



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Pakistan

February 2025

Context

The enabling environment in Pakistan in early 2025 reflects ongoing challenges and progress across its political, economic, and civil society spheres. Politically, the country continues to wrestle with instability and governance issues, which impact the space available for democratic processes and civic participation. Efforts to mediate political tensions are in place, though the state's measures to control online activities and public discourse raise concerns about the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Civil society in Pakistan faces regulatory and bureaucratic obstacles. Despite these challenges, there are vibrant segments within civil society that actively engage in advocacy and development initiatives. Fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech, peaceful assembly, and press, face significant restrictions. The government's control over media and the internet impacts these freedoms directly. Despite these challenges, there are ongoing debates and some level of engagement within civil society and among political actors to address these issues and advocate for greater openness and respect for human rights.

Despite the significant obstacles, the array of reforms and initiatives, including those related to the enabling environment for civil society, suggests a critical, potentially transformative period in Pakistan's development. The extent to which these efforts will succeed hinges on the country's ability to cultivate a more inclusive political landscape, safeguard fundamental freedoms, and bolster civil society's role and effectiveness.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

In Pakistan, the respect and protection of fundamental freedoms present a multifaceted challenge, contrasted against the backdrop of constitutional guarantees. [The Constitution of Pakistan](#) articulates a range of freedoms, including freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and religion. However, the implementation and enforcement of these guarantees often fall short due to a variety of systemic issues. The freedom of the press and expression is regularly compromised by censorship, intimidation, and violence against journalists, committed by both state and non-state actors, with the state frequently invoking security laws to quash dissent. This is evident in recent developments such as the installation of a [national firewall](#) that can track social media content in real time and block or significantly limit the visibility of social media content deemed propaganda by the government. Internet censorship is thus relatively common in Pakistan and is often implemented by authorities citing reasons related to maintaining security and public order. Digital censorship ultimately serves to suppress dissent and curb civil liberties, raising concerns about the fundamental human rights in Pakistan. This censorship has included internet shutdowns, such as in February and November 2024.

Enjoyment of the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly is further hampered by the entrenched roles of military and intelligence agencies in politics and especially in the political party Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI), undermining democratic processes and restricting political engagement, especially for opposition groups. In October 2024, security personnel employed [unlawful use of force including lethal and less-lethal weapons against the supporters of PTI](#) to force them to evacuate the town square D-Chowk. The resulting deaths and mass detention of protesters has been referred to as "[Islamabad massacre](#)".

The extent of human rights violations in 2024 included the [Pakistan military court sentencing 60 civilians to up to 10 years in prison](#). The prosecution of these individuals, who were supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan and had attacked military installations after he got arrested, lacked transparency, independent scrutiny and fair trial guarantees, as noted

by international observers, including the EU. Judicial independence is formally upheld by the Constitution, but in practice, the judiciary faces pressures from the military, which affects its ability to function impartially. We have seen this during the [26th Constitutional Amendment](#), granting authority to Parliament to appoint the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. These threats to judicial independence undermine democratic guarantees meant to protect fundamental freedoms from arbitrary interference and thus enable further threats against civil society.

Moreover, cultural tolerance remains strained as religious and ethnic minorities continue to suffer under [discriminatory practices and laws like those on blasphemy](#), which are often misused to settle personal disputes or incite violence. [According to the report of Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights \(NCHR\)](#), the number of people arrested and jailed on blasphemy charges in the first half of 2024 increased threefold compared to 2023, amounting to a total of 767 prisoners incarcerated for blasphemy as of July 2024. In addition, human rights organizations in Pakistan have raised concerns about the use of criminal and online defamation laws to target journalists, activists, and critics of the government. Thus, while Pakistan's Constitution promises a framework supportive of fundamental freedoms, the reality on the ground indicates significant gaps between these constitutional promises and their actual realization.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Pakistan have faced significant challenges in recent years, particularly in terms of regulatory hurdles, financial scrutiny, and public perception. One of the main issues is the stringent regulatory environment that governs NGOs, which includes a complex registration process under various acts such as the Societies Act 1860 and the Trust Act 1882. This legal framework often hampers the operational flexibility of NGOs by imposing strict controls and accountability measures that are more aligned with corporate governance models than voluntary sector operations. Under the newly passed [Societies Registration \(Amendment\) Act, 2024](#), not only NGOs but also religious seminaries that are not yet registered are required to process their registration within a period of six months. The amalgamation of NGOs and religious seminaries under the same registration act could have a negative influence e.g. if restrictions are put in place due to concerns about activities at some religious seminaries, such as radical teachings or financial mismanagement, there could be a broader reputational impact on all organizations registered under the same act. This might affect public and donor trust in NGOs.

Moreover, NGOs are often targeted under the guise of national security concerns, especially when their work intersects with sensitive areas such as rights advocacy or capacity development. The government's focus on security has at times resulted in increased scrutiny of NGOs, complicating their operations by requiring unnecessary documentation and approval processes, and affecting their ability to deliver services effectively. Additionally, the Anti-Terrorism Act and the National Action Plan provide the legal framework for the government to scrutinise NGOs and place excessive operational burdens on them, often without transparent or fair procedures, sometimes leading NGOs to lose funding or shut down.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

NGOs in Pakistan that focus primarily on advocacy face distinct financial challenges compared to those involved in direct service delivery or development projects. Advocacy and human

rights-based organisations generally do not produce tangible outcomes that can be easily quantified. Funding for advocacy and human rights work is therefore often less readily available than for service delivery. Many grant makers prefer to fund projects with clear, tangible outputs like education, health services, or poverty alleviation. Advocacy work, which often involves influencing policy, raising awareness, and other less tangible outcomes, may be seen as less appealing to funders seeking immediate results.

The regulatory environment in Pakistan has become increasingly challenging for NGOs, particularly those involved in advocacy. Stricter laws regarding foreign funding and activities of NGOs can limit access to international grants, which are a major source of funding for advocacy work. While previous restrictions on foreign funding imposed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs Division have recently been [declared null and void](#) by the Sindh High Court, new barriers are expected following a notification by the federal cabinet in September 2024 to form a [committee to review foreign funding](#) received by both international and domestic nongovernmental organisations (NGOs).

Additionally, the funding landscape is heavily influenced by international donors, which sometimes prioritise certain areas without considering the long-term sustainability of the programs. This has led to a misalignment between the needs of the communities and the available resources, forcing many NGOs to adapt their programs based on the funding available rather than the actual needs of the population they serve. Moreover, NGOs in Pakistan that focus primarily on advocacy face a unique set of financial challenges, exacerbated by the prevalent Request for Proposal (RFP) culture. This culture is prevalent among big donors including USAID, The Global Fund, and the European Commission and typically outlines set priorities and thematic areas, directing NGOs to tailor their proposals to fit these predefined frameworks rather than developing initiatives based on local needs and demands. This approach can sideline grassroots requirements and stifle innovative local solutions that do not align with the narrow focus of available funding calls.

4. State openness and responsiveness

In Pakistan, the relationship between the government and civil society is complex, particularly regarding access to information and participation in government policymaking. The situation varies depending on the type of civil society organization (CSO) and the current political climate.

Civil society in Pakistan has limited access to information regarding government policies. While the government has established mechanisms like the Right to Information (RTI) laws at the federal and provincial levels, the implementation is often inconsistent. These laws are meant to enhance transparency and allow citizens, including CSOs, to access public records and information. However, challenges remain in their effective implementation.

Monitoring government actions and policies is a significant function of civil society in Pakistan. NGOs and other civil society groups often engage in monitoring government commitments and performance, particularly in areas like human rights, education, and environmental policies. They prepare reports, hold public forums, and work with the media to hold the government accountable. Yet, their effectiveness can be hampered by restricted access to necessary information and sometimes by direct governmental pushback.

Further, the participation of civil society in the policymaking process in Pakistan is not systematic. While there are instances where CSOs are consulted, especially on issues like health, education, and climate change, this participation is not always institutionalized. The government occasionally sets up consultative bodies that include CSO representatives, but these are often ad-hoc and lack consistent influence over policy decisions.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

In Pakistan, the general public's perception of NGOs is shaped by a variety of factors that include both appreciation for their contributions and scepticism regarding their motives and funding sources. NGOs are acknowledged for playing crucial roles in addressing critical social issues, advocating for human rights, and promoting transparency and good governance. They are instrumental in bridging the gap between the government and citizens, thereby influencing public policy and fostering civic engagement.

If we look at the perception of NGOs by the government in Pakistan, it is generally one of caution and scrutiny. Security agencies have substantial discretionary powers to oversee and intervene in the operations of NGOs. Security agencies have accused NGOs of being potential fronts for money laundering, terrorist financing, and other anti-state activities. This scepticism then translates into public narratives that question the loyalty and objectives of organisations, complicating their operations and their relationships with the communities they serve.

Challenges and Opportunities

For the next four months, the enabling environment in Pakistan is likely to be influenced by both ongoing challenges and emerging opportunities across economic, political, and societal fronts.

1. CSOs in Pakistan may continue to navigate a complex and often restrictive regulatory landscape. Stricter laws on foreign funding and oversight can pose operational hurdles. New barriers are expected as the federal cabinet has [formed a committee to review foreign funding](#) to international and domestic NGOs.
2. Activities perceived as politically sensitive or critical of the government are expected to continue attracting scrutiny or backlash. This may limit the scope of advocacy and campaign initiatives, particularly those relating to human rights or governance reforms.

In terms of opportunities:

1. CSOs always want to influence policies related to civic freedoms and development priorities. Engaging proactively with policymakers, offering expertise and evidence-based recommendations, can help shape a more favorable environment for civil society and the communities they serve.
2. Respecting fundamental freedoms, expanding civic education and creating more avenues for public engagement in policymaking will empower citizens, that would lead to a more enabling environment in Pakistan.

This publication was funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



EU SEE

SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



Funded by
the European Union

Hivos
people unlimited



**DEMOCRACY
REPORTING
INTERNATIONAL**

**European
Partnership for
Democracy**

forus CONNECT
SUPPORT
INFLUENCE

**TRANSPARENCY
INTERNATIONAL**
the global coalition against corruption