

COUNTRY BRIEF: SOUTH AFRICA

OVERVIEW OF RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOM



Photo credit: South Africa (Getty)



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global attention has focused on South Africa due to its involvement in significant geopolitical developments. In December 2023, South Africa [filed a case](#) at the International Court of Justice accusing Israel of committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. On 26 January 2024, the Court found that Israel is plausibly committing genocide in Gaza and ordered it to prevent its military from committing acts that might be considered genocidal, prevent and punish incitement to genocide and enable humanitarian assistance to people in Gaza. Due to its history of apartheid and colonialism, there are [strong](#) ties between liberation movements in South Africa and Palestine. Several major protests have been held in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The CIVICUS Monitor rates South Africa's civic space as obstructed, indicating the existence of heavy restrictions on civic freedoms. Ahead of its [May 2024 national election](#), political candidates scapegoated and demonised foreign nationals. Human Rights Watch [raised](#) concerns that xenophobic rhetoric may lead to violence. Such developments are increasingly concerning given the country's history of [xenophobic violence](#), including [lethal violence](#). In 2023, the Home Affairs minister [indicated](#) that South Africa doesn't have the resources to uphold the socio-economic rights set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention. On 10 April 2023, the Cabinet [approved](#) a Department of Home Affairs White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection with recommendations including withdrawing from the Refugee Convention and re-acceding to it with reservations.

With South Africa [declared](#) one of the world's most unequal countries, access to basic services such as water, sanitation and other infrastructure remains a challenge for many, a situation that continues to fuel widespread service delivery protests. South Africa has one of the highest rates of [femicide](#), at five times more than the global average, and gender-based violence perpetrated by men. Meanwhile students have protested at universities over the lack of funding and services. In addition, people advocating for environmental and land rights and housing rights, along with [whistleblowers](#) and [women human rights defenders](#), face serious threats to their life.

Diplomatic tensions have been brewing between South Africa and the USA. Donald Trump has [repeatedly](#) criticised South Africa for its policy on Gaza and its recently approved land redistribution law, the Land Expropriation Act, claiming the government is confiscating land from its white minority and treating them poorly. The new act clarifies the conditions under which it is equitable and just for land to be expropriated without compensation. To date, no land has been [expropriated without compensation](#). Trump's claim has been widely refuted as over 70 per cent of land in South Africa is still owned by the white minority, who make up around seven per cent of the population. In addition, South African-born Elon Musk has repeatedly [posted](#) on Twitter/X alleging unfair treatment of white South Africans.

On 7 February 2025, Trump signed an [executive order](#) halting US aid to South Africa and offering refugee status to white South African farmers, claiming the land redistribution law has enabled racial discrimination. For years, right-wing Afrikaner pressure group AfriForum [has lobbied](#) US politicians

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The CIVICUS Monitor, an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in South Africa as **Obstructed**.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED**REPRESSED****OBSTRUCTED****NARROWED****OPEN**



with its claims that the Black majority is threatening the Afrikaner minority. In March 2025, the Trump administration [expelled](#) South Africa's ambassador.

In response to the executive order, the South African government issued a [press release](#) saying that it 'lacks factual accuracy and fails to recognise South Africa's profound and painful history of colonialism and apartheid'. It also pointed out that 'the executive order makes provision for refugee status in the US for a group in South Africa that remains amongst the most economically privileged, while vulnerable people in the US from other parts of the world are being deported and denied asylum despite real hardship'. Trump's decision [prompted protests](#) by white South Africans outside the US embassy in support of the executive order. In May 2025, 59 white Afrikaners arrived in the USA as part of the refugee resettlement programme.

ASSOCIATION

AB AHLALI BASEM JONDOLO MOVEMENT TARGETED

On 18 March 2024, Nomsa Sizani, human rights defender and a leader of the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement (AbM), [reported](#) receiving a threatening phone call, saying 'if you don't shut that mouth, we will shut it for you'. The [ABM](#) is an autonomous anti-poverty shack-dwellers' movement with over 150,000 members, operating in 93 branches in four provinces. For almost two decades, it has advocated for the right to adequate housing, an end to forced evictions and access to education, electricity, healthcare, refuse removal, sanitation and water. It has spoken out against government corruption and xenophobia in communities, provided analyses of South African politics and its impact on the human rights of people who live in exclusion and poverty and has been critical of leading political parties.

Threats against Sizani came after she questioned officials who visited her community to speak about developments taking place there. Threats against her have [escalated](#) since 23 March 2024. On 26 March 2024, she received a text message which said: 'We hope that Zikode [referring to AbM president Sibusiso Zikode] and Abahlali will be able to protect you from that big mouth of yours'. On 31 March 2024, three men arrived at her home looking for her, forcing her into hiding.

The threats against Sizani are not isolated. They come against the backdrop of a greater pattern of harassment, intimidation, killings and threats against AbM leaders and members. [According](#) to AbM, at least 25 members have [been killed](#) since 2005. Some of these killings occurred during evictions, protests and police raids, while others were targeted. AbM reports that Sizani's son, Samuel Hloele, was shot by the eThekweni Anti-Land Invasion Unit. Another AbM leader, [Thapelo Mohapi](#), had to go into hiding after he received death threats.

[According to Amnesty International](#), three AbM members killed in 2022 had received threats. Despite threats being reported to the police, they did not respond or take any measures to protect these individuals. Amnesty International further details that many in the movement believe the violence comes in direct response to AbM leaders and members challenging the status quo in their communities, exposing local corruption and organising outside party politics. They believe the killings are intended to create an environment of fear and disrupt their organising. In addition, Amnesty International documented that around 50 AbM members have been arrested on trumped-up charges from different areas in KwaZulu-Natal province since the movement's inception.

The movement has a strong presence in the KwaZulu-Natal, which is the province with the most politically motivated killings. According to the South African Observatory of the Global Initiative for Transnational Organised Crimes, there [were](#) at least 10 politically related assassinations between January and April 2024. The organisation defines politically related assassinations as 'killings targeted at individuals holding a political or administrative position, whistleblowers, and political activists'. These murders are used to silence political opponents, take control in succession battles, infiltrate local governance and influence political outcomes.



KILLING OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND LAND DEFENDERS

According to [six organisations](#), including the Alliance for Rural Democracy, land rights activist Sbusiso Hlongwane was [gunned down](#) in an assassination-style killing. Hlongwane had opposed mining projects in his community, including one that [formed part](#) of the Jindal Iron Ore Project, which encompasses up to 26,000 hectares of communal land belonging to traditional communities, land under claim and commercial farms. More than 350 families would be evicted from their homes to make way for the first phase of open-cast mining operations in the Entembeni area, northern KwaZulu-Natal.

On 15 August 2023, land rights activist Jomo Keromeng was [shot](#) 16 times by two men at his house in front of his mother and child. It is believed that Keromeng, who worked as a nurse and was from the mining-affected community of Sefikile, Bakgatla Ba Kgafela, North West province, was killed due to his activism. His brutal murder raised serious concerns about the safety and security of dedicated activists fighting for the rights of excluded and vulnerable communities in South Africa. In a [statement](#), Lawyers for Human Rights said that they have been engaged in a legal battle with Kgosi John Pilane, Chair of the Bakgatla Ba Kgafela Traditional Council, who challenged his removal from office after a Commission of Enquiry found millions of South African rands were unaccounted for in a case of corruption and mismanagement of funds. The statement went on to say:

‘Although the biggest mining village in the country is on land bought by the Sefikiles, they never benefit from the mining, and the community lives in abject poverty. Jomo Keromeng was at the forefront of fighting this injustice. Keromeng paid the ultimate price for his activism, losing his life in the pursuit of justice, human rights and the dignity of the poor and vulnerable groups in his community’.

Attacks on land rights defenders come at a time when government officials have publicly vilified civil society organisations (CSOs) for advocating for environmental and land justice.

KILLING OF GENDER ACTIVIST AND WHISTLEBLOWER

On 7 March 2025, Pamela Mabini, a community activist and whistleblower, was [shot](#) and killed outside her home in Kwazakhele, Gqeberha, Eastern Cape province. Mabini, who was a gender and social activist, played an [instrumental](#) role in the arrest of televangelist Timothy Omotoso and others, who are on trial for [human trafficking](#), racketeering and rape. She had regularly attended the trial, participated in protests and provided support to victims and witnesses. In a statement, Human Rights Watch highlighted [concerns](#) regarding the personal risks whistleblowers in South Africa face, given the lack of financial, legal, psychological and security assistance they receive as they expose corruption in government and state-owned enterprises.

In August 2021, Babita Deokran, a civil servant in the Department of Health, was [assassinated](#) outside her home after exposing [corruption](#) in COVID-19 PPE procurement.

LGBTQI+ ACTIVIST KILLED

On 15 February 2025, Muhsin Hendricks, an Islamic scholar and LGBTQI+ rights activist known as the first out gay Imam in the world, was [shot](#) and [killed](#) in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape province. As the founder and executive director of The Inner Circle – South Africa’s first queer mosque – and later through the Al-Ghurbaah Foundation, the Queer Interfaith Collective and other platforms, Hendricks dedicated his life to creating spaces where queer Muslims could live their lives without exclusion and fear. While an investigation into his death is ongoing, many believe the attack was targeted. His family reports that he regularly received death threats.

Outright International [stated](#):

‘The tragic murder of Imam Muhsin Hendricks is another example of the ongoing challenges that LGBTQI communities in South Africa still face’.



PUBLIC VILIFICATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL CSOS AND USE OF SLAPPS

Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy Gwede Mantashe has [repeatedly](#) used public platforms to attack environmental CSOs and their funders, accusing them of being foreign agents with negative agendas to block development. For instance, on 14 September 2023, during the Southern Africa Oil and Gas Conference in Cape Town, Mantashe is [quoted](#) having said that ‘...when a non-governmental organisation is funded by Ford Foundation, or by a number of those entities in the United States, you can’t rule out the fact that some of it comes from the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and [is] a deliberate programme to block development in a poor country like South Africa’. In May 2023 Mantashe accused CSOs and philanthropic funders of having an ‘anti-development agenda’.

Mantashe was [referring](#) to a [court challenge](#) initiated by Sustaining the Wild Coast and others, which in September 2022 saw the Makhanda High Court rule to set aside Shell’s exploration rights to conduct seismic surveys off the Wild Coast, after the court determined they were granted unlawfully. In response to the countrywide opposition to the seismic testing, Mantashe [said](#) in December 2021, ‘We consider the objections to these developments as apartheid and colonialism of a special type, masqueraded as a great interest for environmental protection’.

In a related development, in January 2025, the Gauteng High Court [dismissed](#) a damages claim of R197 million (approx. US\$11 million) by a property development company against environmentalists. The case was recognised as a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) and understood to be the largest of its kind in South African legal history. The lawsuit was filed in 2021 by Century Property Developments and one of its subsidiaries, Riversands Developments, against environmental group Greater Kyalami Conservancy (GEKCO) and its chairperson, Kristin Kallesen, in her personal capacity. It came after GEKCO raised multiple objections over one of the company’s property developments due to environmental concerns about encroachment on wetlands. In 2022 the Constitutional Court [handed down](#) landmark judgements which for the first time recognised SLAPPs as an abuse of process, and set out a limitation to trading corporations’ ability to claim damages for reputational harm.

PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

A wide range of protests have taken place in recent years, including on service delivery and university fees, with police officers regularly deploying excessive force, including rubber bullets and teargas, at times killing and injuring protesters and bystanders.

BYSTANDER SHOT DEAD DURING PROTEST

On 31 July 2023, Slovo Park residents [blocked](#) the busy N12 highway to protest against a lack of water and sanitation and a stalled upgrade to the informal settlement. The protest, which included people of various age groups, led to a blockage of the highway for over six hours. The police used rubber bullets and teargas to disperse protesters. During these events, police [shot](#) 16-year-old Karabo Chaka in the back of the head. Chaka had gone into a yard with other children to observe what was happening, and police then entered the yard. The case was transferred to the Independent Police Investigative Directorate, an oversight body that investigates allegations of police misconduct, for further investigation. The Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa [condemned](#) the police’s use of excessive force, pointing to its failure to use tactics of communication, de-escalation and negotiation.



STUDENT PROTESTS ESCALATE AMID FINANCIAL CRISIS IN UNIVERSITIES

2025 marked [10 years since](#) the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements led by students across South Africa in 2015, calling for affordable and decolonised education. Student funding problems have persisted for years. Since most universities are publicly funded, the problem requires comprehensive national discussions and long-term solutions.

Students [continue](#) to protest over issues including accommodation and funding shortages, financial exclusion and registration problems, amid an unresolved [financial crisis](#) for universities. These protests have led to violent clashes with law enforcement forces and multiple arrests.

On 2 August 2023, thousands of university students [marched to](#) the Union Buildings, the official seat of the South African government in Pretoria, to express their discontent with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme's (NSFAS) new payment system. The system was introduced in June 2023 and mandates students to open a bank account to access financial aid. However, students have reported that the new system imposes exorbitant fees and financial burdens. The protest group at the Union Buildings submitted a memorandum to the presidency. It is [reported](#) that police arrested 20 students. A group of protesters who broke away and marched to the Department of Higher Education and Training faced [heavy](#) police resistance, with rubber bullets and teargas allegedly fired at them.

On 1 March 2024, students [protested](#) outside the main campus of the Central University of Technology in Bloemfontein over funding delays caused by the NSFAS, which resulted in a lack of funding for food, housing and study materials including laptops and textbooks. The police reportedly dispersed protesters with stun grenades and arrested 22 people.

Protests [continued](#) in 2025 at the start of the new academic year after students experienced a housing crisis at universities, with residences full and unable to meet demand. Students reported that the NSFAS platform for private accommodation was dysfunctional and private landlords were demanding deposits or rental top-ups, not allowed by the NSFAS.

On 11 February 2025, police [arrested](#) 15 students at the University of the Free State during protests that disrupted academic activities on both the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses. Tensions escalated as students sought intervention from their student representative, leading to police intervention. University of the Western Cape students [disrupted classes](#) as a form of protest as they camped out in the university's student centre. A private security company reportedly [used](#) rubber bullets against protesting students, who threw stones at the university's entrance gate. The university confirmed that one student was injured during the protest.

On the same day, over 200 students from Cape Peninsula University of Technology [marched](#) to parliament in Cape Town to address accommodation issues. The protest led to fires and property damage. Police arrested a 20-year-old student, while two officers were injured in clashes. It was [reported](#) that police used stun grenades, teargas and water cannon against protesters.

On 14 February 2025, two former Wits University [students](#) began a hunger strike, later joined by others, to protest against financial exclusion caused by historic debt, despite the university allocating R1.8 billion (approx. US\$107,000) in financial aid in 2024. [Students](#) from the University of Cape Town also [held](#) protests, including a march to parliament for the Finance Minister's budget speech. The university's Vice Chancellor Mosa Moshabela [cautioned students](#) against staging 'disruptive protests', promising a shift 'from tolerance to intervention'.



EXCESSIVE FORCE AGAINST SERVICE DELIVERY-RELATED PROTESTS

Given increasing levels of socio-economic inequality, service delivery protests are common in South Africa and are frequently met with violence by security forces.

On 17 August 2023, protesters from Majoks township, Swellendam municipality, Western Cape province, [marched](#) to the municipal offices to hand over a memorandum to the mayor dealing with issues of neglect, including high electricity bills and racism. The police responded by declaring the march illegal and using rubber bullets. In the ensuing chaos, protesters set the municipal offices on fire and looted shops, particularly targeting a Bangladeshi shop owner. On 30 August 2023, a peaceful protest took place. Mayor Francois du Rand accepted their memorandum and promised to respond to their demands. On 20 September 2023, most of the protesters from Plakenspark informal settlement in the same municipality initiated a local shutdown in protest over unresolved issues with the town's indigent policy (a policy that deals with how much free electricity and water low-income households are entitled to). A stand-off occurred between police and protesters, with police using rubber bullets and teargas to disperse the crowd and prevent them accessing the highway. Some protesters threw stones and set fire to a municipal building and a vehicle.

In the context of the 2024 election, South Africa saw a surge in protests driven by dissatisfaction with service delivery. On 3 February 2024, residents in Dlunduma Village, Nkomazi Local Municipality, [organised a protest](#) over poor roads and water shortages. Protesters barred Independent Electoral Commission officials from accessing a voter registration station. Police confirmed they were deployed after residents disrupted the registration process. A Commission official was reportedly assaulted during the protest.

On 9 February 2024, a union representing Agri Eastern Cape agricultural workers staged a [protest](#) in response to the Bhisho Health Department reportedly planning to close a healthcare facility in Cathcart. It is reported that the protests later became violent. Police arrested at least nine people between the ages of 15 and 54 and charged them with offences including damage to essential infrastructure, malicious property damage, possession of unlicensed firearms and public violence. On 13 February 2024, police arrested four males aged 15 and 20 for allegedly stoning vehicles on the N6 highway.

On 13 March 2024, people in various parts of Durban [protested](#) against power and water outages. The protests stemmed from unattended issues since 27 February 2024, when eThekweni municipality workers, aligned with the South African Municipal Workers Union, went on strike over wages. Demands included a 15 per cent salary increase or a R4,000 (approx. US\$240) wage top-up to match salaries in other metropolitan areas. Residents in Lindelani, Durban, [blocked](#) roads with burning tyres and concrete bricks. The municipality [obtained](#) a court order banning workers from striking illegally and gave striking workers a return-to-work ultimatum. [According to](#) a media report, the municipality fired 88 people for participating in an illegal strike, suspended 81 others and sent 1,891 notices of misconduct for engaging in the strike. Police arrested five women at Thokoza hostel for allegedly throwing objects at them. The hostel had been without electricity for almost two weeks. On 14 March 2024, the Durban Magistrate's Court granted 13 eThekweni Municipality workers bail of R2,000 (approx. US\$120) each when they appeared on charges of public violence and, damaging, destroying or tampering with essential infrastructure during strike action on 4 March 2024.

On 2 May 2024, police in Taung, North West province [fired](#) rubber bullets at protesters who disrupted voting at polling stations. The protests reflected deep-rooted dissatisfaction with service delivery, particularly in poorer communities, and underscored the tension between citizens and the government during the election campaign

On 16 February 2025, residents of Phafola, Limpopo province, [frustrated](#) by years of inadequate service delivery, including crumbling infrastructure, lack of clean water and poor road conditions, staged a protest by blocking the N11 highway with burning tyres, demanding immediate action from the Mogalakwena Local



Municipality. Police responded with excessive force including rubber bullets, injuring several protesters. Police arrested 20 people and held them in custody ahead of their court appearance on 21 February 2025. The heavy-handed response drew criticism from local activists.

PROTESTS AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

In April 2025, people held several [protests](#) against gender-based violence, with activists demanding the government declare it a national emergency. The protests came after the [alleged rape](#) of a seven year-old girl at her school. Protests took place in Cape Town and at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. In a symbolic protest on 11 April 2025, [Women for Change](#) and several other CSOs organised a march with a funeral procession to the Union Buildings, symbolising the lives lost through gender-based violence. Activists [handed over](#) a petition signed by over 150,000 people to a government representative. In November 2025, the government recognised civil society's demands by [declaring](#) gender-based violence and femicide a national disaster.

PROTESTS CALLING FOR A CEASEFIRE AND AN END TO GENOCIDE IN GAZA

On 11 November 2023, tens of thousands [marched](#) through Cape Town in a protest organised by civil society groups and political parties to call for a ceasefire in Gaza. The following day, on 12 November 2023, pro-Israel protesters held a demonstration at the Sea Point Promenade in Cape Town, disrupted by Palestine solidarity protesters. Despite a heavy police presence separating the groups, clashes began as Palestine solidarity protesters attempted to take an Israel flag from a pro-Israel protester, and pro-Israel protesters attempted to antagonise the Palestine solidarity protesters. Police used stun grenades and water cannon to [disperse](#) the crowd and arrested four people.

According to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, there have been [several incidents](#) where people expressing solidarity with Palestine have been attacked by Israel supporters. In one case in May 2024, a video went viral on social media that showed pro-Israel protesters attacking a man and a woman during a Palestine solidarity protest. In the video, two men held the protester in a chokehold while a woman shouted, 'You would have been raped by Hamas, because you're beautiful'.

On 22 August 2024, CSOs and unions [gathered](#) outside the offices of coal mining company Glencore, calling for the company to stop supplying coal to Israel. The protesters said that by supplying coal to Israel, the mining company was fuelling the genocide in Palestine. Similarly, in April 2025, a protest [organised by](#) the South African Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Coalition was held outside the offices of South African mining company African Rainbow Minerals [against](#) its coal sales to Israel. The Richards Bay Coal Terminal, from which South Africa's coal is exported, is owned by a coalition of coal-mining companies, including African Rainbow Minerals alongside Anglo, Exxaro, Glencore and South32 Coal. In 2023, South Africa exported US\$238 million worth of goods to Israel, the main product being coal briquettes valued at US\$79 million.

In October 2024, to mark a year of Israel's genocide in Gaza, people [gathered](#) to protest in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In Johannesburg, people marched to the US consulate in Sandton amid a heavy police presence. The South African Zionist Federation condemned the protests.

Peaceful protests continued in 2025. For example, protests [were staged](#) for Nakba Day in May 2025.

PROTESTS IN THE MINING SECTOR

On 7 December 2023, at least 447 miners held a sit-in [protest](#) against dismissals at the Springs Gold One Mine near Johannesburg. The protest was linked to the murder of a 55-year-old gold mine investigator, Elliot Daniso, who was shot dead by unknown suspects while travelling with his family two days before. Daniso was investigating instigators who faced disciplinary hearings related to an alleged forced sit-in during an October 2023 protest, which led to the dismissal of 50 employees. In October 2023, hundreds



of miners refused to come above ground for almost three days in protest against the company's failure to recognise the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union.

On 6 June 2024, community members and activists from the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation [held a protest](#) in Mtubatuba, northern KwaZulu-Natal, against coal-mining company Tendele. This came after the company expanded its mining operation. It is reported that the company went ahead with bulldozers, excavators and machinery without an approved Environmental Impact Assessment and despite not having informed or consulted the community. According to protest organisers, the company's private security officers, who carried arms, threatened protesters. Police who were present at the protest failed to guarantee the safety of protesters.

On the same day, another protest was staged at the head office of the holding company of Tendele Coal Mine in Johannesburg. The organisers expressed their concerns about the rise of intimidation and threats against activists and community members. In October 2022, [Fikile Ntshangase](#), a senior member of Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation, was gunned down at her home in Ophondweni for refusing to back down and make way for mining.

EXPRESSION

South Africa has experienced a significant improvement in press freedom, moving 11 positions to be ranked 27th by the Reporters without Borders (RSF) [World Press Freedom Index](#). RSF noted that South Africa has a well-established investigative journalism culture. However, there are concerns about harassment and intimidation of journalists, particularly women journalists, who face online harassment.

TARGETED FOR EXPRESSING PALESTINE SOLIDARITY

Imtiaz Sooliman, founder of the humanitarian aid organisation Gift of the Givers South Africa, has been [subjected to](#) harassment due to its work. The organisation, which employs 600 people and has offices in nine countries, including Palestine, Somalia and Yemen, provides aid to Gaza. Local pro-Israel groups have accused Sooliman and the organisation of funding 'terror groups' and having an 'Islamist agenda', claims Sooliman strongly denies. Pro-Israel groups have also attempted to investigate Gift of the Givers' funding amid an apparent social media campaign to [discredit](#) Sooliman.

Lawrence Nowosenetz, a former member of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, a local Zionist lobby group, petitioned the Helen Suzman Foundation, a CSO whose patron was Jewish, to prevent Sooliman delivering an annual lecture in 2024. The foundation refused to cancel the lecture. In a [statement](#), Africa 4 Palestine condemned the attacks, stating: 'These unfounded accusations of terrorism reflect a disturbing trend aimed at targeting individuals and organisations that advocate for Palestinian rights and confront the ongoing atrocities in Gaza'.

In May 2024, a Zionist [stabbed and killed](#) Halima Hoosen-Preston, a Muslim woman who had spoken out in solidarity with Palestine, in Glenmore, KwaZulu Natal. Her husband and 14-year-old son were critically injured in the attack. According to the police, the [suspect stated](#) that he had stabbed them because they supported Palestine. The South African Muslim Network condemned the killing with 'contempt and disgust'.

ATTACKS ON AND DETENTION OF JOURNALISTS

There have been several attacks on journalists while doing their jobs, including physical violence, by state and non-state personnel. There also have been incidents of journalists being subjected to detention, intimidation and judicial harassment.



For several years, News24 journalist Karyn Maughan has been subjected to online harassment and intimidation and a SLAPP brought by former President Jacob Zuma after she published details of Zuma's medical condition. In a landmark ruling on 7 June 2023, a high court [ruled](#) that Zuma's attempt to privately prosecute Maughan was an abuse of power and a direct infringement of media freedom. According to the ruling, Zuma must [pay](#) Maughan's legal costs. The judgment noted the online harassment that Maughan has been subjected to. Maughan has been referred to as 'a thing, a bitch, a lying bitch, a white bitch, a witch, a racist, a pig, an alcoholic, a criminal, a hypocrite, a propaganda journalist, a racist, a servant of white privilege, a hack and an askari [traitor]'. The court [agreed](#) that the case was SLAPP.

On 19 September 2023, while covering a protest by Extinction Rebellion at Standard Bank's headquarters, Daily Maverick reporter Lerato Mutsila was [manhandled](#) by the bank's security officers. They deleted photos and videos from her phone and violently removed her from the bank's premises. Mutsila claimed she faced intimidation and physical aggression, as at least four male security guards, acting under the instructions of the bank's group manager for Internal Protection Services, forcibly expelled her from the building. Mutsila filed a charge of assault and unlawful deprivation of property with the South African Police Service in response to the incident.

In a separate incident, eNCA reporter Hloni Mtimkulu was [physically manhandled](#) and pushed out of a South African Post Office branch as she was interviewing government grant recipients on their recent experiences of non-payment of grants.

On 30 October 2023, seven unidentified people [assaulted](#) journalists Jessica Bobo and Sbu Maingo of Mpuma Kapa TV while they covered protests about the alleged hijacking of government housing, where people not on a waiting list take possession of a property, in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape province. While Bobo was not injured, Maingo sustained injuries to his face, neck and ribs and required medical treatment for severe tissue damage.

On 24 December 2023, police [arrested](#) journalist Thomo Nkgadima on charges of intimidation and trespassing after he took pictures of a mayor's house in Burgersfort, Limpopo province. Nkgadima appeared in court on 27 December 2023 after being held for 48 hours, and was denied bail. On 29 December 2023, the court released him on bail of R1,000 (approx. US\$53).

On 18 May 2024, in the run-up to the election, men [assaulted](#) several journalists, including sexual assault, during a uMkhonto we Sizwe party rally. The incidents took place as men dressed in military fatigues formed [a protective cordon](#) around party leader Jacob Zuma. The men took aggressive action against a group of journalists trying to film and photograph Zuma's arrival at the rally. One journalist [reported](#) being pushed and falling over, while another reported being sexually assaulted as a man held her breasts and then violently pushed her away.

On 25 April 2024, police [arrested](#) freelance journalist Sandiso Phaliso while he was photographing a crime scene in Cape Town and held him for around two hours. Although he identified himself as a journalist to the police, they arrested him on allegations of obstructing police work. Phaliso was released on condition that he delete all photographs of the crime scene. On 26 April 2024, GroundUp editor Nathan Geffen wrote to the Independent Police Investigative Directorate to raise concerns about Phaliso's wrongful arrest.

On 5 April 2025, the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) [raised the alarm](#) over a video that showed a police officer shoving and shouting at Nqobile Madlala, a woman journalist from Newzroom Afrika, inside a police station. The statement said: 'South Africa is a country besieged by misogynistic, chauvinistic men who see nothing wrong with abuse and failing to see women as their equals; hence, such behaviour against Madlala is unbecoming, particularly perpetrated by an officer of the law'.



LEGAL LANDSCAPE FOR EXPRESSION REMAINS A CHALLENGE

On 6 December 2023, then Deputy Minister of Justice John Jeffery [announced](#) that parliament had repealed the common law crime of criminal defamation, a long-term media demand. The Judicial Matters Amendment Bill's clause 35(2) [acknowledges](#) that the UN and other international bodies have expressed concerns about the negative impact of criminal defamation laws on journalists and have advocated for their abolition. South Africa joins other African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho and Zimbabwe, in repealing criminal defamation laws. This aligns with international and regional standards on the protection of freedom of expression and the media. On 3 April 2024, President Cyril Ramaphosa [signed](#) the bill into law.

Despite this positive step, there are several [other laws](#) in the pipeline that could have [significant consequences](#) for freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information. The General Intelligence Laws Amendment bill [threatens](#) to introduce security vetting of individuals and institutions of national security interest and create a bulk surveillance regime with almost no safeguards. It poses a clear threat to media independence with the requirement of vetting for those who access national 'key points', which includes the national broadcaster.

The [Cybercrimes Act 2021](#) seeks to ensure online safety, but may work to limit journalists' access to leaked information. The Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill aims to combat racism and other forms of intolerance. However, it criminalises speech based on a broad understanding of hate speech, which could result in unconstitutional limitations on the right to freedom of expression.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES TO JOURNALISTS' WORK

On 28 April 2024, several press freedom organisations, including Media Monitoring Africa and SANEF, [raised concerns](#) after reports that the Editor in Chief of the South African Broadcasting Corporation had been called by the State Security Agency for a security vetting process, including an invasive lie-detector test. A week earlier, President Ramaphosa aired his concerns to an African National Congress election committee that local media had 'no right to be negative' towards the ruling party. In a [statement](#), Angela Quintal, head of the Committee to Protect Journalists' Africa programme said: 'It reeks of convenience that just a week after President Cyril Ramaphosa aired grievances about media coverage of the ANC, the State Security Agency under his control suddenly aims to subject SABC top editor Moshoeshoe Monare to the same security clearance as spy chiefs, including evaluating loyalty to the State'.

On 15 May 2025, some members of the media who had been invited to cover Ramaphosa's visit to the Port of Ngqura, Eastern Cape province were [excluded](#) from covering it. In a statement, SANEF stated that only a select few television cameras were allowed to follow Ramaphosa, while others, including radio, print and online journalists, 'were left waiting idly for more than two hours without access, information, or updates'. They had no opportunity to ask questions and no explanation was offered for their exclusion. SANEF highlighted that this is not the first time Ramaphosa has avoided media engagement, as he last took questions from the media in 2023. SANEF stated, 'The continued marginalisation of journalists, particularly by the highest office in the land, sets a worrying precedent and must be discouraged'.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the South African government

- React swiftly and effectively to harassment, threats and killings of human rights defenders and proactively create a safe and enabling environment for them to carry out their important work without fear of reprisals. This includes publicly recognising, at the highest levels of local and national authorities, the legitimate work of AbM and all human rights defenders and the need for their protection.
- Urgently adopt legislation that recognises and protects human rights defenders in inclusive consultation with civil society, including human rights organisations.
- Impartially, timeously and effectively investigate cases of harassment, threats and killings of AbM members and environmental and land rights defenders to ensure those responsible are brought to justice.
- Urgently finalise the Whistleblower Protection Framework and introduce the Whistleblower Protections Bill to parliament.
- Work in close collaboration with civil society, including media freedom groups, to develop an anti-SLAPP regulation, using the draft [model anti-SLAPP law](#).
- Respect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in line with international standards and ensure that authorities refrain from arbitrary detention of protesters and the use of excessive force.
- Respect the right to media freedom and ensure media independence.
- Conduct independent investigations into cases of violence against journalists.
- Promptly review presidential media engagement protocols to ensure that journalists have equal access and opportunity to pose questions to the president. The presidency and its communications unit should commit to open engagement with the South African media.