters arrested while covering coronavirus lockdown. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/five-zimbabwean-reporters-arrested-while-covering-coronavirus-lockdown>

See also, New Zimbabwe. Journalists arrested for talking to abducted MDC activists. Available at: <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/journalists-arrested-for-talking-to-abducted-mdc-activists/>



The human rights violations experienced so far go against the provisions of the Zimbabwe 2013 Constitution together with the Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020. According to section 53 of the Zimbabwe Constitution, 'No person may be subject to physical or psychological torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'<sup>8</sup> The SI.83 of 2020 also does not state that security forces must resort to violence against citizens found wanting. This entails that

the security sector is going against the Constitution and the relevant statutory instrument which they are supposed to observe.

## Hunger in Zimbabwean Communities: Is Smart Agriculture Locked down Also?

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The government of Zimbabwe is well known for heralding promises but silent when it comes to results. Smart Agriculture has been paraded as a way of combating starvation in Zimbabwe and increasing revenue through exports. However, Zimbabweans have actually experienced the opposite of this stunt.

The lockdown has shown citizens that Smart Agriculture has done nothing in fighting hunger as the government continues to import maize and wait upon donations from the international

community in order to save its starving populace. The beginning of the covid-19 caused despair and left most Zimbabweans trembling in fear, in a country dealing with a severe and shaking economic crisis. Many citizens fear that the steps taken to curb covid-19 will hit hard on the vulnerable population.<sup>9</sup> Interviews in Harare and Bulawayo have shown that the country is at a critical position and risks losing citizens to hunger and human rights violations than to covid-19.

During lockdown, the streets and supermarkets of Zimbabwe have been terrorized by police officers and soldiers in the name of ensuring order in mealie meal queues. The interviewees expressed concerns over the shortage of mealie meal in supermarkets while some disclosed that they are now resorting to bribing police officers in order to be able to buy affordable mealie meal in supermarkets.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Zimbabwe Constitution of 2013, available at: <https://www.constituteproject.org>

<sup>9</sup> Aljazeera online. We'll die of hunger first': Despair as Zimbabwe lockdown begins. Available at: [www.google.com/amp/s/www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2020/03/die-hunger-despair-zimbabwe-lockdown-begins-200330054919081.html](http://www.google.com/amp/s/www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2020/03/die-hunger-despair-zimbabwe-lockdown-begins-200330054919081.html)

<sup>10</sup> Interviews, April, 2020

In abuse of power and desire to earn a living, some members of the security sector have been found selling mealie meal at their homesteads in foreign currency. On the other hand, citizens have been found queuing for long hours exposing themselves to covid19 for a bag of mealie meal.



Citizens queuing to buy mealie meal

Source: The Zimbabwean

In cases like the Zimbabwean situation, one wonders: Is smart agriculture on lockdown? In a bid to assist the starving Zimbabwe population, President Mnangagwa on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May announced that the government will be giving out an 18 billion covid-19 stimulus package in order to assist the vulnerable. To date most citizens

have not received any government assistance. In most parts of the country, citizens rely on international donors of which some areas like Hwange, Lupane and Beitbridge were affected by drought. One interviewee noted that if it was not for the international donors they would be dead by now, but worse, the donors' organisations closed operations in some areas and they are not sure of how they are going to survive in the coming months.<sup>11</sup>

Some noted that the government relief packages were politically centered. Interviewees from Bulawayo and Harare said the relief packages were handed over to ZANU-PF supporters and war veterans while the vulnerable continue to suffer.<sup>12</sup> This is a clear sign that corruption continues to haunt government structures delimiting benefits to ZANU-PF members while the rest of the population starve.

## From Command Agriculture to Command

### Transport

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The imposed lockdown which started on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 as a way of fighting the deadly pandemic, Covid-19, has serious implications on the Zimbabwean economic and socio-political sectors. There has been a shift from focus on Command Agriculture which was mainly a programme used to benefit the corrupt ruling ZANU-PF elite to Command Transport a measure meant to wipe out transport business from the private sector. Evidence have shown that Kudakwashe Tagwirei, an ally to Mnangagwa and the center of Command Agriculture owns 125 of the new ZUPCO buses which he acquired through Landela Investments, a subsidiary of Sotic International and is still

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<sup>11</sup> Telephone interviews in Lupane and Beitbridge, April, 2020

<sup>12</sup> Interviews in Bulawayo and Harare, April 2020

importing more.<sup>13</sup> Thus the banning of private commuter buses would mean a benefit to the cartel, Tagwirei. It can thus be argued that the ruling ZANU-PF elite which are associated with Tagwirei imposed the policy of banning private commuter buses not as a way of protecting citizens but as a simply corrupt political move.



With the banning of private commuter buses, thousands are losing their jobs while most owners of commuter buses are forced to rent their buses to ZUPCO giving the government monopoly over the transport system. This move has left many drivers and bus conductors jobless and the families that depend on them starving.

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<sup>13</sup> The independent, 27, March 2020, Zanu PF benefactor in murky Zupco bus deal. Available at: <https://www.the-independent.co.zw/2020/03/27/zanu-pf-benefactor-in-murky-zupco-bus-deal/>



Source: Open Parly

While Zimbabwe is currently on level two of lockdown, essential and other professional services workers are struggling to travel from and to their workplaces as the ZUPCO buses are very few and limited. Bulawayo residents in May, attested that citizens boarding ZUPCO buses were forced to purchase ZUPCO tap cards.<sup>14</sup> This is evidence of how demanding and impractical our government can be to the hunger stricken and economically impoverished Zimbabwean citizens.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews in Bulawayo, May 2020

