



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment

Snapshot

Panama

April 2025

Context

Panama has maintained a relatively stable environment for civil society over the past decade, especially in the regulatory framework, although challenges remain, such as the low level of associativity and financing difficulties that weaken the sector. Recent advances stand out, such as the leadership of [youth organisations](#) in [civic protests](#) against mining and the recognition of groups that work on social issues. The business sector maintains a strong influence on government decisions, without facing restrictions that affect its activities.

In the first quarter of 2025, Panama has faced a climate of tension and citizen discontent in the face of three issues of great political and social repercussion: the approval of the amendment to the [Law that reforms the Social Security Fund](#) on 17 March 2025, the possible reopening of the [Panama Copper mine](#), and the plans for [the construction of a reservoir](#) in the Indio River basin which seeks to guarantee the availability of water in the interoceanic waterway, but which would affect more than 2,000 people, who must be relocated. To this panorama has just been added an element of general tension: [new agreements](#) signed by the country with the United States to increase the presence of its armed forces in Panama.

This government agenda has led to the resurgence in 2025 of a [social movement](#) that includes trade unions, teachers and environmental organisations, which have initiated protests throughout the country in recent months, with a mixed response from the State, but with a tendency to repression. These same sectors were protagonists of the mobilisations that took place in [2022](#) and [2023](#).

Although the current president of the Republic has only been in government for 10 months, his speech has been catalogued by the media and opinion leaders as a [confrontational and authoritarian discourse](#) that increases social tension.

1. Respect for and protection of fundamental freedoms

The freedoms of expression, association and assembly have constitutional status and there are no regulations that contradict these constitutional rights or the international human rights conventions ratified by Panama and which are part of the constitutional block.

The [government of Panama joined](#) the [Declaration of Chapultepec](#) and the [Declaration of Salta II](#) on freedom of expression and the press. Panama is recognised as a country with low restrictions on the exercise of freedom of the press and freedom of expression. There have been no recent recorded situations of harassment or direct legal or physical persecution against journalists, media outlets or digital platforms.

However, during the election campaign in 2024, there was [physical aggression against journalists](#) by followers of a political candidate.

However, the biggest problem in journalism in Panama continues to be the judicial harassment of media outlets and journalists who criticise government policies or cover issues related to local or transnational corruption. This is usually perpetrated <https://www.sipiapa.org/2025-reunion-medio-ano/panama-n1300114> by political actors who abuse the rules of crimes against honour, filing civil pecuniary lawsuits and seizure of property. Self-censorship is increasing, as is the importance of government advertising contracts for online media, limiting their independence, as RSF's [2025 report confirms](#).

With regard to freedom of association and civic space, the [CIVICUS monitor](#) classifies Panama as a country with [narrow civic space](#), with repression against environmental protests such as in 2023, judicial harassment of journalists and media, persistent legal discrimination against people of sexual diversity, intimidating discourse against activists and journalists, among other elements. In addition, the report "[Global State of Democracy, 2024](#)" by International IDEA ranked Panama 62nd out of 172 countries in terms of civil rights, with a rating of 0.56 out of 1.0.

Freedom of expression has also been affected. Since April 2025, a nationwide [strike](#) was started by a construction workers' union and public school teachers against the reform of the Social Security Fund and the possible reopening of the Panama Copper mine. In addition, protesters disagree with plans to displace over 2,000 people, and with new agreements to expand the U.S. military presence in the country. As the strike [continued](#), there have been reported [clashes between demonstrators and riot police](#), with some arrests and the use of tear gas to disperse crowds.

Between April 2024 and April 2025, organisations focused on the issues of transparency, institutionality and human rights have been able to carry out their activities without facing direct questioning or harassment. Likewise, no legal reforms have been proposed that affect freedom of association, demonstration and expression. However, the situation is different for organisations dedicated to the defence of the environment, especially those that have expressed their opposition to the mining contract. In addition, some activists have been denounced by the mining company. In November 2023, during the protests against the contract, there were more than 1,500 cases of arrests and people injured due to abuses in the use of tear gas, according to a [Report on Human Rights Violations during the Mining Protests](#) prepared by Panamanian and international organisations. To date, there has been no follow-up or compensation for the injured.

2. Legal framework favourable to the work of civil society

Panama has regulations applicable to civil society organisations, contained in several legal instruments. The main rule is the [Executive Decree No. 62 of March 30, 2017](#) that regulates non-profit associations and foundations and that contains a list of

requirements to be met in order to create a non-profit organisation. In Panama it is easier to establish a [corporation](#) than a non-profit organisation.

The legislation governing civil society organisations requires an application for legal status through a lawyer. The cost of lawyers, notaries and registration in the Public Registry are onerous for small organisations. In addition, the procedure for obtaining legal status is centralised in Panama City. These obstacles restrict their capacity for action and advocacy, and Panama is a very formalistic country that does not legally recognise social movements or initiatives.

Since 2003, due to the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), non-profit organisations in Panama have been required to keep an accounting record of financial operations, transactions or donations that justify their origin or nature. This is [Law 50 of July 2, 2003](#), which adds rules on the prevention of terrorism to the Penal Code. All civil society organisations must place in their statutes this obligation to keep records that justify the origin and nature of the funds.

Article 20 of [Decree 62 of March 2017](#) establishes that funds from self-management or from any other source may be subject to inspection, verification and monitoring by the Ministry of Government. This discretionary power is found in the executive decree, but no Panamanian organisation has been subjected to these inspections to date.

The only adverse institutional action against a non-governmental organisation in Panama was directed against the country's largest labour union. The National Bank, the largest state-owned banking institution, [closed the union's account in 2024](#) without clear justification after protests over social security reforms. This precedent should concern civil society organisations. The [Ombudsman urged banks](#) to respect the presumption of innocence and avoid discretionary actions without evidence.

In the last six years, no reforms to the regulations governing non-profit organisations in Panama have been discussed, nor have any reforms been presented or discussed by civil society organisations.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

The [National Office for the Administration of State Subsidies](#) attached to the Ministry of Social Development is responsible for granting State subsidies, especially aimed at organisations with welfare purposes. Most non-governmental organisations do not have access to State subsidies and there is no accountability for the criteria for the allocation of State subsidies. There is no subsidy or support from the State for human rights, transparency, democracy and State reform organisations.

Organisations can receive resources from international cooperation, private donations and self-management. In the case of resources from international cooperation, there are no restrictions or special legislation in this regard. Donations to non-profit organisations will be deductible from income tax, once authorised by the [General Directorate of Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance](#).

However, non-governmental organisations in Panama have difficulty obtaining financing from international cooperation because it is considered a country with [high macroeconomic indicators](#) and therefore is not a priority for cooperation agencies. The limited sources of funding and the difficulty of organisations to meet the minimum requirements for the administration of resources by donors becomes an obstacle to the work and strengthening of civil society. A large number of organisations do not have legal status and this reduces their capacity to represent and defend rights.

4. State openness and responsiveness

In general, Panama has [regulations that promote transparency](#), citizen participation, and formal mechanisms for citizen consultation, although since July 2024, the current government has shown no interest in listening to feedback and opinions from all sectors of civil society. [On August 6, 2024](#), at the request of President José Raúl Mulino, the [National Concertation for Development met](#) "in order to prepare the way for citizen participation in the face of the country's challenges in this five-year period." However, since that date the National Concertation for Development has not met again.

Another aspect that reflects the government's level of openness and its interaction with civil society was the process of selecting prosecutors of the Nation and the Administration. In October 2024, the government chose [both prosecutors](#) without public consultation [or the participation of civil society](#), thus ignoring the agreements of the [State Commission for Justice](#). The [Commission](#) was created in 2005 to define the agenda for judicial reform with the participation of civil society and the definition of a mechanism for the pre-selection of magistrates and prosecutors. This space for dialogue between civil society, government and the justice sector has not been convened in the last year.

However, there are other spaces for dialogue between civil society and State institutions on specific issues, one of them being the construction of a [Roadmap for the Implementation of the Escazú Agreement](#).

5. Political culture and public discourses on civil society

The current President of the Republic has criticised environmental groups and has had a [discourse of disqualification](#) towards citizens who protest against mining operations in Panama - calling them "five cats", an expression that dismisses their number and their incidence. In February 2025, after the [protests](#) in Panama City, the president accused the National Union of Workers in the Construction Industry and Allied Workers (SUNTRACS), the largest union with the greatest capacity to mobilise in the country, of being a trade union group of ["mafiosi and terrorists"](#). Beyond these two incidents, so far there have been no comments by government officials against civil society.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

The country has a high [internet access rate](#). According to a study conducted by OPTIC in 2023, the access rate is 73.9% of the population.

Legislation on cybercrime protection is very incipient in Panama. Although the Budapest Convention was approved according to Law 79 of October 22, 2013, the commitment to adopt legislative measures to criminalise cybercrime, and to adopt procedural measures in order to facilitate the criminal investigation of cybercrime, has not been fulfilled.

There is a [National Cybersecurity Strategy](#) in which entities from the public sector, private sector and civil society must participate, where cybercrime and cybersecurity must be discussed and a national culture of cybersecurity must be promoted. In addition to this, in Panama there is the [Internet Governance Forum \(IGF\)](#) which is a space for dialogue on issues related to the development of the internet.

Digital freedom plays a key role because the [preferred news sources for the population of Panama](#) in 2024/25 are digital platforms (social media and video services), following global trends. In January 2025, Panama had 2.85 million identities of social media users, which is equivalent to [62.7% of the population](#). There is an important factor of potential disinformation on social networks by multiple actors, communicating without apparent exercise of methods of verification of the facts. The use of social networks is one of the main methods used for attacks and dirty campaigns against political and civil society actors and at this time there is no legislation that guarantees a safe digital environment.

Challenges and opportunities

In the coming months, protests by environmental, union and teacher groups - against the reforms to social security, mining activity and the construction of the water reservoir for the Panama Canal - are expected to continue. The tension between the protesters and government could relegate other priorities on the human rights and transparency agenda to the background and could also aggravate the polarisation that is affecting all of Panamanian society.

In addition, the signing of [new agreements](#) on 11 April 2025 between the Panamanian government and the United States, which allow the presence of U.S. armed forces in Panama, has generated strong social tensions. Many citizens consider that this measure violates national sovereignty, betraying decades of struggle by the Panamanian people for their independence and self-determination.

The regulations governing civil society are very ambiguous and allow arbitrariness at any time. This continues to be a danger to civil society.

For the first time in Panama's political history, more than 20 legislators have been elected by free nomination, without being aligned with the traditional political parties. This opens up a unique opportunity for civil society to influence the legislative agenda.



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