



## Overview

Though human rights abuses are rampant and the government maintains strict control over the media, ONI found no evidence of Internet filtering in Zimbabwe.

## Background

Since Zimbabwe's independence from Great Britain in 1980, the country has been tightly controlled by President Robert Mugabe and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which is known for severe repression and continuing violations of human rights.<sup>1</sup> One of the most striking examples of government brutality is Operation Murambatsvina ("Drive Out the Trash") of May 2005, during which military and police forces destroyed nearly 100,000 homes and thousands of businesses in a purported effort to restore order to Zimbabwe's slums. Over 700,000 people were left without homes, jobs or both after the operation, which also disrupted access to education and health care for over 2 million Zimbabwean citizens.<sup>2</sup> The United Nations described the operation as being "carried out in an indiscriminant and unjustified manner, with indifference to

human suffering, and, in repeated cases, with disregard to several provisions of national and international legal frameworks."<sup>3</sup> Though the actual motivations for the operation are unknown, many suggest that it was targeted at regions inhabited by voters for opposition parties or was an attempt to unseat the urban poor before a potential uprising.<sup>4</sup>

Extensive voter intimidation and politically motivated violence also occurred during and after the heavily disputed 2008 presidential elections.<sup>5</sup> Three months after the election, opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai withdrew from a second run-off election, claiming his supporters would be killed if they voted for him.<sup>6</sup> Mugabe won the run-off election as the only candidate. Much of the international community has condemned the Mugabe government, imposing sanctions, recalling ambassadors and publicly supporting Tsvangirai. Several countries, notably Russia, China, and South Africa, opposed such measures and called for more dialogue with Mugabe.<sup>7</sup> Mugabe and Tsvangirai signed a power-sharing deal in

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political	●				
Social	●				
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools	●				
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency				●	
Consistency				●	

## KEY INDICATORS

		worst	best
GNI per capita, PPP (current international \$).....	2,038	■	
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	40.9	■	
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	89.4	■	
Human development index (out of 177).....	151	■	
Rule of law (percentile).....	2	■	
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	8	■	
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	157	■	
Internet users (% of population).....	10.5	■	

September 2008, under which Mugabe remained president and Tsvangirai became prime minister,<sup>8</sup> but by early 2009 cracks were already beginning to show in the new government.<sup>9</sup>

Closely aligned with Zimbabwe's political problems is its economy, which has been in a state of sustained crisis since 2000. Mugabe's land reform policy, under which farmland was seized from white farmers and redistributed to veterans of the war for independence, is largely responsible for disrupting the country's agricultural production, causing massive food shortages and sending Zimbabwe into a downward economic spiral.<sup>10</sup> The land redistribution was marked by human rights abuses, which, combined with worsening inflation – which reached an annual rate of nearly 90 sextillion (10<sup>21</sup>) percent in November 2008<sup>11</sup> – and increasingly flawed elections, have dragged Zimbabwe into the bottom 10 percent of countries in the world with respect to rule of law, government accountability and political stability.<sup>12</sup>

Civil liberties in Zimbabwe are tightly restricted. The government often violently breaks up peaceful protests and charges protesters with violating the 2002 Public Order and Security Act.<sup>13</sup> There have been allegations of police abuse and the torture of detainees,<sup>14</sup> and journalists are

routinely threatened and attacked.<sup>15</sup> A severe press law passed in 2002 allows the Media and Information Commission to crack down on dissent within the media by controlling the licensing of journalists,<sup>16</sup> and the country has no independent newspapers or radio stations.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the government jams a number of radio stations critical of the government, such as Voice of America, Voice of the People, and SW Radio Africa.<sup>18</sup> These draconian press restrictions have forced a number of independent media organizations and journalists to migrate online.<sup>19</sup>

### Internet in Zimbabwe

The number of Internet users in 2008 was reportedly 1,421,000, or approximately 10.5 percent of Zimbabwe's population of 13.3 million.<sup>20</sup> This is a stunning increase from the 2000 penetration rate of 0.4 percent.<sup>21</sup> The high cost of mobile phones – repeated tariff hikes brought the mobile-to-mobile cost per minute to as much as ZWD72 million (USD0.12 at June 2008 exchange rates)<sup>22</sup> – has made the Internet a comparatively cheaper, and therefore more popular, form of communication.<sup>23</sup> Still, hyperinflation has left the government bankrupt and eight in ten Zimbabweans destitute,<sup>24</sup> and unemployment is at 94 percent.<sup>25</sup> In such an environment, demand for luxury goods

such as computers and Internet use is low.

The Mugabe-Tsvangirai Government of National Unity has established a new Ministry for ICT that will focus on ICT growth and development.<sup>26</sup> In April 2009 the government announced a plan to establish Internet cafés at post offices in rural areas.<sup>27</sup> However, given the state of the country's economy, progress in the ICT sector is slow.

Zimbabwe's first ISP, Data Control, was established in 1996. In 1997, the national Posts and Telecommunication Corporation (PTC) built a national Internet backbone and began selling bandwidth to private ISPs.<sup>28</sup> The Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) oversees ISP licensing. Licenses cost USD2-4 million, depending on the level of service the ISP wishes to provide, plus 3.5 percent of the ISP's annual gross income.<sup>29</sup> The most recent membership list on the Zimbabwe Internet Service Providers Association (ZISPA) Web site comprises 28 ISPs.<sup>30</sup>

Government-owned communications company TelOne, which is not part of ZISPA, is Zimbabwe's largest ISP; it provides bandwidth to most other ISPs in the country. In September 2006, international satellite communications provider Intelsat cut service to TelOne after the company failed to pay its USD700,000 debt. TelOne requested money from Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank to pay the debt, but the money was delayed for several weeks. During this time, Internet users in the country experienced severe delays.<sup>31</sup> Service was restored after the reserve bank paid the outstanding debt.<sup>32</sup>

Financial problems have continued to plague TelOne: in April 2009, the company raised its monthly service charges from less than USD30 to USD300. The price hike affected both individual Internet

subscribers and Internet cafés throughout the country, many of whom were forced to cancel their subscriptions and, in the case of cafés, shut their doors.<sup>33</sup> In June 2009, the country's Minister of Information and Communication Technology ordered TelOne to lower its prices; the government then announced plans to privatize the company as part of its attempt to revitalize the country's economy.<sup>34</sup>

### **Legal and regulatory framework**

The Post and Telecommunications Act of 2000 allows the government to monitor e-mail usage and requires ISPs to supply information to government officials when requested.<sup>35</sup> The Supreme Court, however, ruled in 2004 that the sections of the law that permit monitoring violated the constitution.<sup>36</sup> The government struck back with an initiative that requires ISPs to renew contracts with TelOne with the stipulation that they report any e-mail with "offensive or dangerous" content.<sup>37</sup> In essence, this requires ISPs to do what the Supreme Court has ruled unconstitutional. The Zimbabwe Internet Service Providers Association has stated that none of its members will sign agreements with TelOne.<sup>38</sup>

The government strengthened its Internet surveillance policies with the Interception of Communications Bill of 2006. Under its provisions, the government will establish a telecommunications agency called the Monitoring and Interception of Communications Center to oversee, among other things, all telecommunications and postal services. Telecommunications and Internet service providers are required to ensure that their systems are technically capable of monitoring and to cover all associated costs.<sup>39</sup> The government initially withdrew the bill in November 2006 over constitutionality objections from the

Parliamentary Legal Committee, but the parliament approved it in June 2007.<sup>40</sup>

In June 2009, the government began discussing a new Information Communication and Technology Bill, which will take the place of the Broadcasting Services Act and the Postal and Telecommunications Act.<sup>41</sup> It will also amend some sections of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which, among other things, governs the accreditation of journalists.<sup>42</sup> If passed, the bill will consolidate ICT regulation under the proposed National Information and Communications Technology Authority of Zimbabwe, which will oversee ICT, broadcasting and postal services.<sup>43</sup> The Authority will technically be an independent organization, though it will also be responsible for enacting government policies, a duty that may compromise its independence.<sup>44</sup>

### **Surveillance**

According to Reporters Without Borders, during the 2008 presidential elections, government forces hacked into journalists' e-mail accounts; eight journalists were fired for allegedly failing to support Mugabe and the ZANU-PF.<sup>45</sup> Employees of the Reserve Bank are not allowed to receive e-mails containing the words "Morgan Tsvangirai" or "MDC"; the bank has had an e-mail content manager installed since 2006 that prevents e-mails with political content from reaching their intended recipients.<sup>46</sup> In 2005, authorities arrested 40 people in a raid on a local Internet café because an e-mail insulting Mugabe was sent from the location.<sup>47</sup>

### **ONI testing results**

ONI conducted testing on Zimbabwean ISP CABSAS in September 2008 and found no evidence of filtering.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the recent governmental changes, Zimbabwe remains a highly repressive country with a failing economy and a poverty-stricken population. Internet penetration is low, and the Internet is mainly used for e-mail. As a result, the government restricts its efforts toward Internet control to e-mail monitoring and censorship. Though its legal authority to pursue such measures is contested, the government appears to be following through on its wishes to crack down on dissent via e-mail.

## NOTES

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