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INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS DEMOCRATIC FRAILTIES IN ZIMBABWE

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Introduction

Zimbabwe has long struggled in its democratic development. During colonial rule, only white Zimbabweans had full rights and economic opportunities, while Black Zimbabweans had limited political rights (Nyawo and Rich 1980). In 1980, Zimbabwe transitioned from colonial rule to self-governance under a majority-Black government, and Robert Mugabe served first as prime minister and then as president from independence until his ouster in a coup in 2017. Emmerson Mnangagwa, who had served as vice president since 2013, took over as president after the coup and has won two controversial elections since, in 2018 and 2023. Both Mugabe and Mnangagwa belong to the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), the party that has been in power since independence.

After independence, ZANU PF pledged firm commitments to democratic governance, including protection of the right to vote; one man, one vote; and land reform, among other pro-people initiatives. On the one hand, the ZANU PF government brought massive improvements in education and employment and expanded voting rights to every citizen. However, ZANU PF continues to restrict freedom of political participation and human and property rights, and state-sanctioned corruption is at an all-time high. Our previous analysis (Dendere and Tendi 2025) emphasizes that the survival of Zimbabwe’s hybrid regime is mainly due to a shrinking opposition, weakened civil society, and minimal international opposition to the 2017 coup and to support for democracy. In that paper, we also argued that the continued militarization of politics, which began shortly after independence, has severely limited all axes of democratic accountability. This paper proposes policy recommendations to address the democratic frailties we identified, at a time when the regime has not shown a commitment to change and global support for democracy is in decline.

Traditionally, the most effective strategies to strengthen democracy are those that empower civil society and citizens, foster active participation, and encourage governments to undertake meaningful political reforms. These approaches often involve a combi-

nation of grassroots initiatives, international support, and policy changes to increase transparency and accountability. However, implementing such strategies is not always straightforward, particularly in complex, challenging environments like Zimbabwe, where traditional diplomatic tools have proven less effective at navigating the political landscape and promoting democratic development.

Several strategies have been employed by both internal and external parties to advocate for democracy in Zimbabwe. Some of these strategies have worked better than others and with mixed results; for example, despite violence and repression, Zimbabweans consistently vote. Opposition parties participate in elections while voicing concerns about an unfair playing field. Elections remain significant, even when hopes for change are limited (Lindberg 2006). Still, many of the election outcomes have been disputed, and ZANU PF is repeatedly accused of engaging in patronage politics and using the military to influence election outcomes (Kwashirai 2023; Ndawana 2025).

Civil society actively educates voters and raises awareness about political issues, such as constitutional amendments or bills that may violate human rights. External actors support these efforts, especially through financial aid. Western democracies have also exerted pressure on the government, notably through sanctions such as the United States Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA) of 2001 (U.S. Senate 2018). ZIDERA mandated that global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund limit financial aid to Zimbabwe. Additionally, asset freezes and travel restrictions have been imposed on many ruling party elites, including the ZANU PF presidium. Likewise, European Union (EU) sanctions prohibit EU member countries from engaging in economic trade with several Zimbabwean companies, including those involved in arms sales (Council of the E.U. 2025).

ZANU PF blames sanctions for all of Zimbabwe’s economic and political problems. Mugabe and Mnangagwa have argued that sanctions have caused suffering among the masses and created pathways for corruption, especially in the mining sectors (Chakawa 2023;

Sabao 2023).

Given the complex nature of democratic challenges in Zimbabwe, especially since the 2017 coup, which has led to greater militarization of civilian politics and shifting geopolitical conditions, this paper recommends that policymakers and those interested in Zimbabwe's democratic future consider a different approach, one that focuses less on isolating sanctions and more on leveraging the current era of transactional engagement in international diplomacy. To that end, this paper recommends a multi-pronged approach to addressing weaknesses in government accountability alongside traditional efforts such as international diplomatic reengagement, political reform, and the empowerment of opposition groups and civil society. Tackling corruption and boosting trade and investment by foreign actors and the diaspora can help rebuild the economy. Even though, as explored later, Western countries are placing greater emphasis on profitable trade relations over human rights and democracy promotion, mutual trade interests among countries could indirectly benefit democracy. These proposals are not exhaustive of all potential strategies that can be applied to a case like Zimbabwe.

Background: How Zimbabwe's democracy has weakened over time

This paper's strategies to address democratic frailties in Zimbabwe require an understanding of the country's history and why initial promises have not been fully realized. Although Zimbabwe's democratic decline began immediately after it gained independence, the country achieved some positive milestones, including improvements in education and the economy. Under the colonial system, there were limited opportunities for Black Zimbabweans in higher education and professional roles, which hampered the growth of a middle class. To combat these issues, the new government invested heavily in free and compulsory primary

education, expanded rural schools, and hired more teachers. By 1990, just ten years after independence, primary and secondary school enrollment improved and literacy rates exceeded 90%, far above the sub-Saharan African average of 66% (Kanyongo 2005). However, this heavy focus on education and health care led to unintended consequences, including rising unemployment as more well-educated individuals entered the workforce without finding jobs (Sigauke 2023). These unemployment challenges were not immediately apparent in the early post-independence years.

While the government was making notable strides in the realms of education, health care, the economy, and various other social issues, there was a devastating and violent conflict unfolding against the Ndebele people in the southern region of the country. This period, spanning from 1983-1987, is widely known as "Gukurahundi," a time marked by profound suffering and loss. An estimated 20,000 people were killed during the Gukurahundi massacres (Sibanda 2021). The repercussions of Gukurahundi extended beyond the immediate human toll. Matabeleland, home to the Ndebele, has continued to face economic marginalization. Consequently, the region has been a battleground and a stronghold for various opposition groups over the years (Lewanika 2023).

Mugabe called Gukurahundi "a moment of madness," suggesting that the violence was a one-off event and did not undermine economic or democratic gains (Rwafa 2012). And yet, Gukurahundi was not the only violation of the promise of democracy. The militarization of politics was already taking root, and ZANU PF was closing space for opposition engagement. U.S. diplomat Jeffery Davidow (1983) argued that Zimbabwe's troubles in the south and Mugabe's support for a one-party state would not undermine progress in Zimbabwe, pointing to the over \$400 million the United States has invested in Zimbabwe as evidence of hope for democratic growth. Davidow argued that if managed well, Zimbabwe's vast mineral wealth could transform the nation into a regional superpower with strong economic and democratic principles. Davidow was correct in his assessment that Zimbabwe's enormous mineral wealth would play a critical role in the country's politics, but not in the way he intended. The

wealth has not brought economic relief to the masses—just to the elite few.

During the first decade and a half after independence, most analysts maintained hope for a democratic Zimbabwe. In 1990, Zimbabwe was commended for moving away from proposals for a one-party state toward a multi-party state. Chan (1992) argued that ZANU PF elites were worried about consolidating power around Mugabe and a few others, thereby closing opportunities for advancement. In these early years, ZANU PF maintained internal accountability and a democratic culture (Meldrum 1990). Over time, this culture diminished and is no longer visible in today's politics, where there are renewed calls for a one-party state and ZANU PF elites appear at ease with the current President, Emmerson Mnangagwa, remaining in power beyond his constitutional term. ZANU PF elites have been running an active campaign calling for Mnangagwa to extend his current term to 2030, two years past the constitutionally mandated five-year term (Maodza 2025).

Although early elections were not completely free of violence, the opposition participated and won seats, such as ZUM in 1990, which won two seats, including one for Margaret Dongo, who successfully fought for her seat in court after the 1995 elections (Melrum 1995). During the same period, the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC) enjoyed a level of independence that no longer exists for election management bodies. The ESC, like its contemporary, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), was led by a commission appointed by the president—but that is where their similarities ended.

Other civil society organizations also enjoyed independence during this early period. Dorman (2002) notes that civil society organizations operated with greater freedom in the 1990s, citing the Zimbabwe Council of Churches' successful push for a new constitution and ZANU PF's first electoral defeat. Along with churches, women's organizations and those openly advocating for democracy and access to HIV medicines operated with varying degrees of success. Notably, as the middle class grew, so did their political engagement, which culminated in trade union protests in the 1990s.

By the late 1990s, various civil society organizations were familiar with advocating for political change, leading to the formation of the first viable opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by trade unionist Morgan Tsvangirai in 1999. This broad union of professionals, white farmers, the working class, and poor farm workers was not welcomed by ZANU PF. Since 1999, opposition spaces have been suffocated. The ZANU PF government has viewed civil society as an enemy of the state and not a partner in democracy. Civil society, including opposition parties and pro-democracy organizations, has been criminalized, coerced, and co-opted (Kagoro 2005, Moyo 2010, Kabonga and Zvokumba 2021).

Over the last 45 years, there have also been moments of hope for democracy. Zimbabwe has consistently held elections even under very contentious conditions (Tembo and Singh 2023). The 2000 constitutional referendum was evidence that, with sufficient support from both internal and external actors, ZANU PF could be defeated at the polls. Domestic and international actors responded to Zimbabwe's excessive use of electoral violence with different strategies centered on demanding the respect of human rights, respect for the media, and an independent judiciary. However, the initial response from the European Union and the United States was not coordinated. The European Union sought to exert influence through the Cotonou Agreement, which called for an end to violence and respect for electoral outcomes (Weiland 2004), while the United States enacted the 2001 Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA). Although driven by different interests, the EU and U.S. positions, now commonly referred to as targeted sanctions, aim to push ZANU PF toward a more democratic path that recognizes human and property rights and electoral integrity (Dendere 2018).

The sanctions regime has produced mixed outcomes. While it clearly signals that major aid donors like the EU and the U.S. prioritize human rights, property rights, and democracy, it has also inadvertently provided ZANU PF with a campaign platform they have exploited to justify their continued grip on power (Katsinde 2022). ZANU PF attributes poverty to Western sanctions, and supporters of targeted sanctions often rein-

force a narrative of neocolonialism. The long history of European and American involvement in Zimbabwean affairs offers opportunities for a new kind of engagement. This approach would focus on advancing human and property rights and democracy, while also promoting economic ties to combat poverty and reduce corruption.

Most scholars and observers of Zimbabwe hoped that the 2017 coup that removed Robert Mugabe would open new avenues for shaping Zimbabwe's future democracy. Western and regional partners welcomed the new government, focusing on the change itself rather than the problematic aspects of the coup. In a previous work, my co-author and I highlighted that international actors hoped the coup would reset Zimbabwe's situation and that Mnangagwa, who promised that Zimbabwe was now open for business, would be a more effective leader than Mugabe (Tendi and Dendere 2025). However, under Mnangagwa, a militarized state has emerged, significantly limiting access to executive accountability and offering few options for vertical or horizontal accountability. As noted by Makiva and Tashu (2025), accountability is alarmingly low in parliament, where citizen voices should be safeguarded against legislative abuses. In every election since 2018, opposition MPs have lost their parliamentary seats in illegal recalls bolstered by the ZANU PF speaker of parliament. The ouster of young opposition politicians like Fadzai Mahere, who was elected in 2023 under the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC-Chamisa) party, has weakened the opposition voice in parliament, and those who retained their seats are muzzled. Mahere has been a vocal critic of the Mnangagwa regime and has been imprisoned for her views. Parliamentary recalls are another legal tool used by autocratic regimes to limit accountability (Schindler 2025). Since the 2023 elections, at least 27 opposition members have been recalled from office, and ZANU PF has won almost all seats in every subsequent by-election, cementing the ruling party's two-thirds majority and giving it the power to make key changes to parliament, including advancing constitutional amendments on presidential term limits.

Under Mnangagwa, civil society, the media, and the judiciary are significantly weakened and/or compro-

mised (Dendere and Taodzera 2023). While Mnangagwa has claimed to be "soft as wool," his regime has responded to citizen protests with excessive violence, frequently involving military action (Kupeta 2024). The judiciary in Zimbabwe has always been biased toward ZANU PF. However, civil society and the opposition could sometimes use constitutional tools to challenge unfair judgments. Such opportunities no longer exist because Mnangagwa now has greater control over judges and the courts, including the power to appoint judges to the constitutional courts (Matiashe 2024).

Pathways to address democratic frailties

The weakened opposition and civil society lack the necessary tools to hold the regime accountable. Furthermore, shifts in international actors' tactics toward Zimbabwe have made it easier for corrupt individuals in both the government and private sectors to maximize their profits. Corruption is not a new problem in Zimbabwe. However, the depths of corruption and plundering of state resources by individuals connected to the state are unprecedented. The nature of corruption matters when considering pathways to address democratic frailties arising from wealth accumulation. Nonetheless, although militarized regimes pose significant barriers to democratization—since those involved are often opposed to basic democratic principles—achieving progress is not impossible. Given the challenges posed by authoritarian rule, this analysis will focus on how the international community and the Zimbabwean diaspora can support domestic actors, including the opposition and civil society, to foster change under restrictive conditions, particularly in combating corruption.

RECONSIDERING THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

This paper urges interested parties to rethink the role of international trade and engagement and to consider new approaches to reforming the existing relationships among the Zimbabwean government, international actors, the diaspora, and civil society, with

the aim of economic and political progress. A good starting point is to revisit Plattner's (2015) arguments on how poverty challenges democratic growth. Central to their argument and that of this paper is the perspective that links poverty and corruption to the survival of authoritarian regimes, exacerbated by weakened accountability mechanisms. The connection between corruption and poverty serves as a crucial point of departure for this paper, which argues that, alongside traditional tools for promoting democracy, it is essential to rethink how trade and economic strategies can bolster democratic efforts if used correctly.

There is a pressing need to re-evaluate the strategies for growth and democracy consolidation that are most effective in a global environment marked by a democratic recession, limited funding for democratic support, and the prevalence of authoritarianism. The growing rise of Russia and China poses complex challenges for democracy promotion because their investments in developing countries are not conditional on support for human rights or liberal democracy (Jones and Taussig 2019; Grimm et al 2025). Additionally, Western unity and allegiances are no longer as strong as they once were, and we are also witnessing democratic backsliding in Western countries. Global financial strain is forcing countries that in the past devoted significant funding to pro-democracy initiatives to look inward (Human Rights Funders Network 2025).

The most urgent interventions for Zimbabwe should be framed within a diagonal accountability framework, centered on accountability through institutions outside government, such as the media and civil society. Re-engagement with both regional and Western partners regarding the critical situation in Zimbabwe falls under this framework. Foreign diplomats in Zimbabwe, particularly those from countries that previously supported democratic engagement, seem to have softened their stance (Dendere and Tendi 2025). If the political issues remain unresolved, all other investments will ultimately be futile.

As noted earlier, the global landscape looks different in June 2025 than it did just a year ago, when we were first considering the future of democracy in Zimbabwe. A year ago, the global order was relatively more stable.

Western allies had a strong relationship and shared the belief that promoting democracy was one of the most important objectives for the 21st century geopolitical community. The United States and its allies agreed that the wars in Ukraine and other regions needed to end to restore global stability; however, this consensus has since unraveled.

The second term of U.S. President Donald Trump has disrupted established norms regarding Western involvement in democracy promotion (McManus et al 2025). Shortly after assuming office, his administration reduced funding for the United States' largest aid agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Zimbabwe stands to face significant cuts to its health and democracy promotion programs as a result (Bulawayo24 News, 2025). The United States has historically been Zimbabwe's largest donor. In 2021, it provided over \$317 million in bilateral assistance for democracy and governance, agriculture, and health programs, as well as \$51 million in humanitarian aid (Bureau of African Affairs 2022). These new funding cuts further weaken an already fragile civil society and pro-democracy actors. Additional cuts affecting Zimbabwe include reductions in public radio programming, notably the Voice of America, which many Zimbabweans rely on for accurate news.

The U.S. is not the only country adjusting its aid policies. As Western geopolitical relations shift—such as the U.K.'s departure from the European Union, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the growing influence of right-wing groups in Europe—other pro-democracy leaders are reexamining their aid strategies and engagement approaches. (Kent 2025). Countries are also seeking new alliances that may not initially appear aligned with traditional democratic ideals but could be influenced to foster internal revitalization of democratic norms. For example, new reengagement efforts have emerged between the United Kingdom and the Mnangagwa regime. The United Kingdom's ambassador to Zimbabwe, Peter Vowles, has adopted a less vocal stance on political issues and human rights abuses, following the example of his predecessor, Catriona Lang, who emphasized that trade is the most crucial aspect of the relationship. Laing supported the 2017 coup, arguing that Mnangagwa would be suitable for business

(Tendi, M., and Dendere, C., 2025). Similarly, Vowles has been actively promoting stronger trade relations, especially in the mining sector. He expressed this new focus clearly at the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair (ZITF) 2025: “For us, as the United Kingdom ... we are doubling down on trade. We are working harder to increase Zimbabwe’s capacity to export to the UK, to Europe, and globally.” (The Herald 2025) And in May 2025, Zimbabwe’s Finance Minister, Mthuli Ncube, met with Lord Ray Collins, the U.K.’s Minister for Africa, during the African Development Bank Annual Meetings in Côte d’Ivoire. Shortly after this meeting, it was announced that Collins would visit Zimbabwe—a first for a U.K. minister in nearly a decade. This visit followed the U.K.’s announcement that it would remove four ZANU PF-affiliated individuals, including two ministers and two security chiefs, from its sanctions list (eNCA 2025).

Analysts expressed concern, however, that these actions were motivated more by strategic interests in Zimbabwe’s minerals than by a commitment to democratic values (Matiashe 2025). This announcement has bolstered ZANU PF, which has made lifting sanctions and rejoining the Commonwealth a central theme of its campaign. Upon arriving in Harare, Collins stressed that the U.K.’s engagement would now focus on “our partnership for economic growth, from trade and investment to energy and climate,” as stated in a post on X (@LordCollins June 11, 2025). The U.K.’s pledged investment of slightly over \$1 billion in Zimbabwe’s mining industry is modest compared with Russia’s and China’s contributions (Ndlovu 2025). However, it is significant because it indicates a change in tone from a major human rights ally. The Mnangagwa regime welcomed Collins’s visit as a positive step in their reengagement efforts. Additional evidence of the U.K.’s shift in tone is that Collins did not meet with civil society leaders, including Nelson Chamisa, the opposition leader.

In December 2025, the Swedish government, known for its commitment to democracy support, announced that it would close its embassy in Zimbabwe, citing the need to focus on security issues in Europe and budget reallocations. The Swedish government emphasized that, although it is reducing its diplomatic presence,

it will continue to collaborate on “sustainable mining and human rights.” (Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe 2025) Sweden is not the only country shifting its strategy to combine trade interests and human rights. At the December 2025 signing of the peace accord between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the United States, President Trump said the U.S. was eager to support peace initiatives that would give his country access to minerals and increase wealth (Okafor 2025). While other leaders might not be as blatant, it is increasingly evident that trade, investment, and human rights promotion are now tied. At the 2025 European Union-African Union summit, the EU president, Ursula von der Leyen, said that Europe was committed to investment on a win-win basis. She argued that Europe was a better trade partner for Africa because it combines mining with investment in local markets (von der Leyen 2025).

It is clear from these examples that many Western countries are moving from traditional diplomacy to a focus on commercial diplomacy. While I see great benefits in greater trade engagement, prominent pro-democracy donors like Sweden should be encouraged to make slow, gradual shifts, as sudden cuts to aid will also hurt fledgling democratic efforts. There is a need for nuanced approaches in countries where democracy is already weakened and trade alone may not suffice. Pro-democracy activists in Western nations must consider issues related to Foreign Direct Investment in mining such as human rights, labor protections for artisanal miners, and environmental safeguards. They should also demonstrate that unchecked corruption will weaken both trade relations and human rights outcomes.

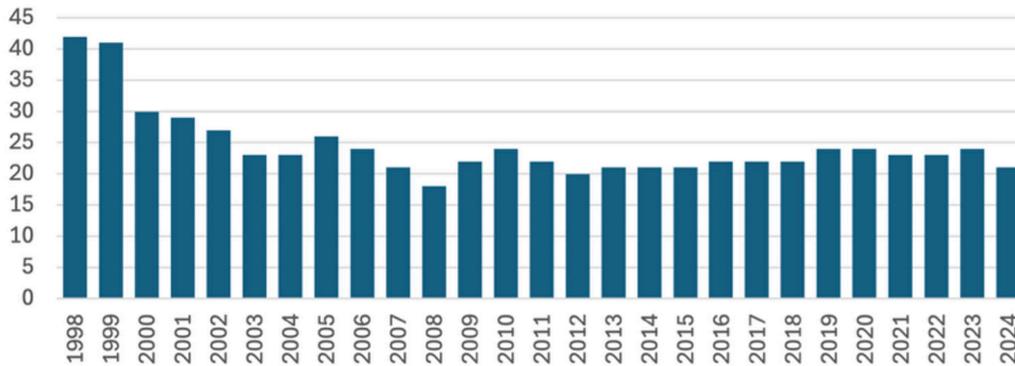
FIGHTING CORRUPTION

The relationship between corruption and democracy promotion is complex; however, countries with weaker democratic systems tend to have higher levels of corruption. The countries ranked in the bottom 25 most corrupt by the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) are also among the worst human rights offenders in Freedom House rankings. Zimbabwe falls into both categories, with a CPI score of 21/100 and a Freedom House score of 25/100 (World Population Review 2024;

Freedom House Report 2025). Corruption has a long history in Zimbabwean politics. See Figure 1 below, which shows that Zimbabwe's CPI scores have grad-

ually declined. In addition, some estimates suggest that the country has lost over \$100 billion to corruption since independence (Perryer 2024).

FIGURE 1
Zimbabwe Corruption Perception Index score, 1998-2024



Source: Transparency International
Note: CPI was measured on a scale of 0-10 until 2011, after which the scale changed to 0-100. Scores between 1998 and 2011 have been multiplied by 10 to match CPI scores after 2012.

Thus, since 1980, development gains have been severely undermined by corruption sanctioned by government officials. Major scandals since 1980 include the 1987 ZISCO scandal, which is estimated to have cost the country \$100 million; the 1988 Willowgate Scandal; and the 1994 war veterans ZW 5,000 payout scandal, which is often credited with crushing the economy and being the root of Zimbabwe's contemporary financial crisis (Mwatwara and Mujere 2015, Mashingaidze 2020). Corruption deepened after the discovery of diamonds in the early 2010s. In 2016, Robert Mugabe claimed that Zimbabwe had lost \$15 billion in diamond revenue due to corruption (Peter 2016). Although Mugabe's claim was never verified, most Zimbabweans and the world believed it. The country was producing millions of carats of diamonds, but there was little evidence of development, especially when compared to neighboring Botswana, which experienced significant reductions in poverty thanks to diamond wealth (Scarpa 2019).

Government-sanctioned corruption is at an all-time high under the Mnangagwa regime, which has been described as a kleptocracy marked by excessive patronage and nepotism (Magadhi 2025). Companies

linked to Mr. Mnangagwa's closest allies, including rising ZANU PF political star Kudakwashe Tagwirei and businessman Wicknell Chivayo, are alleged to have been given millions in government tenders. The self-proclaimed ZANU PF millionaire, Chivayo, has spent over \$9 million on luxury cars and cash gifts to religious leaders and artists who praise ZANU PF (Nyoka 2025). Tagwirei, a fuel mogul, and his wife, along with Mnangagwa and the first lady, were added to the United States' sanctions list for corruption (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2024). A 2023 documentary, *Gold Mafia Investigation*, uncovered an extensive network of corruption in the country that was used to launder over \$10 million in mineral wealth (Al Jazeera Investigative Unit 2023). The documentary reported that government-connected individuals collaborate with gangs, mainly in the Middle East, to facilitate gold smuggling, selling, and laundering funds back into Zimbabwe. According to Zimbabwean law, only the central bank is authorized to sell gold. However, due to the government's financial difficulties, they work with smugglers.

Engaging in more official trade with wealthier countries could allow a larger share of gold to be traded

legally, increasing government revenue. Informal trading in valuable minerals such as gold and diamonds often facilitates corruption, but this can be mitigated through formalization. Allowing Zimbabwe to sell earth minerals, such as gold, through formal channels also reduces corruption. While this won't eliminate all mineral looting, it may motivate the government to follow international standards. Protecting journalists who report on corruption scandals will also help establish new norms. Fortunately for human rights supporters in Zimbabwe, most global investors, including those from China, are also concerned about corruption and its impact on their investments (Yuan et al., 2021; Tawiah et al., 2022).

Mnangagwa's weak response to corruption is fueling rumors of a rift between him and his vice president, retired General Chiwenga, the coup architect who ousted Mugabe and paved the way for Mnangagwa's presidency. Chiwenga has been very vocal in his opposition to corruption and has accused people closely tied to the regime, whom he broadly calls "zviganananda" (meaning individuals who have benefitted from state corruption), of pocketing billions at the expense of suffering millions (Ndoro 2025). Mnangagwa is aware that perceptions that his government and allies are corrupt are hurting the national image. ZANU PF is getting significant pushback against their narrative that sanctions imposed by Western countries are the cause of Zimbabwe's poverty, with many experts now saying corruption is the root cause of problems. There have been a few arrests of individuals accused of corruption, for example, former Health Minister Moyo was sacked over a \$60 million COVID-19-related scandal (Chingono 2020), and two individuals formerly closely aligned with the ruling party were sentenced for defrauding the government in a \$7 million scheme where they promised to deliver goats for rural development and never did so (B-Metro, December 3, 2025). Still, some observers of Zimbabwean politics suspected of stealing even larger sums have not been arrested, a practice often referred to as "catch and release." (Embassy of the United States in Zimbabwe Report 2025)

To improve transparency in corruption arrests, it is crucial to bolster anti-corruption civil society organizations and independent media. Independent outlets

are often the first to uncover corruption stories. When these stories spread on social media and other public channels, they typically compel government action, even if only symbolic. Since corruption is deeply embedded, addressing it effectively demands a comprehensive, multi-layered strategy to curb illicit financial flows. Zimbabwe's democratic future depends heavily on how effectively the government and citizens combat corruption. In this effort, the diaspora can play a crucial role in fighting corruption. The following section will explore how diaspora investment and involvement can strengthen democracy.

LEVERAGING DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

Countries worldwide are increasingly implementing policies to leverage remittances and diaspora engagement in the home country (Dahanni 2025). Zimbabwe has a significant diaspora or immigrant population. Since 2000, the country has experienced a significant exodus, with over 25% of the adult population leaving the country (Crush and Tevera, 2010, p. 10; Dendere, C., 2026). This rate is notably higher than global migration trends (Seo 2016). The sharp increase in migration can be linked to the world's growing interconnectedness, as people seek better jobs and try to escape war and poverty. In 2023, net migration from Zimbabwe was 6 people per 1,000 residents, and in 2024, 58% of Zimbabweans told Afrobarometer they had considered leaving the country, with 34% saying they had considered it "a lot." (Masunungure and Moyo-Nyede 2025)

Nearly 3% of the world's population lives outside their countries of origin, and the significance of remittances—the money immigrants send to their loved ones back home—is attracting increasing academic attention (Adams and Cuecuecha 2013; Cliffe 2009; Hassan and Rahman 2015; Meseguer and Burgess 2014). Remittances and migrants' transnational activities have been shown to positively influence democratization in countries such as Mexico, Ghana, and the Philippines (Kessler and Rother 2016; Escribà-Folch et al 2015). In 2023, the World Bank estimated that remittances to developing countries exceeded \$656 billion, which is "equivalent to the GDP of Belgium." Remittances continue to play a crucial role in helping families

escape poverty in developing nations (Ratha et al 2024). In 2022, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe noted a 23% decline in Foreign Direct Investment since 2014, amounting to \$421 million. In the same year, however, remittances more than doubled to \$1.5 billion (Mbiba and Mupfumira 2022). For 2025, the Zimbabwean government expected remittances to range between \$2.7 and \$3.7 billion, with much of this income coming from Zimbabweans investing in large-scale business projects (Ndlovu 2025). These figures reflect only officially reported transfers from countries where data is available; the actual growth in remittance transfers is likely higher.

Given that remittances are now outpacing foreign direct investment, policy should be oriented toward encouraging diaspora investment, following examples from other African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, which have seen some success with their strategies. For example, the Nigerian bond allows diaspora investors to receive returns on funds invested in large-scale projects in the home country (Adenkule et al 2020; Khayreddine et al 2024). The Zimbabwean diaspora is already engaged in this type of political investment, but on a much smaller scale. Pro-ZANU PF diasporans use their connections to the ruling party to promote the renewal of U.K.-Zimbabwe trade relations, often urging ZANU PF to commit to fighting corruption. Meanwhile, pro-opposition groups actively support prioritizing human rights in any new trade agreements or in renewing relations with the government (Mbiba 2012; van Leeuwen 2025).

Zimbabweans living abroad already stay active in politics back home by engaging in online conversations, encouraging their families to vote, and lobbying their new governments on issues of political importance, such as voting and human rights in Zimbabwe (Mutambarese 2022). The latest threats to migrants, not just in the United States but in other nations, have bolstered the diaspora's active engagement with homeland politics (Jakobson et al 2023). In South Africa, anti-immigrant groups like Dudula have used violent tactics to prevent immigrants, including children, from accessing welfare services such as health care and education (Nhemachena et al 2004). These actions have created fear among immigrant communities.

Social media discussions in anonymous groups reveal a growing trend of people planning to return home due to anti-immigrant violence, even in places like Australia, where right-wing militias have attacked innocent civilians (Bucci et al 2025).

Beyond politics, other actors are thinking along the same lines. For example, billionaire philanthropist Tsitsi Masiyiwa and other wealthy African philanthropists have come together to create a new platform, RemitHope, with the goal of "harnessing sustainable development on the continent." (Ndunge 2025) Ideally, organic initiatives from the diaspora, especially community-based ones, will be less prone to corruption and better equipped to tackle urgent issues, thereby delivering the greatest positive impact. The diaspora often recognizes critical needs and has the necessary financial resources, but lacks formal structures to act. Collaboration among international players, including diplomats, civil society members, and the diaspora, can improve diaspora engagement in Zimbabwe.

PROVIDING FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Investments from international actors and the diaspora can promote democracy when paired with targeted funding and the empowerment of non-partisan civil society, including journalism and youth involvement programs. The Mnangagwa regime has actively targeted activists and jailed several for dissenting opinions (Dendere and Taodzera, 2023). Mnangagwa initially promised "participatory decision making" and the protection of rights to freedom of expression and association, but these promises have not been fulfilled (Zvoushe 2023). A common saying among the youth is, "In Zimbabwe, there might be freedom of speech, but there is no guarantee of it," and even sharing a tweet about publicly witnessed events can result in unfair imprisonment (Banda 2021). In 2025, Mnangagwa signed the controversial the Private Voluntary Organizations Amendment Act (PVO), which severely restricts freedom of association and expression and extends government powers to deregister or strip NGOs of their assets (Human Rights Watch 2025). The government claimed that the law is needed to curb the financing of terrorism. In reality, the government is

using this bill to suppress citizen activism.

Starting in the late 1990s, Zimbabwe's activism scene saw what Chipato (2019) called the NGO-ization of civic space and protests. This term refers to the process of transforming citizen protest movements into more structured organizations. By the 2000s, these groups had become closely linked with the opposition, partly because donor funding for the opposition was often funneled through NGOs. These relationships undermined democratic spaces in several ways, notably by allowing the government to weaken both civil society and the opposition, since it viewed funding flows to NGOs as direct support for the opposition and thus an affront to state sovereignty. Contemporary civil society is deeply fragmented; fractures within the opposition movement have destabilized many organizations, and funding cuts have exacerbated the situation. Donors have also expressed concerns about widespread corruption in civil society and have used this as a justification for reducing funding to Zimbabwean NGOs (Chipato 2019; Adeh 2004). As mentioned earlier, implementing strategies to fight corruption will bolster democratic initiatives throughout all sectors.

USAID was the single largest funder of civil society organizations, and recent cuts and freezes in funding have paralyzed most of that work. Most polling data on CSOs indicate that most have less than a year of funding remaining for their activities (Friedman 2025). Civil society organizations in Western countries should continue to advocate for democracy-promotion funding, notwithstanding concerns about mismanagement. Without access to substantial and regular funding, democracy promotion will die. The global rise of authoritarianism places all democracies, including the United States, at risk. United States-based civil society organizations and their counterparts in other Western countries must continue speaking up against repression in places like Zimbabwe. International advocacy both in terms of funding and vocal support matters because Zimbabwean leaders are concerned about their international public image: The Zimbabwean government has been running a pro-trade campaign, stating that "Zimbabwe is open for business." Their government website claims, "Zimbabwe is also OPEN to receive all visitors and/or tourists to experience this

great nation." (Government of Zimbabwe n.d.)

At the local level, available funds must be channeled to strengthen local civil society organizations and encourage organizations to find creative ways to combine their objectives. For example, civil society organizations that work on preserving election integrity can also expand their initiatives into civic education. In Zimbabwe, civic education initiatives focus on understanding the Constitution, individual rights, and civic duties such as voting and volunteering. Supporting civic education initiatives aligns with the government's patriotic education plans. Sanborn and Thyne (2014) argue that investing in education is as essential as investing in economic, social, and international factors for democratization in authoritarian states. Young people are the demographic most likely to engage in public uprisings and protests, as we have seen in recent protests in Kenya and across Africa. In Zimbabwe, young voters are the least likely to vote, with their political participation hindered by restrictive regime policies that curb freedoms of expression and assembly (Musarurwa 2018). Democracy is more likely to survive if young people believe in preserving the system. Initiatives in Zimbabwe, however, often leave young people out, even when they claim to center youth voices (Pswarayi 2023). External actors could monitor to ensure that local organizations are honoring the pro-democracy objectives they set out in their funding applications and including youth voices.

Despite serious issues arising from harsh government laws and reports of corruption within civil society, donors should still be encouraged to reverse the cuts to democracy initiatives or providing other support such as granting Zimbabweans political asylum, providing safe houses, and/or covering the legal costs of activists unjustly detained. Such cases often take a long time to resolve, resulting in high legal expenses. In Zimbabwe, organizations like Human Rights Watch and Human Rights Lawyers handle a wide range of cases with limited resources, competing against state lawyers who have better access to funding.

Donors might also consider separating support for the opposition from that for nonpartisan organizations, such as those working on elections. The government

might be more receptive to this approach, especially if donors collaborate with the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) to provide technical training for election agents. The ZEC is often rightfully accused of bolstering fraud; however, this is only part of the problem. Scholars have also found the ZEC to be very nuanced in that while the organization as a whole faces accusations of corruption at the higher level or during election ZEC ordinary officers are very professional but need more capacity support. For example, Nshindano's comparison of electoral management bodied in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe found that Zimbabwe and South African bodies have more, "have developed more robust systems with judicial and parliamentary oversight, limiting executive discretion and enhancing the impartiality of their EMB" (54). Many election failures occur long before election day and stem from poor training for those managing the election process. For example, most of their systems, such as voter registration, are still handled manually. Digitizing electoral systems will speed up processes, leading to better voter registration outcomes and freeing officers to focus more on voter education.

Other independent organizations, such as the Zimbabwe Election Support Network, a coalition of 37 nonpartisan organizations, conduct pre- and post-election surveys and independent tabulation. Still, they were forced to reduce their activities during the 2018 and 2023 elections due to a lack of funding. Their independent tabulation efforts and election research are a vital resource for citizens and academics. If donors supported both ZEC and independent groups like ZESN through capacity-building, their investments would lead to more transparent elections and might even reduce incidences of electoral violence.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's ongoing struggle to deepen its democratic institutions is part of a broader global pattern. Recent findings from the 2025 Freedom House report reveal that, over the past 20 years, the state of democracy worldwide has experienced notable advances, but significant setbacks and backsliding have been witnessed. In 2005, 83 countries demonstrated improve-

ments in democratic governance; however, by 2025, this number had decreased to just 34, while at least 60 nations experienced declines in their democratic processes (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe, 2025). Countries such as Zimbabwe face persistent challenges in holding free and fair elections and safeguarding human rights, with government authorities often violating these rights.

In Zimbabwe, democracy promotion encounters numerous formidable obstacles. The most significant among these are the entrenched militarization of political life and pervasive government corruption. Zimbabwe's political landscape has long been characterized by militarized influence; however, under President Mnangagwa, this militarization has become even more overt and pronounced. Years of international isolation—especially from global organizations—have further undermined democratic development, as a lack of accountability and transparency has allowed corruption to flourish unchecked. Both horizontal accountability (between branches of government) and vertical accountability (to citizens) have weakened considerably.

Despite these challenges, the Mnangagwa regime demonstrates a clear desire for re-engagement with the international community, as evidenced by its repeated assurances that Zimbabwe is open for business. To advance democracy, efforts should focus on re-engaging with global trade partners, notably by legalizing and promoting the sale of natural resources. Additionally, increased political and economic engagement by the Zimbabwean diaspora could serve as a vital catalyst; leveraging their influence can raise awareness of corruption issues and advocate more effectively for human rights. Strengthening civil society organizations through investment and support will also be essential in building resilient democratic institutions. Collectively, these strategies aim to create stronger channels of accountability, transparency, and citizen participation, thereby fostering a more vibrant and inclusive democracy in Zimbabwe.

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