



COVID-19 lockdown: Zimbabweans trust police and military, but not enough to criticize them

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 375 | Stephen Ndoma

Summary

On 4 April 2020, the Zimbabwe government deployed the army to help police enforce a national lockdown aimed at combating the spread of COVID-19. As of mid-July, police and soldiers continued to jointly staff roadblocks and conduct patrols in all urban centers and residential suburbs to ensure that the public complies with the lockdown measures.

But allegations of brutality suggest that some security agents are abusing their authority under the lockdown. Pictures circulated widely on social media of injuries suffered by two sisters who, while in a queue to buy food in Bulawayo, were reportedly handcuffed, verbally abused, and physically assaulted with batons for several hours (Tshili, 2020). Three men are suing the police commissioner general, claiming they suffered a broken arm, hearing problems, and dislocated shoulders during beatings by the police (Ncube, 2020). In response to an urgent chamber application by Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) and a woman who was bitten by dogs, the country's High Court has ordered soldiers, police, and other state security agents to respect human rights, dignity, and fundamental freedoms while enforcing the country's lockdown regulations (Dube, 2020).

Considering that such cases may just be the tip of the iceberg, since many others likely go unreported, the question is who will police the police and the military during this indefinite lockdown. Based on 2018 Afrobarometer survey data, this dispatch finds that while a slim majority of Zimbabweans expressed trust in the police and the military, most citizens did not feel free to criticize them. Overall, popular perceptions of the military's pre-pandemic role and conduct were more positive than negative, but opposition supporters, urban residents, and highly educated citizens were more likely to express reservations.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. 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 and commissioned by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 2,400 adult Zimbabweans in each of two pre-election surveys between late April and early July 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. The most recent full Afrobarometer survey in Zimbabwe was conducted in January-February 2017 with a sample size of 1,200, producing a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points.

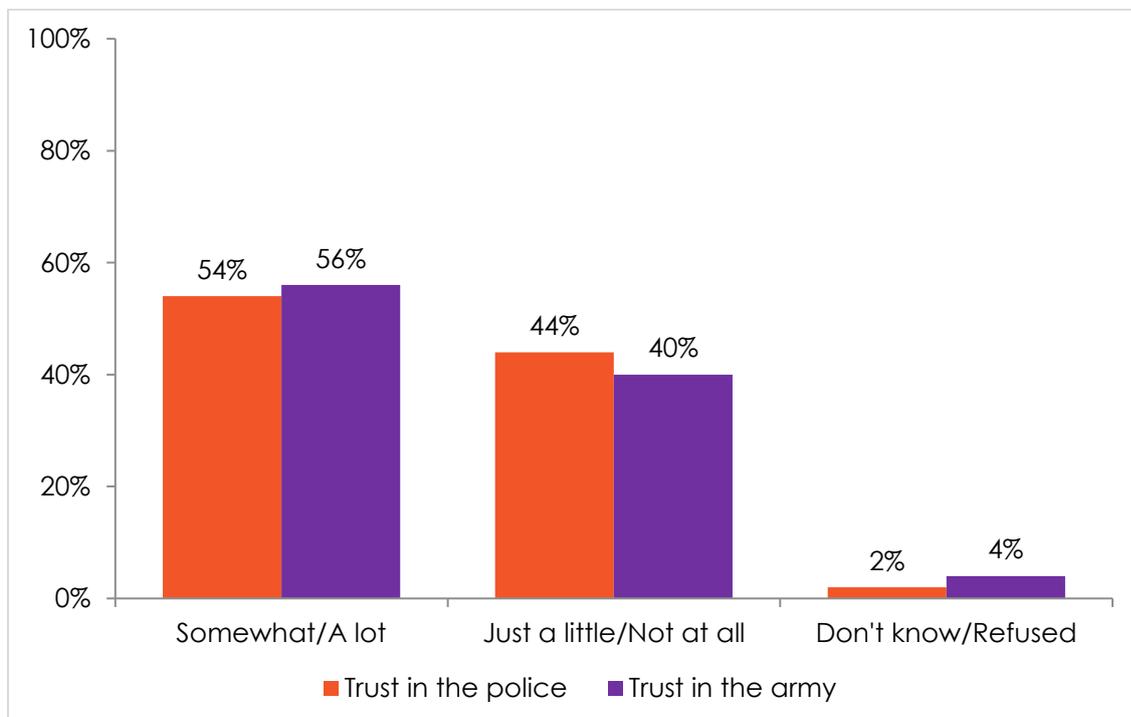
Key findings

- More than half of Zimbabweans said they trust the police (54%) and the army (56%) “somewhat” or “a lot.”
 - Trust in the police and military is low among opposition MDC-T Chamisa supporters (41% and 37%, respectively) and citizens with post-secondary education (33% and 34%).
- A majority of Zimbabweans said they feel “not very free” or “not at all free” to criticize the police (59%) and the army (74%).
- A majority of respondents said the military “often” or “always” safeguards the country’s Constitution and the rule of law (57%), helps the police maintain law and order (56%), and operates in a professional manner and respects the rights of all citizens (54%).
- But this view is shared by fewer than half of urban residents, highly educated citizens, and MDC-T Chamisa supporters.

Trust in the police and the army

The police and the military are key institutions in Zimbabwe, historically linked closely to the ruling ZANU-PF party (International Security Sector Advisory Team, 2019). As of mid-2018, a slim majority of citizens said they trust the police (54%) and the army (56%) “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 1). About four out of 10 said they trust them “just a little” or “not at all” (44% for the police, 40% for the army).

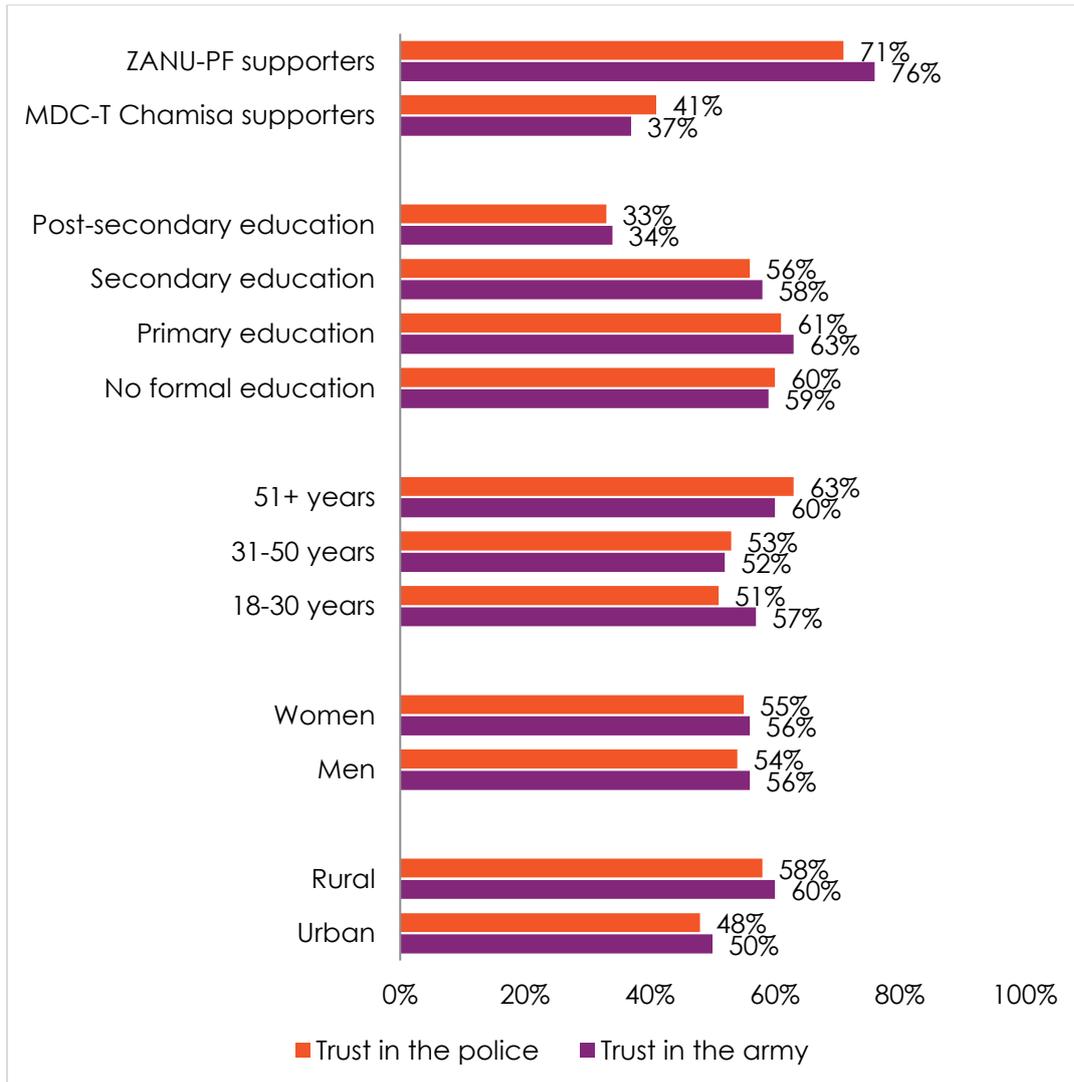
Figure 1: Trust in the police and the army | Zimbabwe | July 2018



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Trust in these two state institutions was fairly consistent across most key socio-demographic groups but varied greatly by political-party affiliation,¹ with ZANU-PF supporters roughly twice as likely to express trust as MDC-T Chamisa adherents (Figure 2). Respondents with post-secondary education were far less likely to say they trust the police and military than their less-educated counterparts. And expressed trust in both agencies was 10 percentage points higher in rural than in urban areas.

Figure 2: Trust in the police and the army | by socio-demographic group
 | Zimbabwe | July 2018

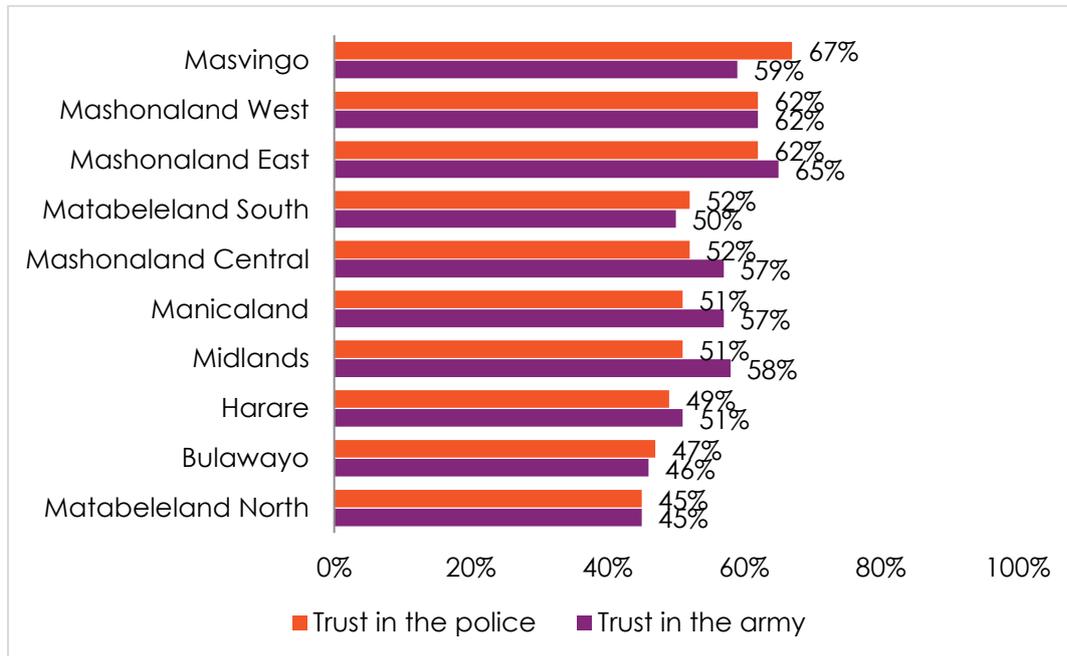


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

Geographically, trust levels were highest in Masvingo, Mashonaland West, and Mashonaland East provinces and lowest in Matabeleland North and Bulawayo (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?"

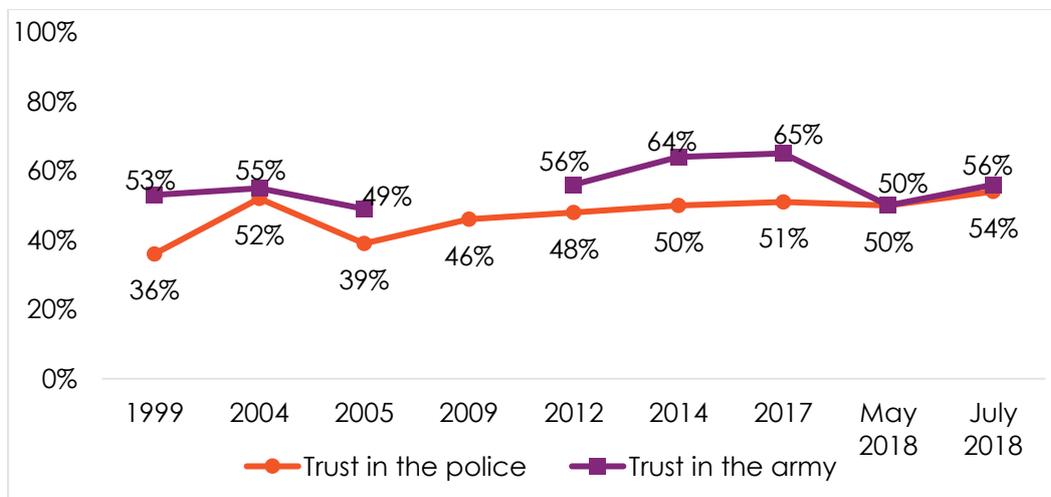
Figure 3: Trust in the police and the army | by province | Zimbabwe | July 2018



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

Over time, the military has generally enjoyed greater popular trust than the police, both in Zimbabwe and across the continent. In Afrobarometer's Round 7 surveys in 34 African countries in 2016/2018, Zimbabweans' trust levels for the police and the military were almost identical to the 34-country averages. But in Zimbabwe, a steep drop between February 2017 (65%) and May 2018 (50%) wiped out the military's advantage on this indicator (Figure 4). One can speculate that this 15-percentage-point drop may have been due to the role the military played in "Operation Restore Legacy" in November 2017, which saw former President Robert Mugabe resign under pressure from the military. On the other hand, trust in the police has been on a slow increase since 2005, though it has never exceeded a slim majority.

Figure 4: Trust in the army and the police | Zimbabwe | 1999-2018

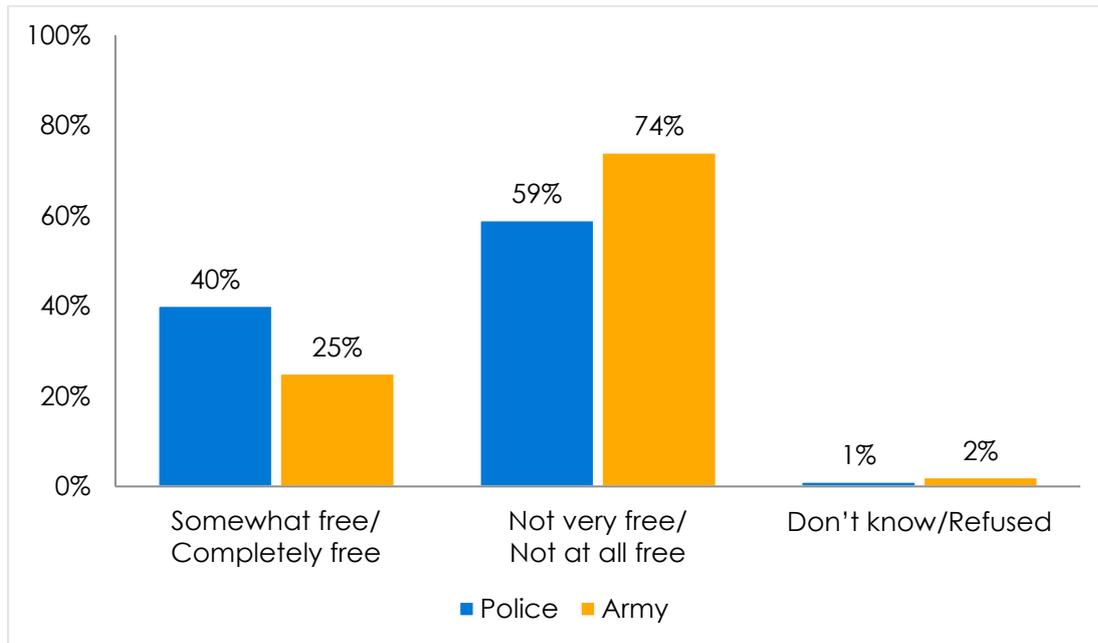


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

Freedom to criticize the police and the army

Do Zimbabweans feel free to criticize these two state institutions? How free are people under lockdown conditions to report any abuse that they may suffer at the hands of law enforcement agents? A majority of respondents said they feel “not very free” or “not at all free” to criticize the police (59%). Even more (74%) feel unfree to criticize the military (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Freedom to criticize police and army | Zimbabwe | July 2018



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following: The police? The army?*

Urban and rural residents, different age groups, and even ZANU-PF and MDC-T Chamisa supporters differed little in how free they feel to criticize the police and the army.

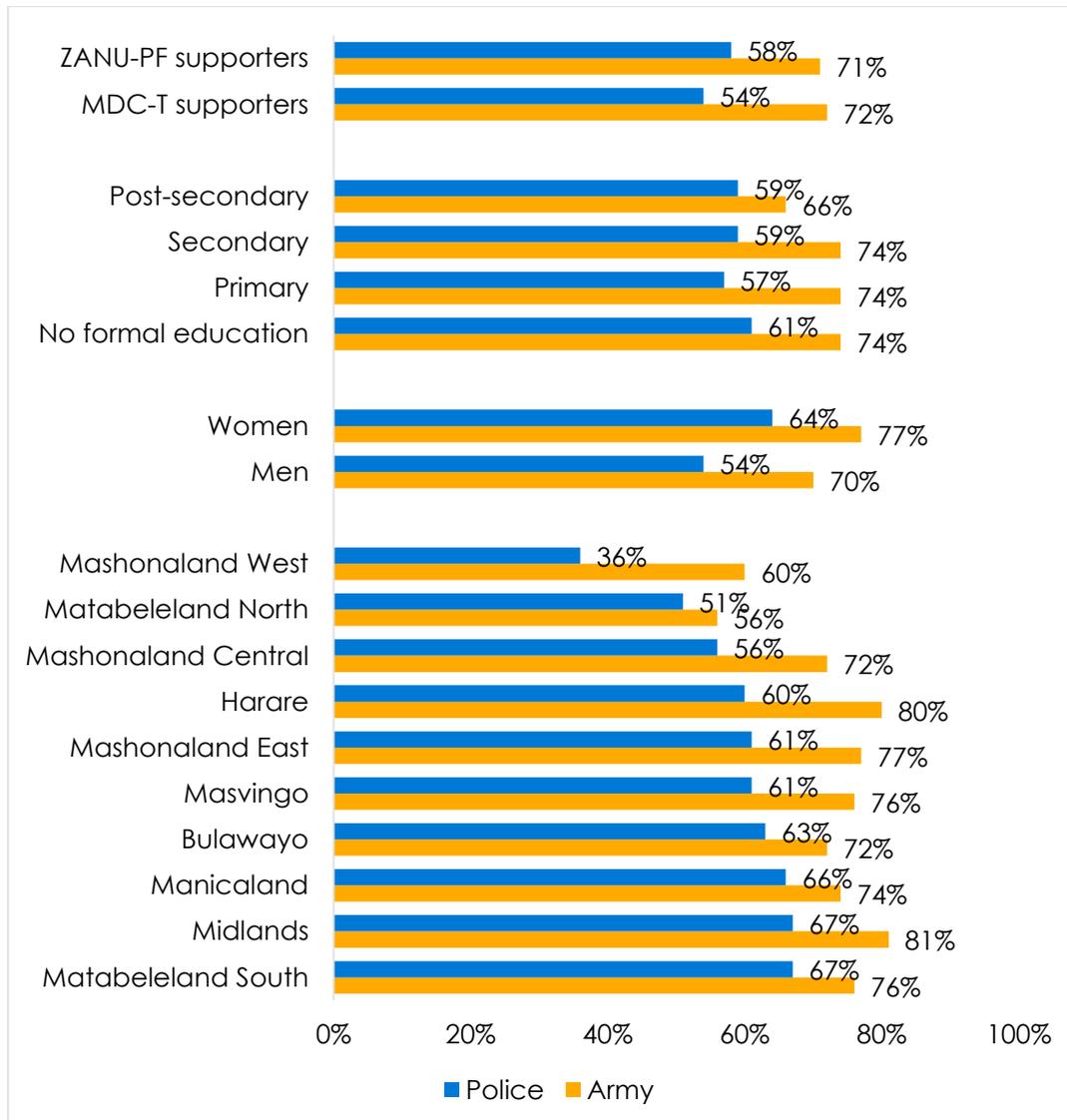
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Respondents with post-secondary education were more likely to feel free to criticize the military (though not the police) than their less-educated counterparts, and women felt less free than men with regard to both agencies (Figure 6).

Geographically, the Midlands province (81%) and Harare (80%) had the highest proportions of respondents who said they feel unfree to criticize the army. With regard to voicing

criticism of the police, residents of Matabeleland South (67%), Midlands (67%), and Manicaland (66%) were most likely to say they feel unfree.

Figure 6: Not free to criticize police and army | by socio-demographic group
 | Zimbabwe | July 2018



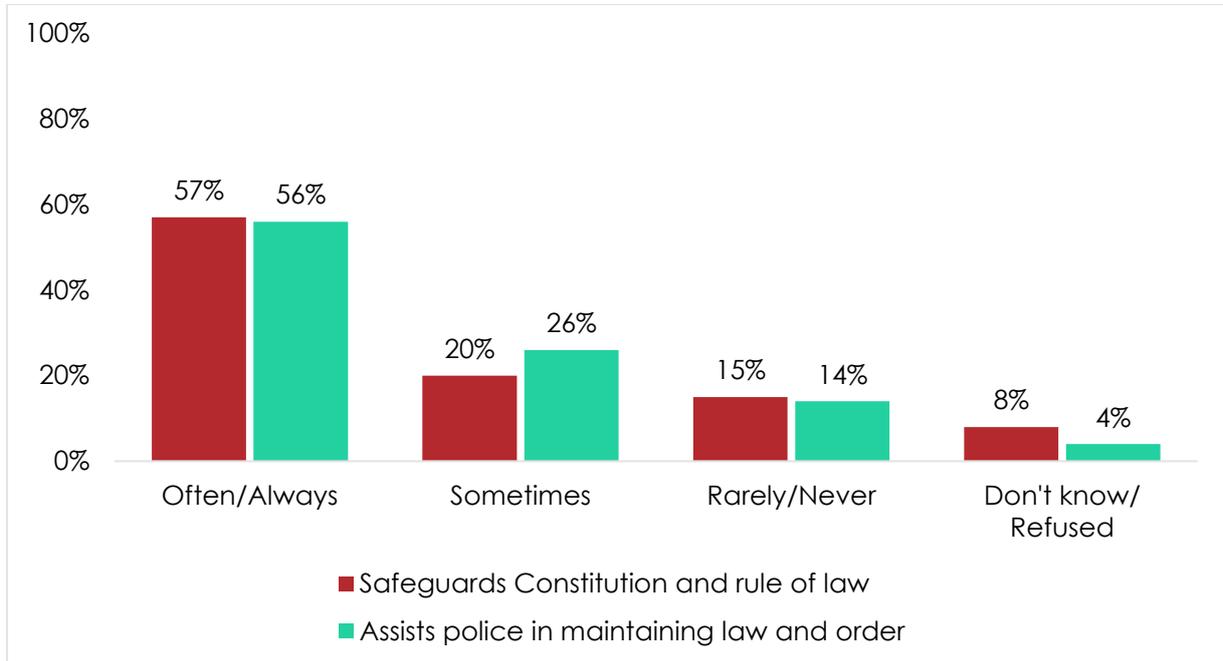
Respondents were asked: In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following: The police? The army? (% who said “not very free” or “not at all free”)

Perceptions of military's role and conduct

In general, Zimbabweans' perceptions of the military's role and conduct were more positive than negative. Asked to what extent the army safeguards the country's Constitution and the rule of law, a majority (57%) said it does so “often” or “always,” while 20% said “sometimes” and 15% said “rarely” or “never” (Figure 7).

Views were similar on the extent to which the military helps the police maintain law and order, with 56% saying this is “often” or “always” the case.

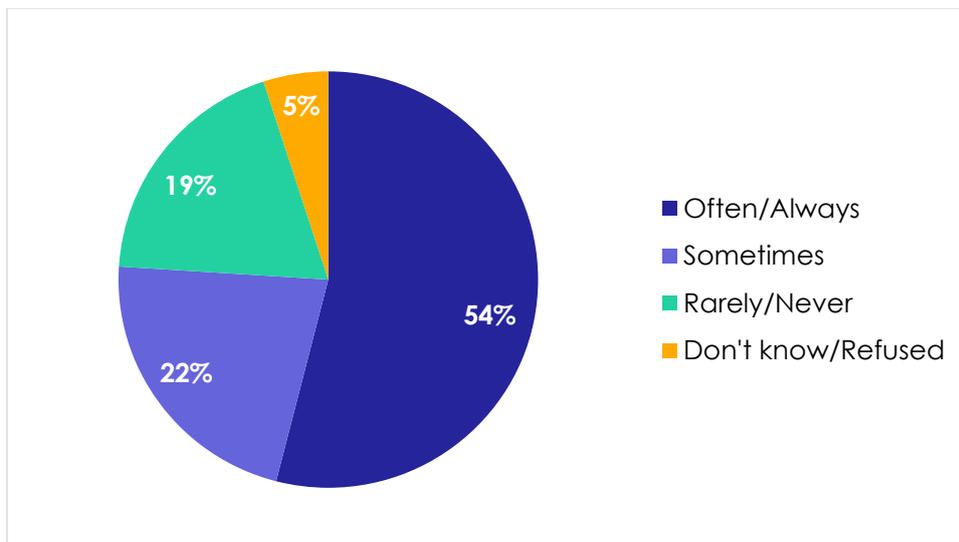
Figure 7: Military safeguards Constitution and rule of law, assists police in maintaining law and order | Zimbabwe | July 2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent do the military of our country:
 Safeguard Zimbabwe's Constitution and the rule of law?
 Assist the police in maintaining law and order?

Overall, a slim majority (54%) of Zimbabweans said the military "often" or "always" operates professionally and respects the rights of all citizens, a 4-percentage-point improvement from early 2017. However, four out of 10 held a different view, with 22% saying this is only "sometimes" and 19% saying it is "rarely" or "never" true (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Military operates professionally and respects citizens' rights | Zimbabwe | May 2018

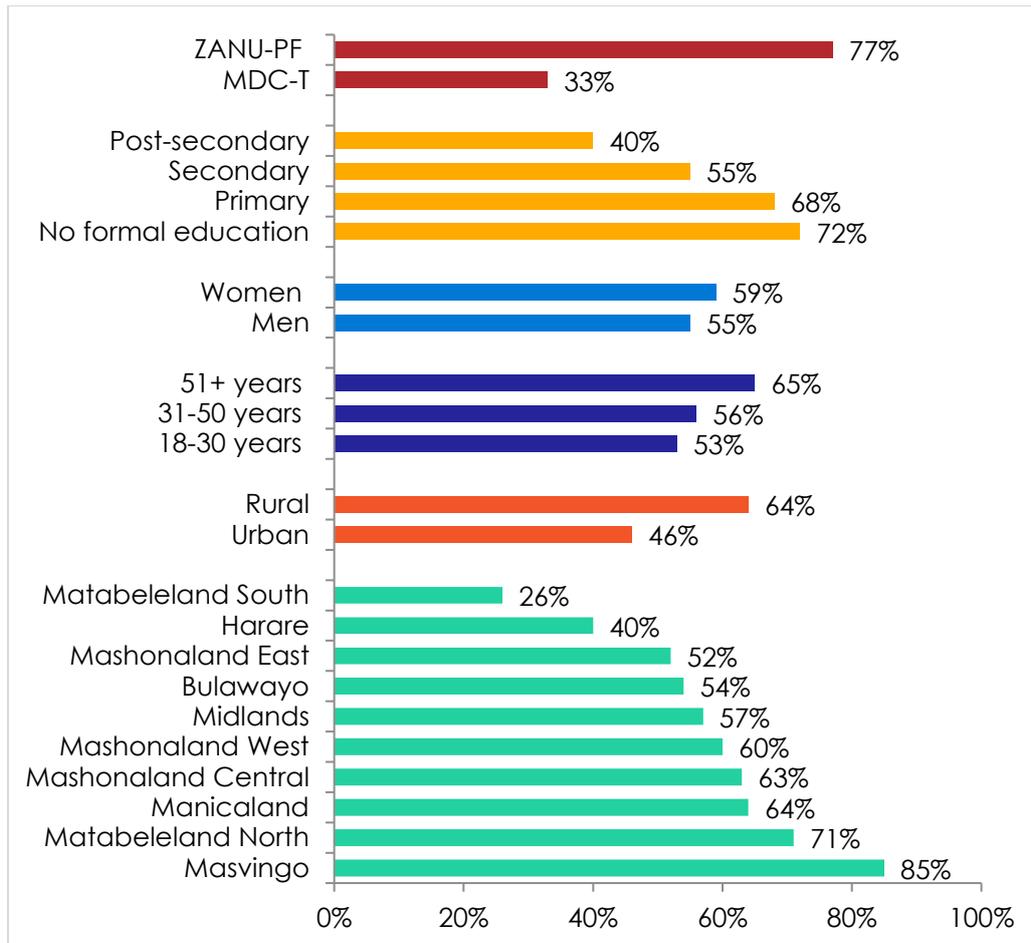


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent do the military of our country operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

The view that the military generally safeguards the Constitution and the rule of law was more pronounced among ZANU-PF supporters (77%), respondents with no formal education (72%), older citizens (65%), and rural residents (64%) (Figure 9). Only one-third (33%) of MDC-T Chamisa adherents and one-fourth (26%) of Matabeleland South residents agreed.

The response pattern was very similar when it comes to the military's role in assisting the police in maintaining law and order and its professional conduct (not shown).

Figure 9: Military safeguards Constitution and rule of law | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | July 2018



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent do the military of our country safeguard Zimbabwe's Constitution and the rule of law?*

Conclusion

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and attendant measures to contain its spread, public trust in Zimbabwe's police and military fell well short of overwhelming. Perhaps most disturbing is that a majority of citizens said they do not feel free to criticize these institutions, which may prevent them from reporting abuses.

Significant proportions of the population also doubted the military's professionalism and its role in safeguarding the rule of law.

Given their mandate to enforce unpopular lockdown measures, the police and military need to build public trust and cooperation to succeed.

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Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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