

Political Abductions in Zimbabwe: 2000 to 2016

9th March 2016

On 9th March 2015, journalist and activist Itai Dzamara was abducted by unidentified men in a white twin cab truck. He has now been missing for a year.

Overview

- Abduction is widely used as a form of intimidation, control, and punishment in Zimbabwe, particularly during times of political instability.
- Over the past sixteen years 5894 abductions have been comprehensively documented.
- The period between the March 2008 election and the June 2008 run-off saw the most dramatic number of abductions (nearly 3 000 in June alone).
- Abduction is invariably accompanied by severe assault or torture. (10% of victims experience severe to life-threatening torture. 70% of victims experience moderate to severe torture).
- 81 people have been confirmed dead as a result of abduction and torture. However, there have also been over 300 reports by victims of relatives and neighbours who were abducted and either disappeared or were discovered dead.
- The agents of abduction and torture include the ZANU PF structures (Youth, war veterans and supporters) working closely with the state security apparatus (the Zimbabwe National Army, the Central Intelligence Organisation, the Zimbabwe Republic Police).
- There has been very limited legal traction for addressing abduction: the police are uninterested in official reports, the courts are slow to process cases, and when cases are successful, it is difficult to extract damages payment from the perpetrators.
- The human structures for abduction and torture in communities have not been dismantled, and can be easily reactivated in moments of political crisis.
- The places of torture to which the victims are taken are well known by the communities and include ZANU PF party offices, homes of perpetrators, local schools and government offices and open spaces which are commandeered by the abductors.
- The names of the abductors are known by the victims, in contrast to abductions elsewhere, indicating the systemic nature of impunity for perpetrators of political violence and torture.
- The victims of abduction and their relatives continue to live under constant fear and intimidation from their perpetrators.

Introduction

Forced disappearances and abductions are widely used as a form of political punishment, control, and intimidation in Zimbabwe. Since 2000, when ZANU PF's hegemony was first substantively threatened by an increasingly popular opposition, ZANU PF operatives and state security agents have used abduction as one of many methods to reduce and threaten opposition support. In the past sixteen years, 5 894 abductions have been comprehensively documented. The real number is inestimably higher, as overt and covert intimidation inhibits the reporting of incidents. The vast majority of abduction victims in Zimbabwe are severely tortured. Victims, their families, and their communities are profoundly affected by the psychological and physical trauma of abductions.

This report does not cover the many other acts of violence, arrest and intimidation of activists and opposition party organisers. The Zimbabwe government has used the law to criminalise political opposition and dismantle opposition structures. Readers should also note that the statistics for abductions do not cover myriad of incidents where people were beaten without being abducted. Abductions are simply one element of the Zimbabwe government's arsenal of repressive tactics to generate fear and inhibit political plurality in the population of Zimbabwe.

In January 2008, I came home from church and went to bed. At around midnight, a group of ZANU PF youths came to the house. My mother answered the door. She told them I had gone to the growth point to sell vegetables, but they smashed the door down. They found me hiding under the bed and I was hauled out of the house. There were a lot of people outside holding sticks and other weapons and shouting abusive things. I was beaten all over my body. We went around the village collecting other MDC supporters. All of us were taken to the ZANU PF base. At the base we were threatened with death if we told anyone about the incident or sought medical treatment. We were forced to sing ZANU PF songs, chant slogans, and dance. I managed to sneak out of the base the next evening. I escaped to Harare, but returned quickly because the ZANU PF youths kept on harassing my mother. When I returned to the village, I surrendered myself to the ZANU PF base. They asked me why I had run away. I told them I ran away because of what they are doing. They interrogated me about what we do at our MDC meetings, but I refused to tell them. They kept me at the base for a week. I was beaten every day – on the palms of my hands and under my feet. I was released because I got sick. When ZANU PF lost in our ward in the March 2008 election, I was subjected to harassment and intimidation. The ZANU PF youth also stole our maize and three goats, for food for the base, and the Village Headman confiscated our irrigation equipment. Mazowe, 2008

Abduction is a Crime against Humanity: the Legal Instruments protecting victims of abduction

The UN defines an enforced disappearance as when “persons are arrested, detained, or abducted against their will or otherwise deprived of their liberty by officials of different branches or levels of Government, or by organised groups or private individuals acting on behalf of, or with the support, direct or indirect, consent or acquiescence of the Government, followed by a refusal to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned or a refusal

to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty, which places such persons outside the protection of the law.”

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1 July 2002) and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (20 December 2006) state that, *“when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed at any civilian population, forced disappearance qualifies as a crime against humanity. As a crime against humanity, it is not subject to any direct statute of limitations”*.

Not only is enforced disappearance considered a crime against humanity on the international stage, but Zimbabwe’s own constitution also explicitly forbids the practice. In the new constitution, adopted in 2013, Chapter 4, Part 2, 49 states that *“every person has the right to personal liberty, which includes the right (a) not to be detained without trial; and (b) not to be deprived of their liberty arbitrarily or without cause.”* The constitution also affirms, in Chapter 4, Part 2, 53, that *“no person may be subjected to physical or psychological torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”*

The previous constitution also protected citizens from abduction. It stipulated that *“no person shall be deprived of his liberty save as may be authorised by law”* in Chapter III, 12, (1). In Chapter III, 15, (1) the constitution stipulated that *“no person may be subject to torture, or to inhuman or degrading or other such punishment.”*

The ZANU PF structures and the state security forces are acting in direct contravention of the Constitution when they abduct citizens, hold them for extended periods of time without legal jurisdiction, and torture them.

I was a Village Headman. During the night on 1 May 2008, I was abducted by ZANU PF militia and taken to their base. These militia had been sent by the Chief and the ZANU PF District Chairman. I was accused of making people in my area support MDC. I was beaten on the back and buttocks using thick wooden sticks. I was then stripped from being a Village Headman. I was told to attend the ZANU PF base meeting every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Centenary, May 2008

Who is abducted?

High profile abductions, such as the disappearance of activist Itai Dzamara in 2015 (still missing at the time of writing) or the three-month ordeal of Jestina Mukoko in 2008, receive significant national and international attention from press and advocacy groups. While prominent human rights activists and key members of the opposition parties live with the daily risk of abduction and torture, the vast majority of the abductions occur at a local level and are intended to dismantle local structures or intimidate the local community.

Some of these abductions are clearly targeted and pre-planned – local MDC polling agents and organisers are singled out both as punishment and in order to limit the MDC’s capacity

in the area. Locally respected figures, such as teachers and headmen, are targeted because they provide structure and leadership to the community. In communities that voted for the MDC, prominent local figures were targeted for having influenced their community “negatively”. Some abductions include torture with the aim of eliciting information – the victim is tortured until they surrender the names of local organisers. Many of the abductions are primarily punitive, with the long-term intention of intimidating the victim, their family, and their community. People are abducted and tortured as punishment for having voted incorrectly or for being members of opposition political parties. If the abductors are unable to locate the intended victim (many organisers hid themselves during peak periods of violence), the abductors then substitute the target’s spouse or parents for torture. Occasionally abductions are spontaneous – a person is seen in opposition regalia, or fails to recite the correct ZANU PF slogan to a group of ZANU PF youths, who then abduct and assault them as punishment.

As the primary aims of abduction are punishment and intimidation, many people are abducted more than once. Once they are known to be a “trouble-maker” or an opposition supporter, they face continued harassment. For instance, many of the people who were abducted and tortured for supporting the MDC in the witch-hunt following the 2002 elections were then abducted and tortured again in 2008. (This is not the only form of punishment: a person who has been singled out as a political threat will be denied access to local food and agricultural inputs).

ZANU PF called a meeting for our village in the bush. We were all forced to attend. The ZANU youth brigade had a list of MDC supporter’s names. My name was called out and I was ordered to lie on the ground. These youths took turns to kick and assault me on the back, the buttocks, and the soles of my feet. I tried to shield myself. After the meeting I was taken to the school, which was the torture base, where they made me chop firewood and clean. I escaped after two days, but stayed in the bush for security reasons. I only went home after the June run-off election. I did not report the case to the police or go to the clinic because the ZANU PF thugs threatened to kill anyone who reported them. Gokwe North, June 2008

ZANU PF and The State: the Abductors

The state security apparatus works closely with the ZANU PF structures to maintain the levels of intimidation and control across the country. Abductions are almost invariably carried out by a consortium of ZANU PF supporters, youth or militia and state actors – the police, military, and CIO. This conflation between the ruling party and the state structures is one of the key factors for ZANU PF’s increased ability to ensure compliance, particularly during election processes.

The threat to both the Presidency and the ZANU PF parliamentary majority in 2000, by a new popular opposition party and active civil society led to the establishment of a national youth training program by President Mugabe and the Minister of Gender, Youth, and Employment, Border Gezi. This program was ostensibly to provide guidance and vocational

training for the unemployed youth in the country. In reality, the programme focuses on political indoctrination and training in the use of violence including torture. The graduates were deployed in Youth Brigades throughout the country. The requirement for evidence of Youth Brigade training to enter any other tertiary training institute (teaching, nursing, police, university) ensured that all institutions throughout the country had “Border Gezi” graduates on their staff. During elections, the Youth Brigades move into an area and establish a base – often at a school. Political dissidents or MDC campaigners are abducted by squads and brought to the base, where they are held and tortured. These bases are also used for rallies, where the youth “educate” the people to vote for ZANU PF by making them chant ZANU PF slogans, and by singling out known MDC supporters in the crowd for verbal and physical abuse.

Since the early 2000s, Zimbabwe has been operating with a massively inflated civil service payroll – some sources estimate that the Zimbabwe government pays over 500 000 employees, including security forces. Although some departments have recently been audited for extraneous employees, the exact numbers are difficult to establish. One of the reasons that the state keeps the number nebulous is that doing so disguises the people employed to run the intimidation and control mechanisms. Even some of the civil service jobs that are accounted for in the audits have vague job descriptions that hide the nature of their work. For instance, the Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation, and Economic Empowerment employs five “Youth Officers” in every one of Zimbabwe’s 1 200 wards. The Ministry of Agriculture employs three “Agricultural Extension Officers” in each ward as well. In every ward there are eight government employees with officially undefined job descriptions. Throughout the 2000s, government employees were required to have passed through the Border Gezi youth training programme, whose graduates made up the Youth Militias that terrorized the rural areas in 2008. It is very likely that the eight extra government officers in each ward were originally deployed to intimidate and control the local community. They may now have an official job description, but everyone in the community remembers their original deployment, and fears their re-deployment as implementers of state sanctioned violence.

Another key element of abductions in Zimbabwe is that many of the victims who reported abductions could identify the perpetrators by name. Other states that have used widespread abduction as a political tool have generally ensured that the identities of abusers are hidden from their victims. The fact that these abductions are carried out relatively openly indicates the systemic nature of impunity for perpetrators of political violence and torture.

My son knew that ZANU PF wanted to assault him, so he was not sleeping at home. On 14 June 2008, ZANU PF youths came to my home at around 5pm. 30 of them surrounded the house, while 3 broke down the door. They were looking for my son and his wife. When they did not find them, they assaulted me on my son’s behalf. They beat the soles of my feet with a wire sjambok. I was assaulted on my back, my head, and all over my body. My husband was also assaulted. He is now disabled and unable to walk. They abducted me and took me to the Marume Base, where I was interrogated about my son. They looted 3 turkeys, 5 chickens, 1 goat, 3 guinea fowls, and 21 rabbits. Buhera,

June 2008

White Trucks and Torture : What happens to victims?

If victims are identified and seized at home, the abductors will often beat them before they take them away. This increases the trauma for the families and neighbours of the victims, adding to the intensity of the intimidation within communities.

The vast majority of the abductions, particularly in the urban areas, are carried out by squads of state and ZANU personnel in vehicles. Vehicles are an effective means of transporting abduction victims, because once inside, the victim is easily overpowered and becomes quickly disoriented. The abuse usually begins on the journey – the victims are beaten or forced to lie on the floor with their heads covered.

Most people are held for some time – overnight or for a number of days. During this period, they are usually deprived of food, held in unhealthy conditions, and repeatedly assaulted or tortured. Many female victims are raped or otherwise sexually assaulted. Some of the male victims are also sexually assaulted. Much of the torture is basic assault: the victims are beaten using sticks, logs, or police batons, and kicked and stamped by booted feet. However, there are also more sophisticated forms of torture – the torturers douse the victims' wounds with fertilizer, acid or chemicals, administer electric shocks via car batteries and mains electricity, use extreme positioning or simulate drowning. Falanga (beating the sole of the feet) is used in most torture incidents.

Around 10% of the abduction victims are subjected to severe to life-threatening torture by the security forces. Around 70% of the victims are subjected to moderate or moderate to severe torture (meaning that they require medical attention, often for multiple fractures or serious soft tissue damage).

There have been 81 confirmed deaths of victims of abduction. However, there have also been over 300 reports by victims of relatives and neighbours who were abducted and either disappeared or were discovered dead, so the exact number of deaths from abduction is unclear. As relatively few of the abducted victims are killed outright (often by gunshot), it appears that death in abduction tends to be accidental – the torturers go too far and the victim dies from assault injuries, rather than being directly murdered. (This is not to say that ZANU PF does not use murder as a tactic, as there have been many incidents of shootings or petrol bombings of MDC activists.)

The victims are generally held within an hour or two driving distance of their home. In the rural areas, many of the temporary bases are established in schools. It is an important part of the intimidation tactic for victims to feel removed enough from their community that they feel vulnerable, but for the site of the torture to be close enough to the local community feel intimidated.

ZANU PF youths had been visiting suspected MDC supporters' homes in Epworth, taking people outside and assaulting them. On 7 February, at around 10pm, I was visited by the ZANU PF youth. My wife and I were asleep. They asked for ZANU PF membership cards, which we did not have. We were forced to chant ZANU PF slogans. I chanted them, but the youths were not convinced. I was forced to lie down and they assaulted me on the buttocks. I was then taken to their Epworth base with other suspected MDC supporters. At the base all of the ZANU PF youths were lined up and given a stick. We were ordered to lie on our stomach and the youths took turns assaulting us on our buttocks. They then poured water on us. We were ordered to perform sexual intercourse with the ground until ejaculation takes place. We were then forced to join them on the "patrol", where they destroyed property and assaulted people in their homes. Towards dawn they released us, but we were made to report for "patrol" the next night. If one reports to the police about the issue, they say they are powerless. Epworth, February 2011

"It was useless to report to the police:" Justice for Victims of Abduction

When the victims are released, they are strongly warned against reporting their abduction or seeking treatment for their torture. Many take this threat so seriously that, in 2016, outreach coordinators continue to identify untreated 2008 victims in communities across the country. Many of the victims are "fined" for their political affiliation, or they are forced to "donate" livestock and maize to feed the ZANU PF bases. Victims are often required to report back to the base regularly for "monitoring".

Only a very small minority of the victims of abductions report their case to the police. For victims who were abducted by police officers, who were tortured in proximity to the police station, or who were held in police cells, they understandably mistrust the police force. Fewer than 250 of the 5 890 abductions were reported to the police. Of the 250 victims who approached the police, few had positive interactions. Most of the victims' cases were filed and ignored. In multiple cases, the police simply refused to document the incident, or "advised" the victim to leave politics.

For those victims who have sought legal redress, filing reports with the police has been only the first step of a frustrating engagement with the Zimbabwean authorities over abduction and torture. Many have found their cases stalled, often for years, by the backlog of cases passing through the courts and by the Zimbabwean authorities' reluctance to address the issue. In some cases, the outcome has been surprisingly positive. For example, in April 2015, a ZANU PF youth was fined \$8 000 for having severely assaulted an MDC-T activist who had been abducted and held at a ZANU PF torture camp in Wedza in June 2008. However, even when victims are awarded damages by the courts, the perpetrators invariably fail to pay the victims, and the courts invariably fail to enforce the payment of damages.

In 2002, before the elections, the MDC gave me whistles and red cards to distribute to our members. One day ZANU PF youths came and destroyed my house, beat me up, and confiscated all my MDC party materials. On the day of the election I was at the mobile polling station. When I went home that

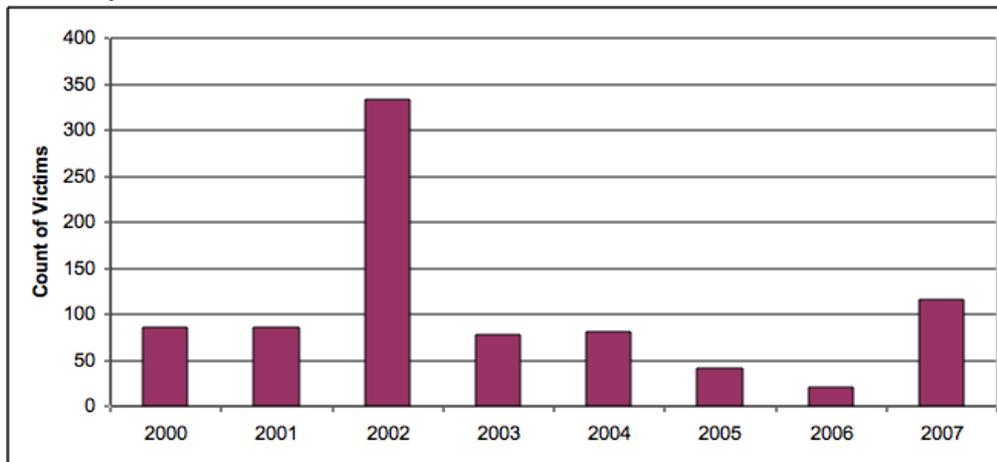
evening, I was abducted by CIOs, police, and ZANU PF supporters. I was beaten on my buttocks and my feet. In 2005, during the election, all members of the MDC were abducted from our compound and beaten with logs and whips by ZANU PF youth and a team of soldiers. Makonde

On 24 May, a large group of ZANU PF supporters came to my house at around midnight. I was with my husband, the children had run away. They broke down the wall, pulled us out, and started assaulting us all over our bodies. Then they took us to the base at the primary school. We were told to lie down on our tummies, then they started beating us on the back, buttocks, and legs. We were released the next morning, but it took us five hours to get home. My husband was in pain, he kept fainting. When we got home the house was burned with all of our property inside. They had also taken two goats. After a few days they came again and abducted my first-born son, who had been a polling agent in the election. They assaulted him at the base and he died after two days. We made a report at the police station, but nothing was done. The perpetrators are still there. Gokwe North, May 2008

Abductions and the Zimbabwe Situation

As abductions are used to intimidate communities, abduction incidents tend to spike at times of high political tension. For instance, from this graph it can be seen that the number of abductions more than tripled between 2001 and 2002. After the threat to ZANU PF's hegemony in the 2000 elections, Mugabe was determined not to risk the 2002 presidential election. In the months prior to the 11 March polling day, he deployed the newly formed Border Gezi Youth Militia across the country, where they unleashed a campaign of abductions, torture, and murder.

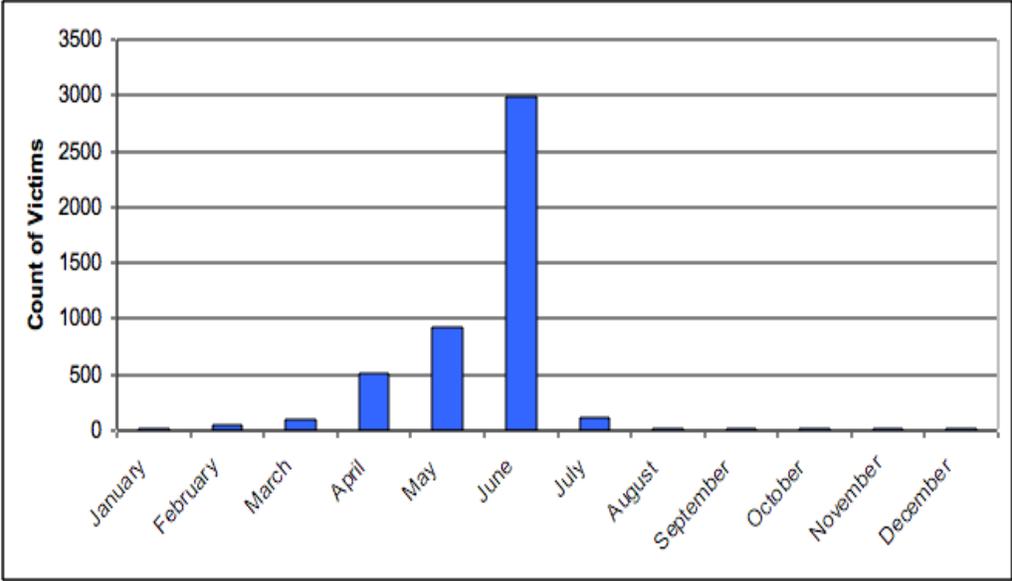
Politically Motivated Abduction Cases 2000-2007



In the following years, the incidences of abduction dropped (but did not disappear). In 2007, a combination of a more determined opposition and wildly increasing hyperinflation precipitated more widespread resistance to ZANU PF's rule. The government responded with a spate of abductions and severe torture, particularly of high-ranking MDC party officials.

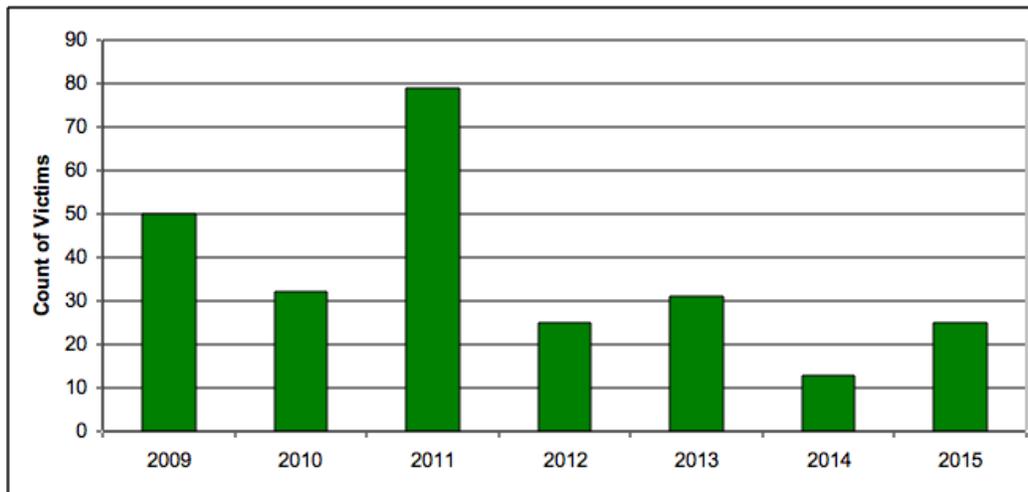
In March 2008, Zimbabwe held harmonized general elections for local government, parliament, senate and president in which ZANU PF faced a better-organised opposition and a more frustrated, more determined electorate. ZANU PF was ill prepared for the election results. The targeted abductions and violence commenced within 5 days of the election. The electoral commission took five weeks to release the results of the election, at which point they admitted that Morgan Tsvangirai had won, but claimed that the margin by which he won was too small to merit a handover of power (in the “official” results, Tsvangirai won 47.9% of the vote and Mugabe won 43.2% of the vote). A run-off election was declared for the 27 June, and ZANU PF intensified the campaign of violence to ensure that an MDC victory would be impossible. In June nearly 3 000 people were abducted and severely tortured, most in the week prior to the election. Mugabe won the second round by an overwhelming margin, as Tsvangirai withdrew his candidature 6 days prior to the run-off. The cases of abduction and torture dropped sharply after the election, as the “lesson” had been taught to the communities about their voting habits and Mugabe was back in power.

Politically Motivated Abduction Cases 2008



Since 2008’s spike, the number of abduction cases has dropped. During the 2013 election year, when observers expected a sharp increase in violence and abductions, echoing 2008, 30 people were abducted.

Politically Motivated Abduction Cases 2009-2015

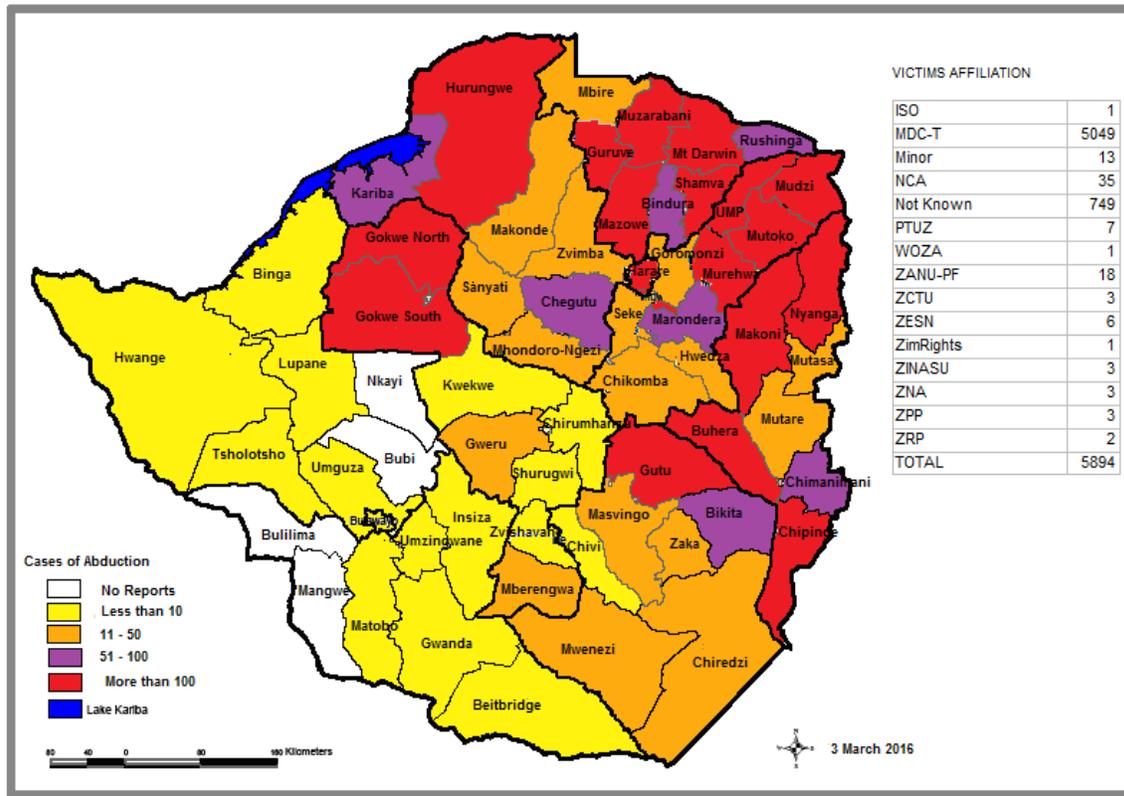


However, what cannot be depicted on the graph measuring abductions is the threat of violence. In all of the communities that suffered from high numbers of abductions in 2008, the structures for violence are still in place. In many of these areas, the perpetrators live unpunished in the community, alongside their victims. The victims live daily with the knowledge that they could be abducted and tortured again at any time. ZANU PF did not need to carry out a massive abduction campaign in 2013, because people were already intimidated.

The issue of the continued threat of violence in communities is particularly important to bear in mind as we enter a new phase of Zimbabwean politics, in which factions within ZANU PF fight for control of the party and the government. The political situation is extremely unstable, but the party and state structures for controlling the population remain in place. A politician who could command the militia or the security forces would be in a very powerful position nationally.

The link between abduction and political control can be clearly seen when a geographical distribution of reported incidents of abduction is examined. The districts with the highest number of incidents are all districts in which ZANU PF has been threatened by decreasing support, particularly in their traditional strongholds, or where the MDC has emerged as the dominant preferred political party.

Distribution of Politically Motivated Abductions by District, 2000-2016



Buhera has had the most abductions of any district – 763 cases, mostly from 2008, have been recorded. Buhera is the home district of the MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai and various other key MDC figures, and the majority of the district not only voted for MDC, but actively supported the party during campaigns. The high level of abductions and torture in Buhera was retribution for the population’s support of the MDC and to return the district to ZANU PF control.

Mt Darwin has had 425 abductions to date. Many key ZANU PF officials are originally from the area; for instance, it is the home of Joice Mujuru (Vice President from 2004 until 2014) and Saviour Kasukuwere who has been intimately involved in many aspects of the structures of youth control within ZANU PF and the state. In Mt Darwin, as in many of the districts in Mashonaland Central and East, ZANU PF was shocked when the first round of polls in the 2008 election indicated that the area had begun to support the MDC and in particular Morgan Tsvangirai. The backlash after the first round of elections in key ZANU areas in Mashonaland East and Mashonaland Central and Mashonaland West was brutal.

Harare has had 520 recorded abductions to date. As Harare is the capital city, its population is generally well-informed about political, social, and economic issues, and has access to media that is not controlled by the government. The MDC has always relied on strong support from Harare and other urban districts. However, the Harare abductions are

more than simply about intimidating people who voted for the MDC – many of the Harare abductions are carried out against important opposition leaders and activists by the CIO or military intelligence, with the purpose of not only intimidating but collecting information about structures and strategies.

Matabeleland has seen the lowest numbers of abductions in the country post 2000, probably because ZANU PF was hesitant to send forces into Matabeleland, given the widespread resistance to ZANU PF post the 1980s Gukurahundi massacres.

My husband, the children, and I were sleeping, when we heard a knock on the door. We knew it was ZANU PF youth, so we did not respond. We were screaming. They told us to be quiet and told my husband that they had come to kill him. My husband managed to escape. They could not see him running away because it was dark. They broke down the door with an iron bar. They started to beat me and accuse me of hiding my husband. They tore off my clothes and threw me in the vehicle naked. I asked them where they were taking me and they told me they were going to kill me. They drove me about 30km from our home. They assaulted me all over my body, including my private parts. They dumped me by the road. I was unconscious. Nyanga, 2008

Conclusion

The widespread, systematic abductions directed against the population of Zimbabwe are a key tool to exert political control over the country. Over the last sixteen years, abduction and the threat of abduction have been used to punish and intimidate the political opposition and groups working for human rights in the country.

The structures that carry out the abductions and intimidation have not been dismantled. Most of the personnel continue to occupy roles in the local government hierarchy or the state security forces, and continue to threaten their communities with the possibility of further abuses. ZANU PF's current political instability is almost certainly going to result in a seizure of power by one of the factions within the party, rather than an opposition overthrow of the party. The faction that takes over the party will then need to rapidly and brutally assert control over the other factions (and over any opposition forces that might attempt to push for political change in the vacuum). The key figures in ZANU PF's power struggle have been closely involved with the party and state structures of abduction and intimidation, and they will not hesitate to deploy them against their political rivals. Although it is difficult to assess how the factional politics at the highest levels has affected the structures on the ground, given the history of using violence for political control in Zimbabwe, there is a very high risk that the country will experience a wave of abductions and torture as the winning faction within ZANU PF fights to take control of the party and the state.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the 5 894 reported abductions represent only a fraction of the trauma of the population of Zimbabwe. As highlighted earlier, in 2016, unreported abductions from 2008 or the early 2000s are still being discovered, so the figure is significantly higher. Most importantly, each abducted person has a family, who either witnessed their initial assault prior to the abduction, or came home from school or work to find their parent or child gone. While most victims of abduction in Zimbabwe did not disappear entirely, when they returned to their families, they were severely injured and deeply traumatised. The lack of control and dehumanisation experienced by abduction victims has profound long-term consequences, for both the victims and their families and the continued presence of the perpetrators in the community ensures that the ordeals remain fresh in the memory of the victims.