

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Zambia

May 2025

Context

Zambia has experienced a history of significant tests of its democratic institutions over the past 15 years, with power shifting from ruling parties to the opposition in both 2011 and 2021. These transitions, although smooth, were marked by tension, notably the [over 100 days of incarceration](#) on [trumped-up treason charges](#) and reported [torture](#) of current President Hakainde Hichilema by his predecessor Edgar Lungu, in the build-up to the 2011 election.

The enabling environment for civil society organisations (CSOs) has evolved alongside these political changes. The [current government](#) consistently [reassures](#) the public of its commitment to restoring [the rule of law](#), fostering [good governance](#), and [fighting corruption](#). Despite facing multiple [accusations](#) of [using state machinery](#) and law enforcement to neutralise political opponents, the government [insists](#) it does not possess the authoritarian traits of the previous regime. There is a general belief amongst CSOs and citizens that there has been a positive shift to a more open and supportive environment for their activities.

A significant achievement for Zambian citizens and CSOs under the current government was [President Hichilema's ban](#) on ["cadre-ism."](#) This practice involved political hooligans who, taking advantage of their affiliation with the [ruling party](#), [intimidated](#) citizens, civil society and the opposition with acts of violence. Anyone who did not align with the government of the day or was involved in holding them accountable was targeted and censured, thereby contributing to a restrictive environment for civil society and the exercise of freedom of expression, assembly and association. The 2024 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) [report](#) showed Zambia [ranked 3rd](#) among nine countries that had previously undergone autocratisation and are now in a phase of democratisation. This shows a positive shift from the former [authoritarian regime](#) that was known for [suppressing](#) human rights and fundamental freedoms .

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The civic space in Zambia has seen some improvements and challenges. Positive developments include the 2022 amendment of the [Defamation Act](#), which decriminalised defamation of the President, enhancing freedom of expression. Additionally, the [Access to Information Act](#) No. 24 of 2024, effective [from June 2024](#), allows citizens and civil society to access government-held information, promoting transparency and accountability. However, the CIVICUS monitor indicates that Zambia's civic space remains [obstructed](#). Although fundamental freedoms are guaranteed by the Zambian [Constitution of 1991](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression [identified](#) the continued use of the [1955 Public Order Act](#) by police to restrict and disrupt public gatherings as a major ongoing concern ahead of the 2026 elections. However, government [has stated clear intentions](#) of amending it into the Public Gathering Act. Despite these intentions, the Act remains unchanged and fully operational. The 2025 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report notes that the Public order Act and Penal Code are [used to curtail fundamental freedoms](#). The police often misinterpret the need for a seven-day notification for public gatherings as per Section 5(4) of the [Public Order Act](#) as requiring formal authorisation. Notable events include police [disruption](#) of former president Edgar Lungu's meeting with the clergy in Kabwe in May of 2024, [disruption](#) of the "Fix Zesco Protest" on 10

July 2024 against the public utility company led and organised by four civil society actors who were detained, and the [blocking](#) of a Socialist Party rally in Kitwe by [heavily armed security forces](#) on 8 June 2024 despite complying with the notification procedures.

On 15 March 2025, the Zambia Police Service [denied clearance](#) for nationwide protests planned by the opposition Tonse Alliance, citing the Public Order Act. Authorities stated that the demonstrations posed a threat to public order. In contrast, the Citizen First party leader Harry Kalaba was able to [hold a public rally](#) in March without interference or obstruction from the police. These actions have created a [tense](#) and uncertain [environment for civil society actors, opposition, and human rights defenders](#), undermining their ability to express themselves and assemble freely.

Although press houses are allowed to operate freely, the freedom of information and media freedom in Zambia remain under threat, with isolated incidents of journalists being [targeted and arrested](#) for covering [opposition](#) activities. On 7 March 2025, journalist Hope Chooma was [arrested in Mazabuka](#) under unclear circumstances linked to coverage involving the UPND party. The arrest drew condemnation from media rights advocates, who viewed it as a troubling act of repression against press freedom.

Furthermore, the [reintroduction of repressive laws](#) like the [Cyber Security Act No. 3 of 2025](#) and the [Cyber Crimes Act No. 4 of 2025](#) (the “new cyber laws”) have the potential to further [restrict](#) fundamental freedoms and negatively [impact the civic space](#) in Zambia. The Cyber Crimes and Cyber Security Acts were [passed](#) on 8 April 2025 despite [CSOs raising concerns](#) over vague provisions, excessive surveillance powers, and inadequate safeguards for press freedom, privacy, and freedom of expression. These laws have sparked [widespread debate and backlash](#) across various sectors of society, raising concerns about their true intent—particularly regarding the treatment of government critics and the potential erosion of fundamental freedoms and digital security. This development threatens the operations of the NGOs especially, [hindering](#) a free press. In this regard, while civil society continues to raise their concerns simultaneously, [litigation is underway](#) as the Lawyers Association of Zambia (LAZ) has [resolved to petition](#) the High Court to review the constitutionality of the provisions of the act as they believe it infringes on the rights and freedoms of citizens and a free press.

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

In Zambia, civil society organisations [are permitted to operate](#) upon completing legal registration, either through the [Ministry](#) of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) or the [Patents and Companies Registration Agency](#) (PACRA). Despite the entrenchment of freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association in articles 20 and 21 of the [Constitution](#) of Zambia (1991) as [amended in 2016](#), the legal framework for CSOs’ operations in Zambia prohibits the operation of unregistered civil non-governmental organisations. The [Non-Governmental Organisations Act](#) of 2009 established the NGO Registration Board to oversee their registration and operations. It mandates annual reporting

for transparency, which [can also be used](#) and manipulated to control and censure existing civil society groups and their advocacy actions through provisions such as re-registration every five years and severe penalties due to lack of compliance with several provisions and procedures. Ongoing [consultations](#) between the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services and CSOs aim to address [contentious clauses](#) such as NGO re-registration after five years, adherence to a government regulated central body and accompanying penalties, fines and risks of imprisonment in the [Non-Governmental Organisations Bill No. 6 of 2025 \(NGO Bill\)](#), expected to be tabled later in 2025. The NGO Bill is among the approved bills by Cabinet to be tabled for parliamentary debate during the current parliamentary sitting that opened on 28 February. If unaddressed, this trend sets a worrying precedent for the enabling environment for civil society in Zambia and challenges the foundational norms of participatory governance.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for civil society in Zambia is generally accessible both locally and internationally, with more support coming from international NGOs, foundations, embassies, and global philanthropies. However, donor confidence has been eroded due to past instances of fund [mismanagement](#) by government and civil society organisations, leading to [withdrawal](#), [suspension](#) and scarcity of donor resources and a competitive environment among CSOs. Donor priorities are often uncoordinated, resulting in competition for limited resources. Most available funding is short-term and project-based, hindering long-term sustainability and strategic planning for CSOs. There is no tangible evidence of government interference in funding sources, but CSOs in the governance sector are generally believed to be closely scrutinised.

The recent [freeze on U.S. foreign aid](#), including a \$500 million cut to Zambia, threatens vital programmes supported by USAID, impacting key sectors such as health, education, governance, and poverty reduction. CSOs that have been heavily reliant and sustained by USAID funding and projects [face significant disruptions](#) in their operations, especially those complementing government service delivery in HIV/ART. Most CSOs that were funded by USAID to undertake projects on Access to Information, Freedom of Information and digital rights received stop-orders to halt their initiatives. Most have been shut down with employees laid off, further worsening the operations of [CSOs](#) and, worse still, [vulnerable](#) and marginalised groups. The freeze also endangers Zambia's fight against HIV/AIDS, as the PEPFAR programme, which provides lifesaving antiretroviral treatment, could be halted. The loss of this funding creates uncertainty for CSOs, forcing them to seek alternative resources to continue their work in vulnerable communities.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Laws such as the Access to Information (ATI) Act and the [National Planning and Budgeting Act](#) of 2020 provide for the inclusion of CSOs in policy-making and development processes by providing formal provisions for their appointment, consultation, dialogue, and participation in national development structures and discourse. However, the interaction between civil society and the government in Zambia remains largely unstructured and reactive, often

responding to issues that catch the president and his ministers' attention. In 2024, [CSOs met with the president](#), who [directed regular](#), structured engagement to address national issues. This led to the development of a comprehensive engagement framework aligned with National Development Plan Clusters. CSOs, including youth, religious groups, community members and women, participate in [decision-making structures](#) like Provincial and District Development Coordinating Committees and Ward Development Committees. These platforms allow for observer participation in local government meetings. Specific CSOs also engage with the government through Cluster Advisory Groups under the [National Development Plan](#). In addition, Zambia's 2024 [membership](#) in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) is expected to create more opportunities for CSO engagement.

The government is more [responsive](#) to CSOs addressing “non-controversial issues”, such as [education](#), [water, and sanitation](#) and [food aid](#) rather than governance and accountability. Some CSOs, like [Transparency International Zambia](#) and the [Christian Churches Monitoring Group](#), have established strong relationships with state institutions, enhancing their influence on anti-corruption efforts and electoral policy reform. The level of responsiveness often depends on the nature of the issue being raised. Recent engagements have focused on topics such as constitutional amendments, the NGO Bill, and the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Acts, which have sparked more debate and resistance from the government.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

The perception of civil society in public discourse and political discussions has shifted with changes in government. Civil society actors aligned with the government are sometimes seen as executing the government's agenda, a sentiment that was [very high](#) among CSOs during the previous administration. Political commentators and constitutional lawyers believe civil society has weakened due to the appointment of notable leaders of civil society organisations to significant government positions and the diplomatic service. Historian [Sishuwa Sishuwa highlights](#) that these appointments benefit the government while disadvantaging civil society. For example, in January 2025, the President dissolved the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Board and [appointed](#) two notable civil society leaders, which the public perceives as diminishing civil society's influence. While appointing leaders of CSOs to government boards can be seen as efforts to involve civil society in governance, these actions are often viewed as reducing civil society's independence and effectiveness.

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

In Zambia, civil society organisations generally enjoy the freedom to access and share information online without facing the widespread internet or social media shutdowns seen in some neighbouring countries. However, the digital environment has undergone notable changes in 2025, particularly following the enactment of the [Cyber Security Act No. 3 of 2025](#) and the [Cyber Crimes Act No. 4 of 2025](#) introducing new regulatory frameworks that may impact digital rights and online civic engagement. These laws grant the state and law enforcement extensive powers to monitor and control online activities if left unchecked, with

minimal safeguards for genuine citizen actions. These provisions have raised concerns [among CSOs](#) and legal experts who warn that, if left unchecked, these provisions could infringe on citizens' rights to privacy and freedom of expression. The Law Association of Zambia (LAZ) has called for a [reconsideration of several clauses](#), arguing that they could undermine democratic values by allowing mass data collection without adequate judicial oversight. LAZ has further announced its intention to [petition](#) the enacted law in the high court for a review of the constitutionality of the “contentious” provisions that can potentially infringe the rights and civil liberties and freedoms of citizens.

Regarding privacy violations, there have been reports of harassment by both state and non-state actors. [Women](#) politicians, in particular, have faced cyberbullying and online sexual harassment during election campaigns. Additionally, the government's surveillance capabilities have been a topic of concern, especially with statements suggesting [monitoring of private messaging platforms](#) as provided for in the Cyber Crimes Act. While aimed at enhancing cybersecurity, the broad surveillance powers and vague definitions within the law have raised alarms about potential misuse to suppress dissent and limit freedoms.

Challenges and Opportunities

Over the next four months, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Zambia are likely to face significant challenges in sustaining momentum against repressive legislation. The legislative calendar is already crowded with numerous bills, including the controversial NGO Bill. This legislative overload poses a serious challenge to coordinated advocacy, making it difficult for CSOs to respond swiftly and strategically to emerging threats. Meanwhile, other critical laws—such as the long-contested Public Order Act—remain unresolved, with civil society pushback slowing due to competing priorities. As CSOs attempt to engage on multiple fronts, they risk overstressing their limited resources and personnel, potentially diluting the impact of their advocacy.

Despite these challenges, the current environment also presents opportunities to strengthen civic space. With the 2026 general elections on the horizon, there is a window to galvanise public discourse and political will around democratic reforms. Zambia's recent accession to the Open Government Partnership further provides a valuable platform for CSOs to advocate for greater transparency, citizen participation, and accountability. By leveraging this momentum, civil society can push for the domestication of international norms that support an enabling environment for civic actors. Additionally, the government's proposed electoral boundary delimitation—intended to increase parliamentary representation and enhance Constituency Development Fund (CDF) utilisation—offers another entry point for electoral advocacy. CSOs can use this process to promote inclusive representation and ensure that electoral reforms align with democratic principles.



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