



A critical examination of the ramifications of the 2030 agenda on Freedom of Expression

Introduction

The Zimbabwean political landscape is on a knife's edge as tensions escalate within ZANU PF over the contentious motion to extend President Emmerson Mnangagwa's rule beyond 2028. Dubbed the "2030 agenda" by its proponents, this move has ignited a firestorm of criticism, severely impacting the country's human rights record, particularly freedom of expression and media freedom. As the agenda's supporters seek to muzzle dissenting voices, and as the opponents of the agenda seek to push back the agenda, the situation has become increasingly volatile, with reports of arrests, detentions, and intimidation of journalists, and activists. This has created a political landscape that is characteristic of volatility, uncertainty and perpetual fear for the repeat of the 2017 events. All this has serious ramifications on human rights in general and the right to freedom of expression in particular. This article examines the events around the push and counter-push for the 2030 agenda and their implications on the right to freedom of expression.

The 2030 Agenda

The 2030 agenda is a vigorous push by some sections of members of the ruling party, ZANU PF to extend the current term of the President Emmerson Mnangagwa beyond the constitutional limit of 2028. Proponents of the 2030 agenda argue that the president has performed so well economically, socially and politically that the country can benefit from his prolonged stay in power. They cite Vision 2030, a policy blueprint launched by the president in 2018 which aims to make Zimbabwe "a prosperous and empowered upper middle-income society by 2030" as a basis to argue that the president needs to be in power beyond 2028 to see through his vision. They argue that constitutional term limits are an unnecessary impediment to the achievement of Vision 2030 and as such, have to be done away with.

Opponents of the 2030 agenda on the other hand argue that Vision 2030 is a government policy blueprint which can be implemented regardless of who is in power. They also argue that those



pushing for the 2030 agenda are people of dubious economic and social status who are using unorthodox means to derive economic benefits from their proximity to the president, the advantage of which they want to prolong. They argue that the president has presided over an unprecedented corruption being spearheaded by people who hang around him and that these are the people behind the 2030 agenda. They also argue that extending the president's term is illegal as it violates Section 91 of the constitution which states that *"a person is disqualified for election as President or appointment as Vice-President if he or she has already held office as President for two terms, whether continuous or not, and for the purpose of this subsection three or more years' service is deemed to be a full term"* and Section 91 (2) which prevents an incumbent president from benefitting any changes in the term limits. They also argue that amending a constitution to benefit an individual will set a wrong precedent.

The 2030 agenda has therefore heightened tensions and factionalism within the ruling party. It has triggered political events which mirror those which took place prior to the 2017 military coup. The President has on many occasions, including during a meeting with editors and senior media practitioners recently, distanced himself from the 2030 agenda stating that he is a 'constitutionalist' and will not stay in power beyond the two terms. Despite publicly distancing himself from the 2030 campaigns, many analysts have questioned his sincerity. This is particularly because in the past, before becoming president, he was on numerous occasions questioned on his intentions to become president and he vehemently denied harboring such intentions. His invitation of the 2030 protagonists to his farm, his reluctance to call those pushing the 2030 agenda to order, the hunting down, arresting and detaining the 2030 antagonists are all signs that the president is aiding and abetting the illegal amendment of the constitution to extend his term of office. Therefore the push and counter-push for the 2030 agenda has led to a rise in a host of human rights abuses, particularly the right to freedom of expression.

The legal basis for freedom of expression

A close analysis of human rights violations data in the possession of the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) indicates a nexus between the political events linked to the 2030 agenda and an increase in HRVs in general, and an increase in the violations of freedom of expression in particular. Before



we lay bare this nexus, it is important to define freedom of expression from a domestic and international law perspective.

Locally, freedom of expression is provided for in Section 61 of the Constitution which states that (1) Every person has the right to freedom of expression, which includes— (a) freedom to seek, receive and communicate ideas and other information...’ It further states that (2) Every person is entitled to freedom of the media, which includes protection of the confidentiality of journalists’ sources of information. Freedom of the media, also known as press freedom, universally extends to the right of media outlets, journalists, and individuals to gather, produce, and disseminate information without undue interference, restriction, or censorship from governments, institutions, or other powerful entities.

Internationally, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, protects the right to receive and impart information. Additionally, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees the right to freedom of expression in Article 19, emphasizing that restrictions on this right must be necessary and proportionate. Zimbabwe is a State Party to the aforementioned international instruments and is therefore legally obligated to uphold, protect, and ensure the full realization of the rights and standards enshrined therein. Compliance with these obligations is not optional but a binding duty under international law.

The implications of the 2030 agenda on freedom of expression: An analysis of human rights violations data

It is evident from the human rights violations data in the possession of ZPP that citizens within and outside of ZANU PF are experiencing targeted human rights violations on account of their real or perceived opposition to the 2030 agenda. Whilst known or perceived opponents of the 2030 agenda have been subjected to various forms of human rights violations, a closer look at the human rights violations data indicates that the most pervasive of these human rights violations is freedom of expression. Between October 2024 and March 2025, ZPP documented a



total of 28 human rights violations which affected a total of 558 victims that were linked to the 2030 agenda. Of these, 220 were women while 328 were men. 72 of these victims are ZANU PF members while the remainder are not from ZANU PF. These statistics demonstrate the proliferation of intra-party human rights violations, that is, human rights violations perpetrated against ZANU PF members by fellow ZANU PF members. Of all the 28 violations linked to the 2030 agenda that ZPP documented, 13 relate to freedom of expression.

Why freedom of expression is under assault

As already demonstrated, human rights violations data shows that the most pervasive of the human rights violations targeted against real or perceived opponents of the 2030 agenda is freedom of expression. There is a reason for that. The exercise of the right to freedom of expression remains an avenue to push back the 2030 agenda. Other avenues for pushing back the 2030 agenda are effectively restricted. For instance, there is an apparent dearth in the exercise of the right to freedom of assembly and association and the exercise of the right to demonstrate and petition as provided for in Section 58 and 59 of the Zimbabwean Constitution respectively. This is because of the existence of repressive legislation such as the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act [Chapter 11:23] popularly known as ‘MOPA’ which is weaponized to restrict and criminalize the exercise of the right to freedom of assembly and association in Zimbabwe.

Analysis of HRV data reveals that the regime is descending on anyone who dares speak up (or even create opportunities for others to speak up such as Blessed Mhlanga) against the 2030 agenda with savage vehemence and alarming alacrity. This is in addition to weaponization of criminal law to criminalize their work. Opponents of the agenda are subjected to all sorts of human rights violations which include expulsion from ZANU PF if they are members of ZANU PF, being hunted down like rats, being subjected to arbitrary arrests, prolonged pre-trial detentions, just to name a few. The crackdown has a chilling effect on human rights defenders who are contemplating challenging the 2030 agenda.



The arrest of senior journalist Blessed Mhlanga.

The most blatant assault on press freedoms in the context of the 2030 agenda is the arbitrary arrest, detention and denial of bail of Blessed Mhlanga, a journalist with Alpha Media Holdings, which owns Heart and Soul TV. Mhlanga was charged with two counts of contravening Section 164 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act for allegedly transmitting data messages that ‘incite violence.’ This was after Blessing, in his capacity as a journalist, interviewing war veterans and individuals who criticized the 2030 agenda. What makes the arrest arbitrary is the fact that Blessed himself did not communicate any opinion on the 2030 agenda, nor does he own the platform which was used to transmit the message. Blessed Mhlanga was simply carrying out his professional duties as a journalist when he was arrested—yet he has now been held in custody for 45 days (*at the time of publishing this article*) without bail, raising serious concerns over the erosion of press freedom, the violation of his right to a fair trial, and the abuse of pretrial detention as a tool of intimidation.

“Journalism is merely what it is: transmission of information. If you criminalize transmission of information, you are definitely coming to the very fabric of what constitutes journalism. It is not Blessed that has been arrested. What has been arrested and what is in the dock is free expression, journalism and ultimately constitutionalism” Nigel Nyamutumbu, Media Alliance Coordinator has commented.

Other attacks on free speech

In addition to the arrest and prolonged detention of Blessed Mhlanga, ZPP recorded several other human rights violations from across the country perpetrated against citizens who are in opposition, or perceived to be in opposition to the 2030 agenda. In Gokwe South District, a male vendor was summoned by state security agents on January 25th for publicly expressing his opposition to the 2030 agenda. The victim was threatened with expulsion from the farmers market, where he operates a business. In Gokwe North District, ZPP recorded incidents of savage assaults on the freedom of expression of people who are in opposition of the 2030 agenda. In Ward 7 of Kabuyuni Constituency, villagers (six males and one female) were forced



to publicly renounce their opposition to the 2030 agenda in front of fellow villagers. They did so under extreme duress. ZPP also recorded incidents where chiefs summoned village heads under their jurisdictions and instructed them not to entertain any villagers who criticize the 2030 agenda. Similarly, in Epworth, two CCC members were brutally assaulted by ZANU PF supporters for expressing opposition to the presidential term extension. The victims had earlier on been threatened by the assailants to speak about the ruling party's agenda since they were not members.

The March 31 protests, initiated by former ZANU PF member Blessed Geza, highlighted a serious attack on freedom of expression and civic participation in Zimbabwe. A total of 98 people were arrested in Harare for participating in the protests, with the majority remanded without bail, underscoring the criminalization of peaceful dissent. In the Midlands, local councillors and activists were arrested and assaulted for allegedly mobilising communities. This pattern of repression, including prolonged pretrial detention, illustrates how the state uses the justice system and security apparatus to stifle dissent, intimidate citizens, and silence critical voices. Such actions undermine constitutionally protected rights and inhibit citizens from freely expressing their views or engaging in democratic processes, reinforcing a climate of fear and eroding trust in public institutions.

Conclusion

The 2030 agenda and the political events around it have ramifications on human rights in general and in particular, the right to freedom of expression. While citizens who openly declare their opposition to the 2030 agenda have been subjected to various human rights violations, it is their freedom of speech which has been severely affected. Emerging human rights violations data indicate a clear nexus between the 2030 agenda and the violation of freedom of expression in Zimbabwe.