



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Somalia

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HiiL
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Context

Somalia has experienced prolonged insecurity and conflict since the collapse of its central government in 1991. However, since 2012, the country has made notable [progress](#) in its state-building efforts toward reestablishing a functioning state. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent media in Somalia operate in a constrained civic space characterised by political instability, armed conflict, and government repression. Freedom of expression and media freedom remain restricted. Since 2010, over 50 media professionals [have been killed](#), making Somalia one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in Africa. Human [rights abuses](#) by both state and non-state actors occur regularly. Civic actors face harassment and detentions, while journalists operate under [conditions of impunity](#). Somalia's civic space is classified as ["Repressed"](#) by the CIVICUS Monitor. The country received a score of 8 out of 100 in the Freedom House Freedom in the World 2024 [report](#) and ranked 136th out of 180 in the 2025 Reporters Without Borders [World Press Freedom Index](#). CSOs are forced to scale back activities, relocate to safer areas, or operate clandestinely. They struggle to promote human rights, accountability, and inclusive development.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Despite constitutional guarantees under Articles 16, 18, and 20 of Somalia's 2012 [Provisional Constitution](#), which uphold the rights to freedom of association, expression, and assembly, civic space continues under [intense pressure](#), rated as [repressed](#) by CIVICUS monitor. Somalia's [media law](#) (Law no. 26 of 2020) also guarantees press freedom, regulates media operations and establishes the national media council. Outdated and repressive laws—particularly the 1962 Penal Code—are routinely used to criminalise dissent. Provisions such as Articles 215 (subversive propaganda), 269 (insult to public bodies), and 328 (false news) have [been weaponized](#) to arrest and imprison journalists and civil society actors, often under vague national security pretexts.

In 2024 alone, over 40 cases of media censorship [were documented](#), including the [shutdown](#) of Risaala TV and the detention of five journalists in March following coverage of a bombing and at least 41 journalists had been [targeted](#) as of 15 May 2025. In June 2025, NISA agents [raided](#) Himilo Somali TV after it aired an interview alleging forced voter registration. In October 2024, journalist Abduqadir Mohamed Nur "Jakarta" was [abducted](#) by intelligence agents and detained in a facility known for torture. In February 2025, the Somaliland Ministry of Information ordered the suspension of Universal TV and [revoked](#) its broadcasting licence, following its broadcast of a report covering President Abdirahman Abdillahi Irro's visit to the United Arab Emirates. These incidents reflect a broader pattern of state-led repression aimed at silencing independent journalism and public scrutiny.

Restrictions on freedom of assembly and association remain widespread. In the first half of 2025, local organisations [documented](#) repeated instances of security forces using intimidation and arrests to prevent or disperse peaceful gatherings, particularly those addressing governance, corruption, or human rights. CSOs frequently face permit denials, bureaucratic delays, and surveillance. These patterns reflect a broader strategy of suppressing civic mobilisation and dissent.

Civil society actors and human rights defenders continue to face escalating threats. In 2024, 23 enforced disappearances involving HRDs were [reported](#). Zakariye Y. Abdirahman, a prominent HRD, was [subjected](#) to death threats, intimidation, and brief detention after publicly denouncing corruption and land grabs. These incidents underscore the shrinking

space for civic engagement and the growing risks faced by those who challenge state-linked abuses.

These cases illustrate a deteriorating environment where fundamental freedoms are routinely violated. The persistent use of [legal and extralegal](#) measures to suppress expression and assembly underscores the urgent need for legal reform and international scrutiny.

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

At the federal level, civil society organisations in Somalia are primarily regulated under Article 54 of [Civil Law No. 37 of 1973](#), which mandates [registration](#) with the Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs & Reconciliation. The process requires submission of detailed documentation, including a constitution, objectives, and founding member information. While the Ministry's website provides forms and guidance, CSOs frequently report that the process is lengthy, opaque, and inconsistently applied across federal and regional levels. Delays in feedback, unclear requirements, and non-transparent registration fees—especially burdensome for grassroots organisations—create significant barriers to formalisation.

Although the draft [Non-Governmental Organisations Act of 2019](#) was drafted to [harmonize](#) and modernize the regulatory environment, it has yet to be fully enacted or operationalised. As a result, CSOs operate in a fragmented legal landscape, navigating overlapping mandates between the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Planning. This legal vacuum undermines legal certainty, weakens protections from state interference, and limits the autonomy of civil society actors.

The current framework does not provide robust legal safeguards to ensure independence, freedom of operation, or protection from arbitrary state action. CSOs often face surveillance, political pressure, and administrative hurdles when attempting to define their agendas, engage in advocacy, or access funding. Without a unified and enforceable NGO law, civil society in Somalia remains vulnerable to inconsistent regulation and political manipulation, undermining its ability to contribute effectively to governance, development, and human rights.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Civil society organisations in Somalia face a fragile and increasingly constrained funding environment that undermines their sustainability and independence. Most CSOs rely heavily on international donors, as domestic funding sources—whether from the government or local philanthropy—remain extremely limited. The [suspension](#) of USAID funding in early 2025 disrupted operations across sectors, with over 60% of NGOs [reporting](#) halted projects, staff layoffs, and reduced services to millions of beneficiaries. This exposed the sector's overdependence on a narrow pool of external donors and the lack of diversified, sustainable funding streams.

While foreign funding is not formally prohibited, access to financial services is increasingly politicised. In April 2024, the Somali Journalist Syndicate (SJS) had its bank accounts [frozen](#) by multiple banks following a [court order](#) and accusations of using falsified documents. The Attorney General's office [cited vague](#) legal provisions, including defamation and violations of

the media law. This case illustrates how financial and legal tools are weaponised to suppress independent voices and deter donor engagement.

CSOs also face barriers in opening and maintaining bank accounts, especially those working on sensitive issues like governance or human rights. Financial reporting requirements tied to donor funding are often burdensome and lack harmonisation, particularly for smaller organisations. Moreover, information on funding opportunities is not always accessible, and bureaucratic hurdles further limit equitable access.

These challenges collectively weaken the enabling environment for civil society, threatening their ability to operate independently, set their own agendas, and respond effectively to community needs.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Somalia lacks a fully enacted access to information law, though a draft [Official Information Bill](#) introduced in 2024 includes provisions for proactive disclosure and timelines for appeals. However, in practice, access to government-held information remains limited, with journalists and civil society actors frequently denied access to public data, especially on sensitive issues.

While the 2023 [Cooperation Forum](#) between the Federal Government and civil society was a positive step, it did not result in a formal mechanism for sustained engagement or feedback. Civil society inputs are rarely integrated into policy, and government responsiveness to transparency requests [remains inconsistent](#).

Although the [National Transformation Plan](#) (2025–2029) was developed through consultations with civil society, there is little evidence of structured follow-up or accountability mechanisms. Independent media and critical CSOs continue [to face](#) harassment, surveillance, and [arbitrary detention](#), further eroding trust and limiting open dialogue.

The absence of institutionalised participation frameworks and weak protections for civic actors undermine the government's accountability to civil society. Without legal guarantees for access to information and formal consultation channels, civil society's role in governance remains constrained and largely symbolic.

5. Political culture and public discourses on civil society

In Somalia, public discourse and political culture often portray civil society with suspicion, undermining its legitimacy and role in governance. Government officials and state-aligned media frequently frame civil society entities as foreign-driven or politically subversive, especially when they engage in human rights or anti-corruption work. For example, the June 2025 [raid](#) on Himilo Somali TV by NISA, following its broadcast of a politically sensitive interview, reinforced narratives that equate independent civic actors with threats to national stability.

Such rhetoric fosters a hostile environment, discouraging public engagement and weakening trust in civil society. While some Somalis view CSOs as vital to accountability and service delivery, others remain [skeptical](#) of their motives, influenced by state narratives and limited civic education. Civil society is not meaningfully integrated into school curricula, and public institutions rarely promote awareness of its role.

There is no consistent government effort to publicly acknowledge CSO contributions or provide feedback on their policy inputs. The absence of inclusive discourse and civic

education limits citizen support and reinforces a political culture that marginalises independent civic actors, ultimately constraining the enabling environment for civil society.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Somalia's digital environment remains fragile and unevenly enabling for civil society. While the 2025 [Inclusive Digital Policy](#) aims to expand internet access and digital literacy among marginalised groups, structural gaps persist. Although events like [Universal Acceptance Day](#) show growing awareness, rural communities, women, persons with disabilities, and linguistic minorities still struggle to access or meaningfully use digital tools. Internet penetration [stands](#) at just 27.6%, with access concentrated in urban areas, leaving civil society serving rural communities and vulnerable populations digitally excluded. High data costs and limited infrastructure further exacerbate the digital divide.

Although Somalia enacted its first [Data Protection Act](#) in 2023, and established a Data Protection Authority in 2024, enforcement [remains weak](#). The Cybercrime Bill is still under review, leaving civil society actors exposed to surveillance and digital threats. Cases such as the March 2025 [arrest of 19 journalists](#) and the [tracking and detention](#) of freelance journalist Sharif Abdi via mobile data highlight the misuse of digital tools to suppress online dissent.

There are no legal safeguards explicitly protecting online civic space, and digital security skills among CSOs remain low, despite some [localized training efforts](#). The absence of robust cybersecurity laws, combined with surveillance practices and limited digital access, undermines civil society's ability to operate safely and effectively online, particularly in rural and high-risk areas.

Challenges and opportunities

In the next four months, civil society in Somalia is [expected to face](#) mounting challenges as political tensions rise ahead of the upcoming presidential elections expected in May 2026. This period is likely to see increased restrictions on civic space, heightened surveillance, and further limitations on freedom of expression, particularly for organisations and media outlets critical of the government. There is limited engagement of CSOs in official electoral processes, which undermines their ability to advocate for transparency and fair participation. Insecurity in several regions, coupled with the absence of a comprehensive legal framework protecting civil society, will continue to expose civic actors to arbitrary interference. Delays in passing key legislation, such as the NGO law and cybercrime bill, along with persistent funding constraints, will further hinder the operational capacity of many organisations. Fragmented coordination among CSOs also weakens their collective influence and ability to respond to emerging threats.

Despite these obstacles, the electoral period presents a critical opportunity for civil society to advocate for transparency, civic education, and inclusive participation. To effectively seize this moment, civil society actors must be supported through legal reforms that guarantee their independence, the establishment of sustainable and diversified funding mechanisms, and strengthened coordination platforms. Additionally, targeted capacity building in digital security, advocacy, and public engagement is essential to ensure that civil society can play a meaningful and resilient role in Somalia's democratic processes.

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