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Zimbabwe's cyber city: Urban utopia or surveillance menace?

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In a fertile stretch of fields and farms dubbed New Harare, Zimbabwe is building a high-tech "cyber city" a world away from the traffic-clogged streets and overcrowded slums of the country's nearby capital.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa, eager to highlight positive news about the country's troubled economy, launched the first $500-million stage of the Zim Cyber City project last year in partnership with Dubai-based company Mulk International.

It could require a total investment of $60 billion, according to Mulk, a sum the government has said it is optimistic of meeting with financing from foreign and local investors.

A new parliament building - paid for by China - has already been built in Mount Hampden, nicknamed New Harare for the government's plan to make it the country's new capital.

Eventually, the plan for Zim Cyber City is to build upmarket residential areas, shopping malls, modern offices and information technology hubs.

But even as some commentators doubt whether the project will come to fruition, digital rights campaigners are worried about plans to put surveillance systems at its heart.

Mulk International says it will install "surveillance technology that is directly connected to law enforcement authorities", saying the facilities will ensure the safety of people living and working there.

Rights groups fear any data gathered in Zim Cyber City could be misused by authorities in a country where security forces have been accused of violence and arbitrary arrests targeting protesters and opposition activists.

"There is going to be so much increased surveillance of citizens by the government," said Tawanda Mugari, a chief technology officer and co-founder of the Digital Society Africa (DSA), an advocacy group.

"They can use them to their own advantage, to identify people," Mugari said.

Information minister Monica Mutsvangwa said the new city's security systems would simply be used to keep residents safe.

"Nobody's privacy will be compromised," she told Context (a Thomson Reuters Foundation media platform), giving no further details about the plans.

Facial recognition fears

There is particular concern about the possible use of facial recognition technology, which uses artificial intelligence (AI) to match live images of a person captured on cameras against a database of images.

"If there are going to be cameras it means data relating to facial recognition is going to be collected," said Nompilo Simanje, an information and communication technologies (ICT) and legal expert at the Media Institute of Southern Africa-Zimbabwe.

In countries where facial recognition tech is being rolled out, authorities say it is needed to bolster security, prevent crime and find missing children, but critics say there is little evidence that the technology reduces crime.

It can also be used to crack down on dissent by repressive governments and is problematic in the absence of data protection laws, rights groups say.

In 2021, Zimbabwe enacted a cyber and data protection law, but critics say the legislation fails to strike the right balance between protecting citizens' privacy and enabling mass surveillance.

"If there is a robbery it is easier to identify people using footage from those cameras. But if there is a genuine protest it is then easier for them to identify who was leading the protests," said Mugari.

Echoing government officials, executives from Mulk International said CCTV cameras posed no risk to people's privacy.

"Nobody's privacy will be encroached," Nawab Shaji Ul Mulk, a chairperson at the conglomerate, told Context. "Each outlet will have its own regular surveillance camera ... the management will not be involved in those surveillance cameras."

Smart surveillance?

Zim Cyber City is not the first smart city project to raise surveillance concerns.

Saudi Arabia's plans for a futuristic city called The Line include paying residents for sharing their data, but rights experts have expressed concern about how the data will be used in light of the country's poor human rights record.

In Egypt, where the New Administrative Capital is taking shape in the desert, digital rights campaigners have voiced similar worries about the more than 6,000 surveillance cameras keeping watch over the city's first residents.

Zimbabwe has already experimented with surveillance systems in law enforcement. Police have installed CCTV cameras for traffic monitoring in Harare and the second-biggest city of Bulawayo with help from Chinese tech giant Huawei.

But rights groups say several incidents have shone a spotlight on possible abuses.

In June last year, the communications minister, Jenfan Muswere, commissioned a Telecommunications Traffic Monitoring System (TTMS) at the Harare offices of Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ).

POTRAZ has said the system aims to track mobile phone traffic in real-time to monitor the revenue operators generate, but digital technology experts said it would enable authorities to eavesdrop on every call in the country.

In the run-up to the country's 2018 general election, many people suspect voter data stored by the country's electoral commission was leaked to the ruling Zanu PF party.

Thousands of mobile phone users received campaign messages from an unknown number mobilising them to vote for the party.

The electoral commission denied the allegations of a data leak at the time.

Controls

Strict controls will be needed at Zim Cyber City to prevent possible abuses, said Mugari.

"For instance, a shop needs to disclose to their customers that they are collecting what information from them and how they are safeguarding it from malicious actors. All that needs to be transparent," he said.

Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure data is only used for the purposes for which it is collected, said Simanje.

"It is important that these cameras should not open a floodgate for mass surveillance," she said.

"When data is given to law enforcement agents it should be only for investigating a crime and should not be used for any other purposes outside that," she added.

In Harare, a city built for 200 000 people but now home to 1.6 million, many residents are skeptical about the Zim Cyber City project as they grapple with daily difficulties from corruption to uncollected garbage and water-borne diseases caused by ageing water and sewer infrastructure.

A widespread lack of confidence in state institutions is also fuelling their surveillance and privacy fears about the project.

"I don't trust the government with my data," said Chris Mutisi, a resident of a medium-density suburb outside Harare near Mount Hampden. "They are capable of doing the worst."