



Majority of Zimbabweans want government out of private communications, religious speech

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 165 | Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Zimbabwe's Constitution of 2013 guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms for citizens, including freedom of speech, association, and religion as well as the right to privacy in their communications (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). In practice, however, fundamental rights may sometimes be seen as conflicting with other priorities, such as maintaining public security.

Governments trying to deal with security threats, for example, may decide to use roadblocks and curfews limiting people's movements, or to regulate religious speech they consider a danger to public safety. In Zimbabwe, the Interception of Communications Act of 2007 provides for the lawful monitoring of certain communications, and the government has proposed a Computer Crime and Cybercrime Bill that critics describe as an attempt to tighten government control and infringe on citizens' rights (Zimbabwe Independent, 2017).

How do Zimbabweans see potential trade-offs between freedoms and security? Do they believe that some freedoms must be limited in order to enjoy security from violence, or do they think that political liberty is too important to sacrifice even if public security is at risk?

Based on findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey in Zimbabwe, majorities of Zimbabweans favour protecting private communications, freedom of movement, and freedom of religious speech even in the face of potential security threats. Moreover, substantial proportions of the population think that their freedoms to say what they think about politics and to join any political organization they want, as well as the media's freedom to investigate or criticize the government, are weakening.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being carried out in 2017/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by Mass Public Opinion Institute, interviewed 1,200 adult Zimbabweans between 28 January and 10 February 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

- About seven in 10 Zimbabweans (69%) say the government should not be able to monitor private communications. Fully half (50%) of respondents say they feel “very strongly” on this issue.
- Opposition to government monitoring of private communications is especially strong among better-educated citizens, as well as among citizens who express little trust in the police and courts. It is also stronger among MDC-T supporters than among ZANU-PF adherents.
- A slimmer majority (54%) say that people should be able to move about freely even at times of security threats, while 40% affirm that the government has a right to impose curfews and set up roadblocks in order to protect public safety.
- Three-fifths (60%) of Zimbabweans say the government should never regulate what is said in places of worship.
- Substantial proportions of the population perceive “somewhat less” or “much less” freedom than “a few years ago” for citizens to say what they think about politics (47%) and join any political organization they want (39%), as well as for the media to investigate or criticize the government (36%).

Government monitoring of private communications

More than two-thirds (69%) of Zimbabweans say the government should not have the right to monitor private communications, such as mobile phones, to “make sure that people are not plotting violence,” including 50% who say they feel “very strongly” about this right to privacy. Only 25% of respondents would grant government the power to monitor private communications (Figure 1).

Support for the right to privacy in communications is somewhat more widespread among men (71%) than women (66%) and among urbanites (76%) than rural dwellers (64%) (Figure 2). By age group, older citizens are least likely to oppose surveillance of private communications (58% among those aged 56 years or older).

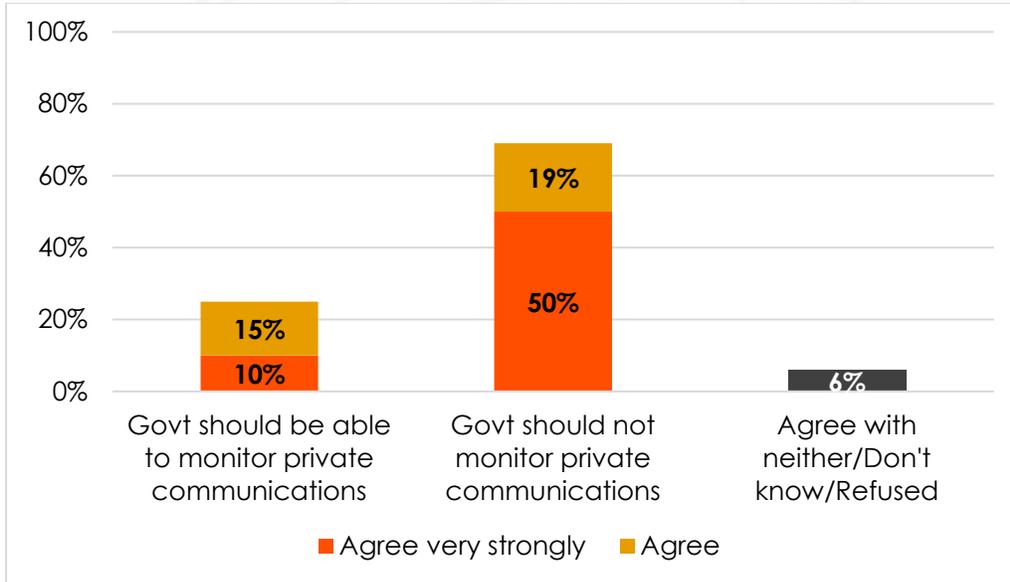
Opposition to surveillance of private communications increases dramatically with respondents’ education level: Those with post-secondary qualifications are almost twice as likely to be against government monitoring (77%) as those with no formal schooling (40%).

MDC-T supporters (86%) are considerably more commonly opposed to government monitoring than ZANU-PF supporters (54%) and non-partisans (74%).¹

Opposition to surveillance of private communications is the majority view across all 10 provinces, ranging from a low of 55% in Mashonaland West to highs of 77% in Manicaland and 79% in Harare province (Figure 3).

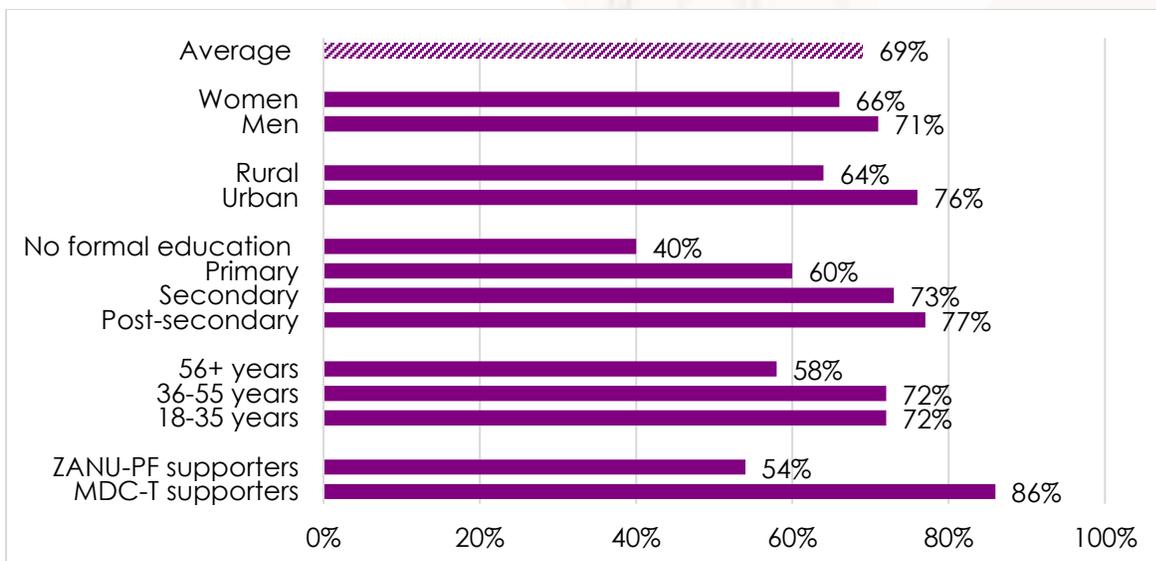
¹ Afrobarometer determines political-party affiliation based on responses to the questions “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

Figure 1: Should government be able to monitor private communications?
 | Zimbabwe | 2017



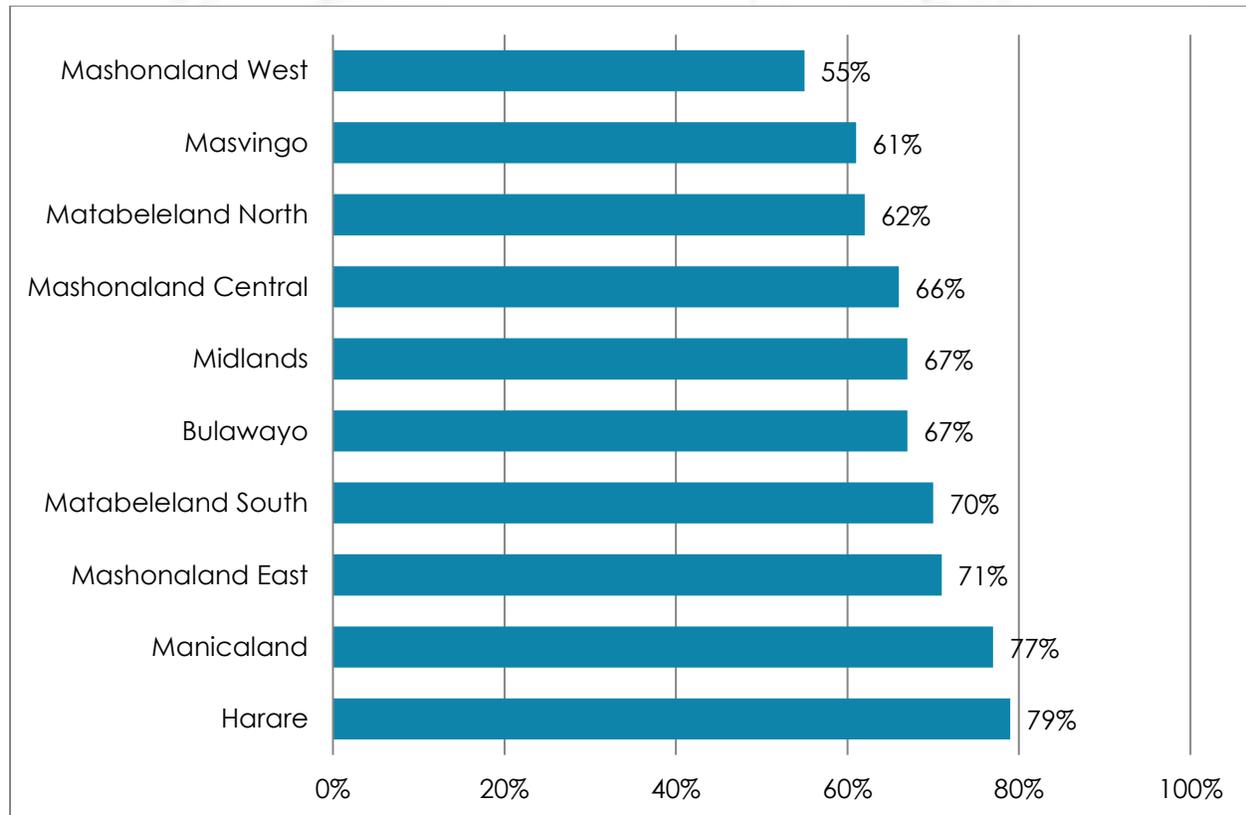
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Government should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence.
 Statement 2: People should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying.

Figure 2: Opposition to government monitoring of private communications
 | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that "people should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying")

Figure 3: Opposition to government monitoring of private communications
 | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017

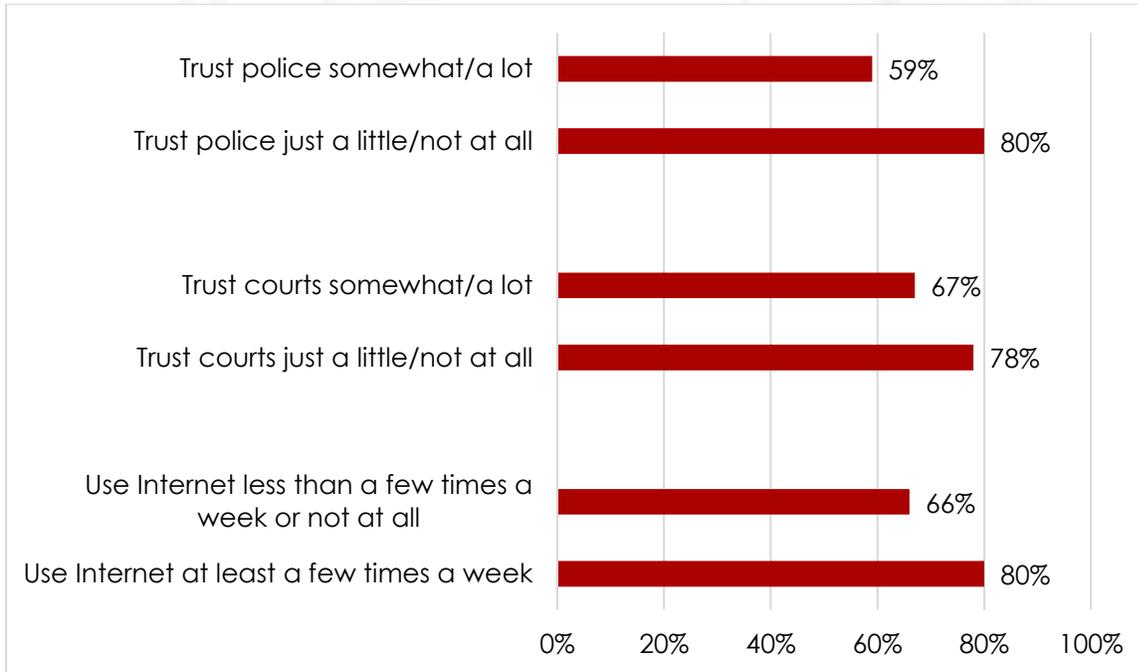


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 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 2)

It is plausible that citizens who don't trust the government's law enforcement institutions, such as the police or the courts, might hesitate to endorse government monitoring of private communications. Indeed, survey respondents who say they trust the police "just a little" or "not at all" are considerably more likely to oppose monitoring of private communications (80%) than those who trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot" (59%). Similarly, citizens who express little or no trust in the courts are more commonly opposed to government monitoring (78%) than those who trust the courts somewhat/a lot (67%).

A similar gap separates Zimbabweans who regularly use the Internet from those who don't, perhaps reflecting differences in education level and exposure to critical viewpoints in online media. Among respondents who use the Internet "every day" or "a few times a week," 80% oppose government monitoring of private communications, compared to 66% among those who use the Internet less regularly or not at all.

Figure 4: Opposition to government monitoring of private communications | by trust in state institutions and Internet use | Zimbabwe | 2017



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 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with Statement 2)

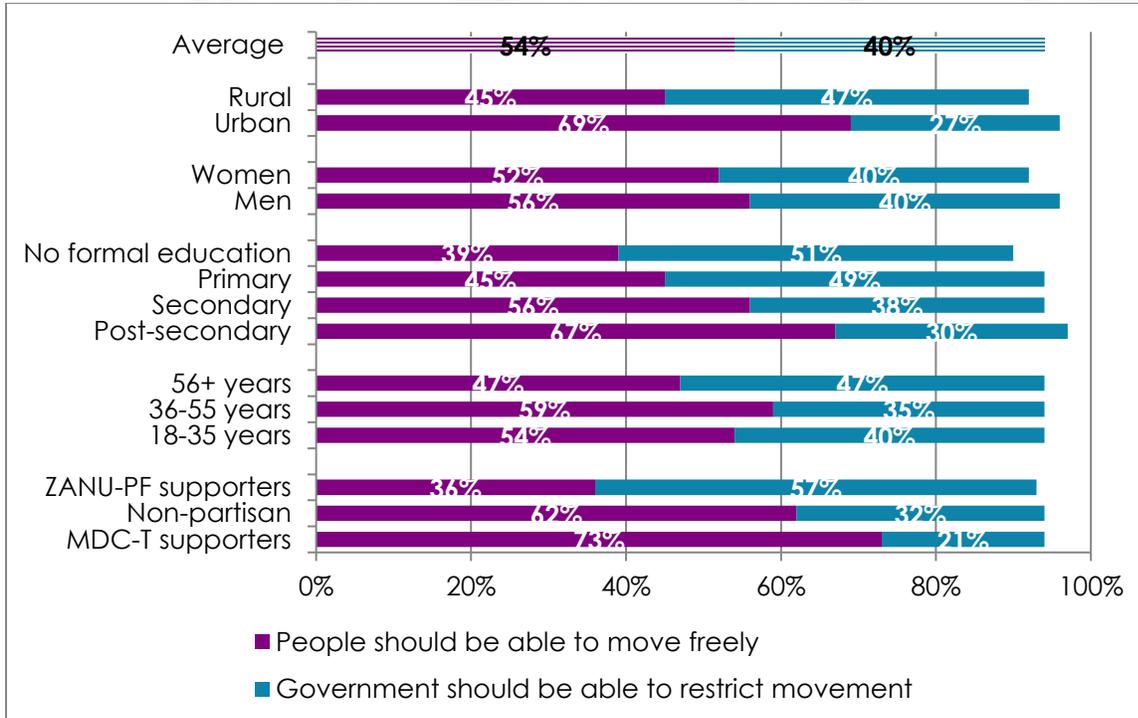
Views on restricting movement

While Zimbabweans overwhelmingly reject government monitoring of private communications, they are more divided when it comes to the government’s right to restrict people’s movement in order to protect public security. Still, a majority (54%) say people should be able to move about freely even if the country is “faced with threats to public security.” However, a sizeable minority (40%) disagree, endorsing the government’s right to impose curfews and set up roadblocks as a way to protect public safety (Figure 5).

Support for free movement is stronger among urbanites (69%) than among rural residents (45%) and among better-educated citizens (67% of those with post-secondary qualifications) than among their less-educated compatriots (39% of those with no formal education). Middle-aged citizens are more likely to demand free movement (59% of those aged 36-55) than younger (54%) or older (47%) respondents. And MDC-T supporters are considerably more likely to endorse free movement (73%) than ZANU-PF adherents (36%) or unaffiliated respondents (62%).

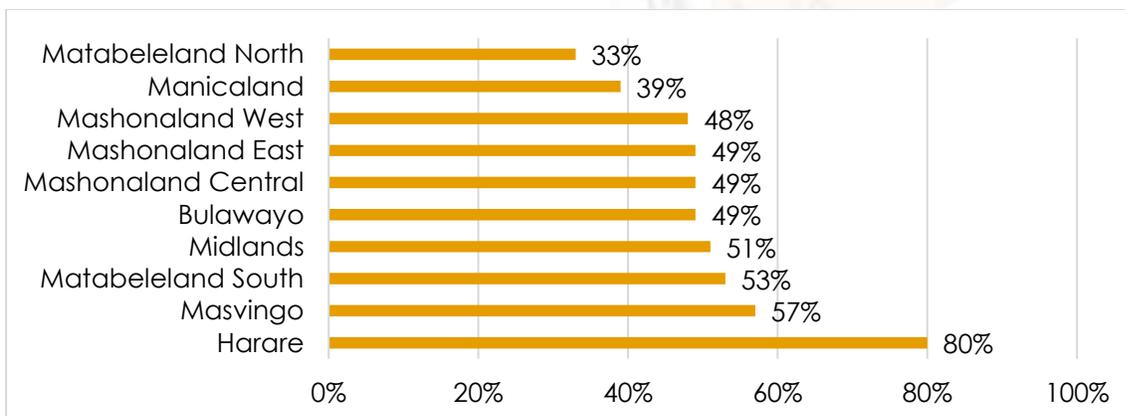
Public demand for freedom of movement, even in the face of a security threat, is far stronger in Harare province (80%) than in other provinces, and is the majority view in only four of the 10 provinces (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Should government be able to restrict movement? | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at any time of day and night.
 Statement 2: When faced with threats to public security, the government should be able to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks to prevent people from moving around.

Figure 6: Opposition to government restrictions on movement | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017



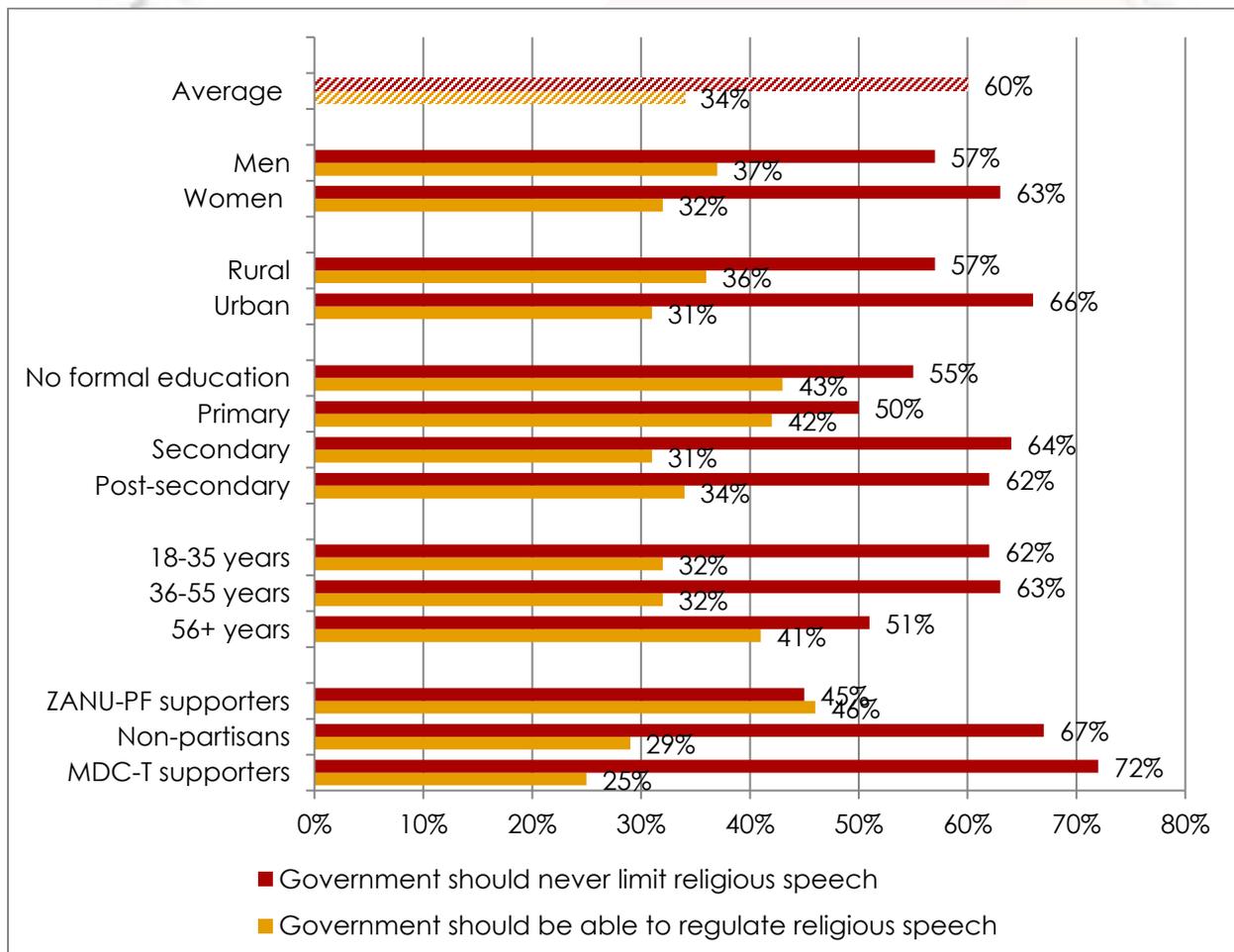
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that "even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at any time of day and night")

Views on religious freedom

While popular demand for unmonitored private communications is high (69%) and insistence on freedom of movement is somewhat weaker (54%), preference for absolute freedom of religion, even in the face of possible security threats, falls between the two: Six of 10 Zimbabweans (60%) say the government “should never limit what is said in places of worship” (Figure 7). One in three respondents (34%) say they feel “very strongly” about this right.

About one-third (34%) “agree” or “agree very strongly” that the government should have the power to “regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.”

Figure 7: Freedom of religious speech | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

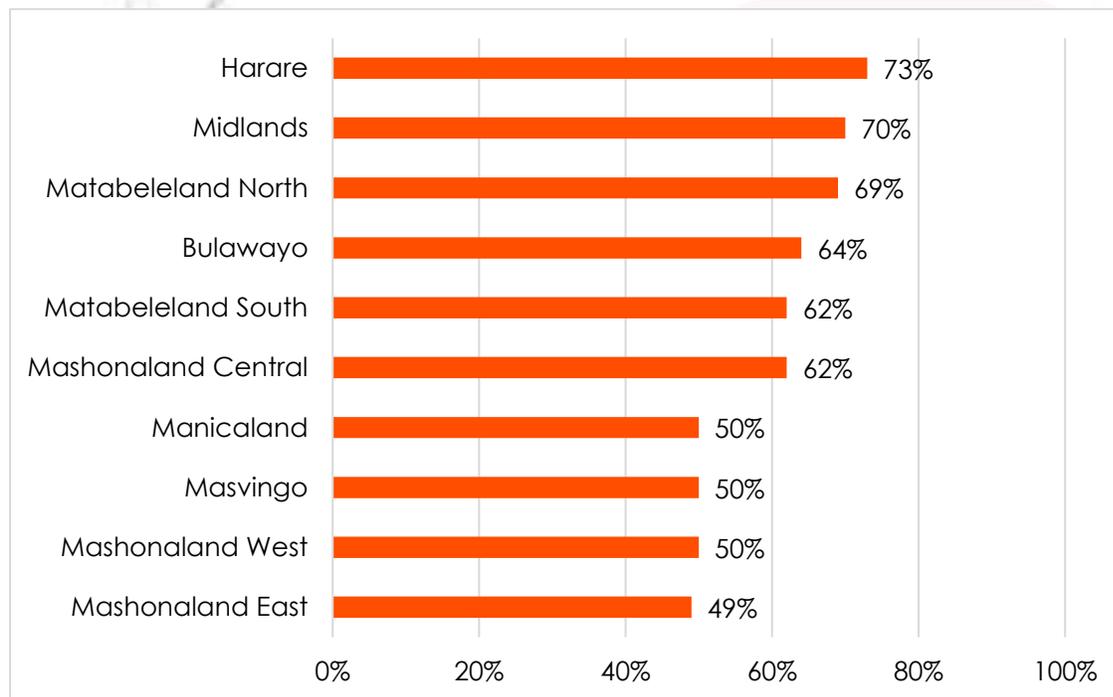
Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that the government should never limit what is said in places of worship.

Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.

Demand for absolute freedom of religious speech is more widespread among urbanites (66%) and women (63%) than among rural residents (57%) and men (57%). Respondents with at least a secondary education are more likely to share this view than their less-educated counterparts. Fewer than half (45%) of ZANU-PF adherents insist on absolute freedom of religious speech, compared to 72% of MDC-T supporters and 67% of non-partisans.

Demand for absolute freedom of religious speech ranges from a high of 73% in Harare province to a low of 49% in Mashonaland East (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Demand for absolute freedom of religious speech | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that the government should never limit what is said in places of worship.

Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.

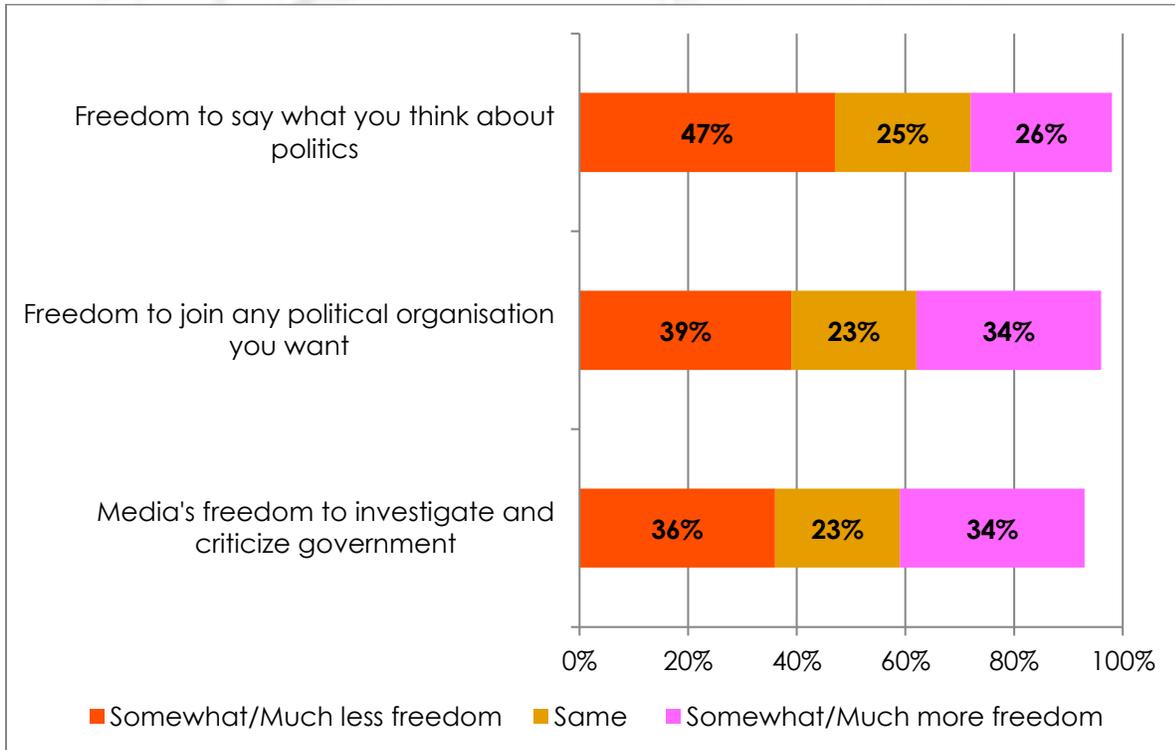
Perceived trends in freedom

While majorities favour protecting private communications, freedom of movement, and freedom of religious speech even in the face of potential security threats, substantial proportions of the population see important political freedoms as shrinking in Zimbabwe.

Almost half (47%) of respondents say they now feel “somewhat less” or “much less” free to say what they think about politics than they did “a few years ago” (Figure 9). About one in four say that freedom of speech has increased (26%), while about the same proportion see levels of this freedom as unchanged (25%).

Zimbabweans are more evenly divided when it comes to perceptions of freedom of association and press freedom. A plurality (39%) see a decline in their freedom to join any political organization they want, while almost as many say this freedom has increased (34%) over the past few years. Responses are similar with regard to the media's freedom "to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance."

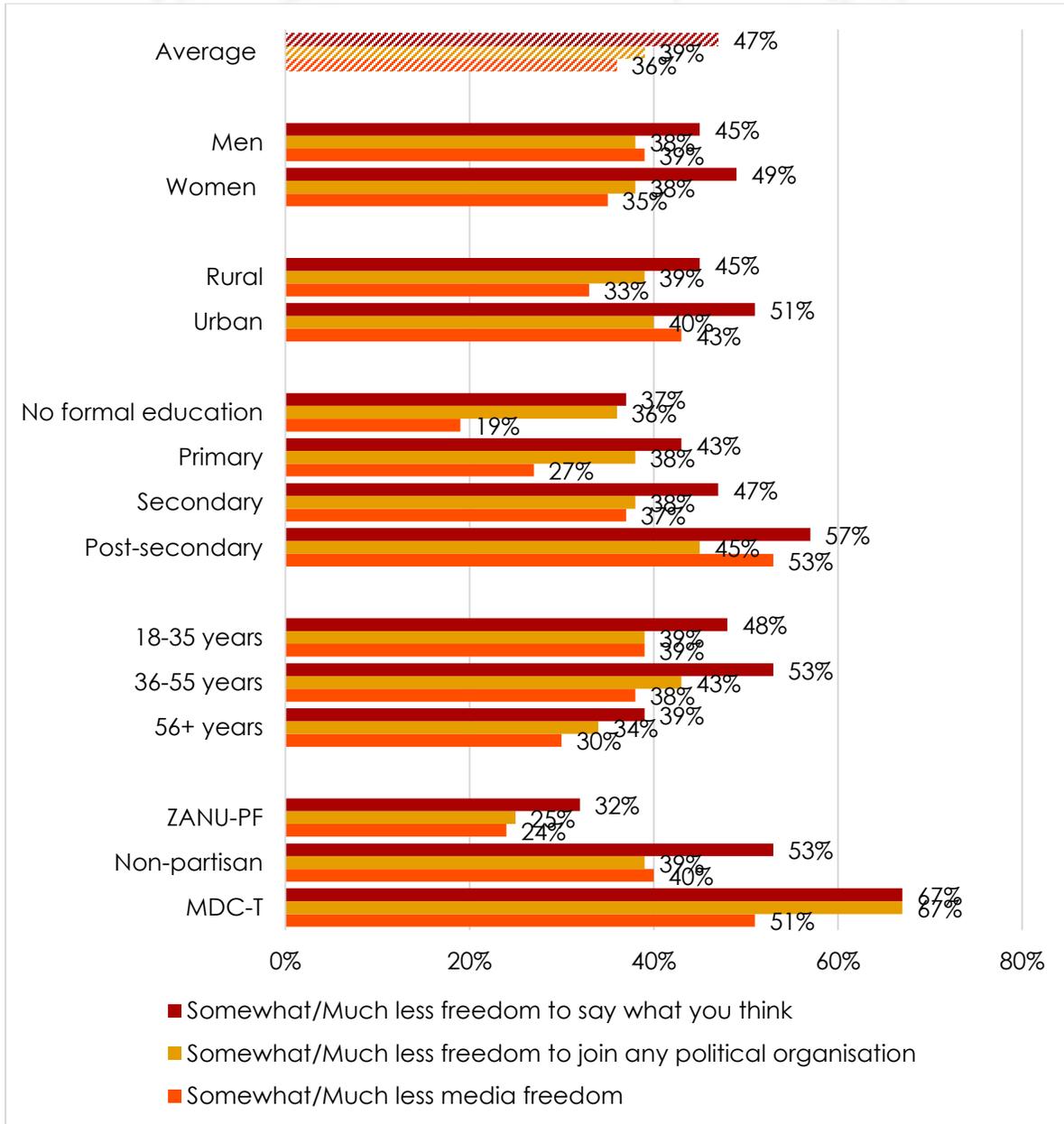
Figure 9: Freedoms compared to a few years ago | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: Your own freedom to say what you think about politics? Your own freedom to join any political organization you want? The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?

As shown in Figure 10, perceptions that these freedoms are shrinking differ only modestly by respondents' gender and urban vs. rural location. But they vary significantly by education level: Educated respondents are far more likely than their less-educated counterparts to see "somewhat less" or "much less" freedom to say what they think, to join any organization, and for the media to investigate and criticize the government. And MDC-T supporters are about twice as likely as ZANU-PF supporters to see these freedoms as diminishing.

Figure 10: Freedoms compared to a few years ago | by socio-demographic group
 | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: Your own freedom to say what you think about politics? Your own freedom to join any political organization you want? The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?

Conclusion

A majority of Zimbabweans demand protection of their rights to private communication, free movement, and free religious speech, even in instances when the government sees public security as being at risk. For the current debate over communication, the implication is that the existing Interception of Communications Act and the proposed Computer Crime and Cybercrime Bill are not consistent with citizens' desires. More broadly, substantial portions of the population see freedoms of speech, association, and the news media as shrinking – a challenge for a government committed to the 2013 Constitution and international human-rights standards.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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