

Zimbabwe: Govt Goes After NGOs Ahead of the 2023 Elections

The East African by Kitsepile Nyathi

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Emmerson Mnangagwa - [John Manzongo/The Herald](#)

Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa's government is tightening the noose on non-governmental organisations it accuses of pursuing a regime change agenda ahead of crucial elections in 2023.

President Mnangagwa, 79, who came to power after a 2017 coup that toppled founding father and long-time president Robert Mugabe, accuses NGOs of being conduits of money from hostile Western countries, seeking to topple his party.

President Mnangagwa faces a tough re-election campaign after struggling to fulfil promises to engineer a swift economic revival after years of a downward spiral during Mugabe's tenure.

In a recent Afrobarometer survey, "almost three-quarters of 72 percent of Zimbabweans described the country's economic condition as fairly bad or very bad."

"Two thirds, 67 percent, of Zimbabweans say the country is going in the wrong direction."

Political scientists say President Mnangagwa, who enjoys strong backing from the military, will do everything possible to stay in power and this could include going after NGOs perceived to be critical of his administration.

Civil society organisations say government officials have been summoning them to their offices demanding information about their operations amid threats to deregister those accused of supporting the opposition.

The organisations say the moves by the officials are not only illegal, but are also meant to close the democratic space in Zimbabwe ahead of the polls.

Ruling Zanu PF party's top decision-making body, the Politburo, said on Wednesday that it had "endorsed President Mnangagwa's call for NGOs and civil society organisations to stick to their mandates or risk deregistration."

Citizens in Action Southern Africa (CIASA), a regional body representing civil society organisations, said it was alarmed by the targeting of NGOs in Zimbabwe.

"CIASA is worried about the closure of operating space for civil society in Zimbabwe where authorities are making illegal demands regarding the operations of NGOs and civil society organisations," the organisation said.

"NGOs in Zimbabwe are severely restricted in their ability to operate in the current political situation, putting their safety at stake.

"The efforts and trajectory of strengthening civic space and championing the promotion of the rule of law, constitutionalism and anti-corruption in the country are now becoming a fallacy due to the threats being amplified targeting such NGOs."

CIASA added: "We call on the government of Zimbabwe to respect and uphold constitutionally guaranteed rights to assembly and freedom of expression, which form the bedrock of civil society."



The National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO), a body that represents NGOs operating in Zimbabwe, said the threat to clamp down on the sector could have dire consequences for the country's majority poor, who rely on handouts for survival.

"The current development if not managed well may have a huge implication on the welfare of the vulnerable communities and reversal of the gains in health, resilience, education, social protection and effective participation of the public in democratic processes," NANGO warned.

Last month, the World Bank said the number of extremely poor Zimbabwean citizens stood at 7.9 million or 49 percent of the population.

Most of the poor depend on NGOs for food, sanitation, health and education, among other things as Western countries stopped channelling development aid through the government two decades ago citing corruption.



Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (CiZC), a grouping of over 40 civil society organisations in the southern African country, said the threats by government officials were "part of a broader campaign by the state to close the civic and democratic space ahead of the 2023 elections."

"The illegal demands are not confined to Harare, but have been implemented in other provinces particularly, rural communities where the conflation of the state and the ruling party is intensive," CiZC said.

Alex Magaisa, a Zimbabwean law academic at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom, said demands by the Harare provincial administrator for NGOs to sign an MoU with the government were illegal.

"Conspicuously missing in this extravagant demand is the law under which he is exercising his phantom power," Dr Magaisa said.

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