



Zimbabwe — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[formerly known as Southern Rhodesia]

10/29/1889 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom]: At the beginning of the 20th century, Zimbabwe (Mashonaland and Matabeleland) was administered by the British South Africa Company (BSAC) as Southern Rhodesia as a British colony. This arrangement followed the Rudd Concessions, a treaty signed under pressure by Lobengula, King of Ndebele (Matabele) in 1888, granting Cecil Rhodes, founder of the BSAC, exclusive control over metal and mineral rights, as well as commercial and legal powers in exchange for British protection, payments, and weapons. Based on this treaty, Cecil Rhodes received a charter from the British government on 10/29/1889 allowing him to establish the BSAC, modelled on the British and Dutch East India companies (Roberts 1986).¹ The BSAC had the authority to raise its police force, create settlements, and govern Zimbabwe on behalf of Britain. In 1895, the BSAC officially renamed the region as Southern Rhodesia. The Southern Rhodesian order-in-council of 1898 in the British government established the colony's governance and remained in effect until 1923 when the BSAC's rule ended, and Southern Rhodesia gained self-government. Moreover, it was a compromise between business and imperial interests, resulting in a settler colony characterized by land seizures, segregation in governance, denying African political participation (Mlambo 2014, Raftopoulos/Mlambo 2009). On 10/10/1898, an all-white Southern Rhodesian legislative council was introduced as the governing body of the BSAC. Legislative council elections were held on 04/17/1899, marking the first election in the colony. The council consisted of at least ten voting members: the Southern Rhodesia administrator, five members nominated by the BSAC, and four members elected by registered voters. The right to vote was limited to British subjects, male, aged 21 years or older, literate, and meeting specific financial requirements. No political parties existed at the time, and candidates ran independently.² According to LIED, only multiparty legislative elections were held during this period. No executive elections were present. In 1919 restricted suffrage was introduced (for whites only).³ However, no universal suffrage and voting rights for the native population were present. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and not really present according to V-Dem's PCLI. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

10/01/1923 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy]/Start Right-Wing (Racial) Autocracy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy]: On this date, the British government formally assumed control of Southern Rhodesia from the BSAC and integrated it into the British Empire after a referendum on 10/27/1922 (Day 1969). In the referendum, only sixty members of the 900.000 African population were eligible to vote. The 1923 constitution granted significant self-government to the Southern Rhodesian prime minister, but foreign policy and specific legislation affecting Africans to conditions or restrictions not applying to Europeans were subject to British government veto (Martin/Johnson 1981, Day 1969, Mlambo 2014). Moreover, a government was established under a British governor, assisted by an executive council and a legislature (McCracken 1986, Steinberg 1966). First general elections under the new constitution took place on 04/29/1924.⁴ However, only white settlers formed the government, excluding any native population from exercising power.⁵ On

08/01/1953, the British government established the Central African Federation (CAF) comprising Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland. In the preceding Southern Rhodesian federation referendum on 04/09/1953, only 429 Africans were eligible to vote (Martin/Johnson 1981). As it was not a sovereign entity, the constitutional status of Southern Rhodesia as a self-governing entity was not affected.⁶ The federation had a two-tier system of government in which federal administrative posts, such as governor and parliament, were replicated at the territorial level. While the territorial government had autonomy over local matters, including African affairs, the federal government was responsible for defense and foreign policy. African representation in the federal assembly was severely limited, and they were allocated only six representatives, two for each territory, of the 35 seats (Raftopoulos/Mlambo 2009). On 09/12/1957, the Southern Rhodesian National Congress (SRANC), the first nationalist African party, was formed but banned again in 1959. The same year, Prime Minister Edgar Whitehead declared a state of emergency, and 500 leaders and members of the SANC were arrested (Day 1969, Martin/Johnson 1981). The SANC was succeeded by the National Democratic Party (NDP) on 01/01/1960, advocating for African rights, one man, one vote, and a constitutional conference. However, the NDP was banned in 1961 and succeeded by the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) (Raftopoulos/Mlambo 2009). On 07/26/1961, a new constitution was approved in a referendum. It gave Southern Rhodesia almost complete internal autonomy (Crawford 2006). The new electoral system purportedly widened the franchise for Africans by creating a 'B Roll' with lower qualifications. It also provided for an enlargement of the Rhodesian parliament from 30 to 65 members, 15 of whom would be elected by B Roll voters (Raftopoulos/Mlambo 2009). General elections under the new constitution were held in 1962. However, they were boycotted by many black Africans many of whom did not qualify to vote under the constitution anyway.⁷ The federation was dissolved on 12/31/1963 and on 10/24/1964, the country was renamed Rhodesia. From then on, the country was de facto independent (Steinberg 1966). On 11/11/1965 a unilateral declaration of independence by Southern Rhodesia followed. In 1964, Ian Smith became Prime Minister and led the white minority government, a position he held until 1979. Under him, independence was declared, and the Bush War took place.⁸ On 03/02/1970 a new constitution was adopted. General elections were held on 04/10/1970 in which the Rhodesian Front Party won 50 of the 66 seats. On 05/28/1970 the new bicameral Parliament was opened by the president, replacing the unicameral Legislative Assembly.⁹ Britain, however, declared the regime and independence as illegal (Paxton 1980). In 1978 universal suffrage was introduced.¹⁰ A draft constitution was accepted by the white electorate in a referendum in 1979. In April 1979 general elections were held under a restricted 'whites-only' franchise for the 72 black seats in the 100-seat Parliament. The United African National Council (UANC) won 51 of the 72 seats and Bishop Abel Muzorewa became prime minister of Rhodesia-Zimbabwe on 06/01/1979. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held, which contradicts the findings of LIED, because it only classifies multiparty legislative elections up to 1965. During the entire time the elections were not competitive following LIED. Between 1923 and 1928, 1933 and 1953, 1958 to 1965 and 1970 to 1979 the elections were somewhat clean. For the remaining years the electoral cleanliness is considered ambiguous. According to V-Dem's EF&FI the elections were free and fair from 1923 to 1927. For the following five years somewhat freedom and fairness are scored. Between 1933 and 1953 the overall conditions were free and fair back again before they turned back to somewhat free and fair outcomes until 1957. In a period of seven years the country achieved free and fair elections again. Since 1965 the elections have been somewhat free and fair. Nevertheless, no political liberties were achieved during this regime period, therefore the classification as electoral oligarchy can be confirmed (LIED). Per FH, from 1972 to 1977, the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. As classified by FH for 1978, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. Per FH's scoring for 1979, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. For 1923 and 1924, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as ambiguous regarding the status of political liberties. Between 1925 and 1963, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are not really present. For remainder the given timeframe, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is also classified by us as

indicating that political liberties are absent. Polity5 doesn't entail data for this period. Until 1963, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive. For the remaining years, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating moderate constraints on the executive.

12/21/1979 End Right-Wing (Racial) Autocracy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: On this date the Lancaster House Agreement was signed.¹¹ This concluded the constitutional conference in Lancaster House between the government of Zimbabwe Rhodesia (led by Bishop Muzowera), the British Government and the Patriotic Front (led by Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, the leaders of the rebel fractions ZANU and ZAPU) to end the Rhodesian Bush War. The agreement consisted of Zimbabwe's temporary return to colonial status under the British, which were to oversee the next election as well as the ceasefire. As the return to colonialism was considered as purely temporary, we argue that this regime period is better classified as a non-electoral transitional regime, than being a case of indirect colonial rule. As the regime change itself is clearly marked by negotiation between different groups (both internally and internationally), we consider it a negotiated transition and not a foreign intervention. Elections took place on 02/14/1980 and 03/04/1980. The newly formed parliament (House of Assembly) was designed to consist of 100 members. Of these, 80 would be elected proportionally by province, with all adult citizens participating in a common roll. Additionally, 20 members would be elected in single-member constituencies, but only by white voters on a separate roll.¹² The result was a victory of Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) won 57 of the 80 black seats (Paxton 1980). Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front won all 20 of the white roll seats, with most of its candidates running unopposed. Increasing tensions between the black majority and the white minority led to civil war. The elections were clearly not fair. The electoral regime still had a bias towards the white minority. Conversely, onlookers noted extensive violence and coercion against non-white voters by ZANU combatants and supporters. The trend of violence against dissenters has persisted ever since (Kriger 2003: 311, Norman 2004: 84-87, 95-96, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 109). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. For these elections universal suffrage was present for the first time per LIED. According to FH, a score of 6 to 7 for the year 1980 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. For the period under consideration, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as ambiguous regarding the status of political liberties.

04/18/1980 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Electoral Autocracy: Zimbabwe became an independent state under the rule of ZANU and Mugabe. Its independence was recognized by the United Kingdom. One of the most contentious issues during this period was land redistribution. Land was a key source of tension, with many white-owned farms still in the hands of a few landowners, while the majority of the population had limited access to arable land. Among the earliest and most egregious displays of the new regime's brutality were the Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland, claiming approximately 20,000 lives, predominantly from the Ndebele minority.¹³ The formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, by a wide range of civic movements, led to the first opposition party that posed a serious threat to ZANU-PF rule.¹⁴ The outcomes of successive elections during the period from 2000 to 2018 were highly contested, while the elections themselves were marked by gross human rights violations (particularly in 2002 and 2008) and election irregularities. The 2013 election was characterized by more subtle forms of intimidation and violence.¹⁵ On 11/06/2017, Mugabe dismissed Mnangagwa Emmerson as vice-president, in a move that positioned First Lady Grace Mugabe to succeed the aging president.¹⁶ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. According to LIED no competitive elections were held during the entire time. Until 1985, not really cleanliness outcomes are scored. Between 1986 and 1989, no cleanliness was given. From 1990 to 1999 the elections changed back to not really cleanliness. Since 2000 the country's elections are classified as not clean (V-Dem's CEI). Regarding the overall elections conditions by V-Dem's EF&FI, they are classified as ambiguous between 1980 and 1999. From 2000 to 2007 no real

freedom and fairness is scored. Between 2008 and 2012 the overall conditions are stated as not free and fair. Since 2013 the overall conditions are classified as ambiguous. According to FH, a score of 6 to 7 for the year 1980 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. As per FH, for 1981 and 1982, the country receives a score of 8, which we interpret as falling into the rather not free category. As classified by FH from 1983 to 1998, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. According to FH's classification for the years 1999 to 2014, a score between 11 and 14 makes the country not free, which we also place in the not free category. Per FH's evaluation for 2015 and 2016, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. As classified by FH for 2017, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. Besides, according to LIED political liberties were absent for the entire time. V-Dem's PCLI indicates them as ambiguous until 1999, from 2010 to 2015 and in 2017. For the other years they were not really present. According to Polity5, from 1980 to 1982, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 3, between substantial limitations and executive parity or subordination. From 1983 to 1986, the executive's constraints were categorized as Intermediate Category 2, between slight and substantial limitations. From 1987 to 2000, the executive encountered slight limitations on decision-making power imposed by other institutions. From 2001 to 2008, the executive faced weak constraints, classified as Intermediate Category 1 between unlimited authority and slight limitations. From 2009 to 2012, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints. From 2013 to 2018, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. Until 1988, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. From 1988 to 1999, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. From 2000 to 2002 and from 2009 to 2016, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating moderate constraints on the executive. For the remaining years, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

11/21/2017 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: On this date, following nationwide protests in 2016, a military coup took place. It forced Mugabe to step down after he dismissed his Vice-President, and he was replaced by Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa was also a leading member of ZANU-PF and a longtime ally of Mugabe.¹⁷ However, his appointment was not in accordance with the constitution.¹⁸ Since the military launched a coup but did not take over the new regime is classified as a non-electoral transitional regime and not a military autocracy.¹⁹ According to LIED, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period. This, however, is contradicted by our observations. Per FH's evaluation for 2018, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. In this timeframe, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is categorized by us as ambiguous regarding the status of political liberties, indicating an intermediate state between present and absent.

07/30/2018 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date, general elections were held. The 2018 elections were historic, as they were the first ones in which Mugabe did not participate. It saw the ZANU-PF getting control of the parliament (again), and Emmerson Mnangagwa victorious in the presidential election beating the young MDC-A leader, Nelson Chamisa.²⁰ The elections showed competitive campaigning and peaceful voting but fell short in key areas. There were deficiencies in legal recourse, equal suffrage, and voter registration. The pre-election environment was marred by biased state media, misuse of state resources, and an electoral commission lacking impartiality. Final results lacked transparency and errors were abundant. Post-election, political freedoms were restricted, security forces used excessive force, and human rights abuses occurred. As classified by FH for 2018 and 2019, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. According to FH's classification for the rest of the assessed regime period, a score between 11 and 14 makes the country not free, which we also place in the not free

category. In addition to that LIED confirms that political liberties were absent. Following V-Dem's PCLI their presence was ambiguous in 2018, 2019 and 2023 and changed to not really present from 2020 to 2022. From 2019 to 2022, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. In 2023, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. These shortcomings mean the 2018 elections did not meet international standards (Brok 2018). The current government has predominantly upheld the legal, administrative, and security structures inherited from the Mugabe era. Despite an initial phase of enhancement, it has intensified repression to solidify its control.²¹ In the general elections on 08/23/2023 Mnangagwa was reelected as president.²² The elections were overshadowed by claims of intimidation, electoral irregularities, and violence. Persistent issues, including the need for electoral reforms and unfair voter registration processes, remained unaddressed.²³ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED affirms that no competitiveness for the elections is scored. In addition, no cleanliness is given, according to V-Dem's CEI. Moreover, since 2018 the elections are not really free and fair. Polity5 doesn't entail data for this period.

Electoral Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Baumhögger 1999, Tendi 2010)

Notes

¹ <https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/queen-victoria-britain-approves-charter-rhodes>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1924_Southern_Rhodesian_general_election

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/British-South-Africa-Company#ref29434>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federation_of_Rhodesia_and_Nyasaland

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1962_Southern_Rhodesian_general_election

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Smith

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament_of_Zimbabwe

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lancaster_House_Agreement

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1980_Southern_Rhodesian_general_election

¹³ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ZWE>

¹⁴ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ZWE>

¹⁵ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ZWE>

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmerson_Mnangagwa

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmerson_Mnangagwa

¹⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zimbabwe#History>

¹⁹ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ZWE>

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_Zimbabwean_general_election; <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ZWE>

²¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe>

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Zimbabwean_general_election

²³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-world/2024>

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