



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Gabon

July 2025

Context

Over the past two years, Gabon has undergone a period of transition marked by political, institutional and social upheaval. The [coup d'état](#) of 30 August 2023 paved the way for a profound restructuring of the national landscape, followed by the Inclusive National Dialogue from 1 to 30 April 2024, which enabled the country's various stakeholders to debate and propose reforms for a more harmonious future. The [constitutional referendum](#) of 16 November 2024 redefined the legal framework of the Fifth Republic, while the presidential election of 12 April 2025 was a key step in the democratic rebuilding of Gabon.

However, assembly rights have been further eroded by the June 2025 [political party law](#), which mandates a 12,000-member threshold and nationwide presence—criteria that disproportionately exclude emerging movements. It also allows for the suspension of a political party in the event of ‘disturbance of public order’—a vague and open-to-interpretation concept. The case of [Jean Rémy Yama's](#) National Party for Labour and Progress (PNTP) illustrates this: denied recognition, its public gatherings were banned or dispersed, and activists detained under vague “public order” pretexts. These provisions, although announced as aimed at structuring the political landscape, are perceived as disguised barriers to entry into the public sphere for emerging or critical movements.

The country is now preparing for legislative and local elections that should complete [this transition](#) and establish a new institutional and political balance. Throughout these transformations, civil society organisations (CSOs) have played an essential role. They have helped to raise public awareness, promote dialogue and develop the reforms necessary for the country's stability. Their commitment has fostered a peaceful civil climate, strengthened governance and involved citizens in the consolidation of Gabonese democracy.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Gabon's post-coup trajectory since August 2023 reflects notable constitutional reforms, particularly the 2024 [Constitution](#)'s Articles 10–14, which formally enshrine civil liberties. These provisions have enabled modest gains, such as increased [media freedom](#) and enhanced [data protection](#) frameworks. Despite constitutional reforms following the 2023 coup, Gabon's civic space remains tightly controlled. Empirical indicators reveal a disconnect between legal guarantees and lived realities. Freedom House rates Gabon as [“Not Free”](#) (21/100), while CIVICUS categorizes its civic space as [“repressed”](#), reflecting [persistent restrictions](#) on expression, association, and assembly.

Freedom of Expression has seen [marginal improvement](#). Journalists now face fewer direct crackdowns, and some critical reporting is tolerated. However, systemic issues persist. The High Authority for Communication (HAC), which regulates media, lacks independence and has arbitrarily suspended outlets. In 2024, a 15-year-old [was prosecuted](#) for posting a satirical video involving the transitional president's image, highlighting the fragility of speech protections. The July 2023 law restoring government control over HAC appointments further undermines press autonomy.

Freedom of assembly and protest in Gabon remains in a formative stage. Although the 2024 Constitution formally guarantees this right, its practical implementation is still limited and uneven. In January 2024, [pro-government demonstrations](#) were held in Libreville, Oyem, and Franceville, where civil society groups called for the lifting of sanctions, including Gabon's suspension from the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). These demonstrations were permitted and supported, reflecting a selective enabling environment. Election-monitoring civil society organizations [also experienced greater operational freedom](#), as they were allowed to

observe the electoral process. However, this openness contrasts sharply with the broader [restrictions imposed on opposition groups](#) and independent civic movements. The transitional government's tight control over electoral procedures and public gatherings has raised concerns about the increasing militarisation of civic life and the propensity to narrow the democratic space.

Freedom of Association is hindered by the outdated Law No. 35/62, in force since 1962, which fails to distinguish between NGOs and associations, creating [legal ambiguity](#). Registration procedures are slow, lengthy and opaque, with provisional receipts issued after beginning the registration process often insufficient for securing funding or recognition. Arbitrary suspensions without clear justification further weaken organizational capacity. Civil society actors have called for urgent reform, including digital platforms for registration and transparent criteria for public utility status.

In sum, while Gabon's legal framework nominally supports civil liberties, its implementation reveals entrenched political control. A genuine democratization of civic space requires not only legal reform but institutional accountability and inclusive governance.

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

Gabon's legal framework governing CSOs remains anchored [in Law No. 35/62](#), a legacy of colonial-era [French legislation](#). CSOs must register under this law to be recognised and function officially in Gabon. This outdated law fails to differentiate between associations, NGOs, and foundations, resulting in legal ambiguity that undermines institutional clarity and operational efficiency. The absence of tailored classifications prevents the government from addressing the distinct needs of various civil society actors, thereby weakening the sector's strategic development.

The registration process is another critical bottleneck. CSOs often face multi-year delays in obtaining final receipts from the Ministry of the Interior, which restricts their access to funding, formal partnerships, and public recognition. This administrative inertia not only stifles innovation but also [fosters unfair competition](#), where opportunistic entities—often better connected—monopolise resources at the expense of grassroots initiatives with genuine social impact. Moreover, the lack of digital infrastructure in the registration and oversight process exacerbates inefficiencies and limits transparency. In response to these systemic challenges, civil society actors have consistently advocated for reform.

A significant milestone in Gabon's civil society legal framework emerged with the May 2025 [Bill on the creation, organization and functioning of non-governmental organizations](#), adopted in its first reading by the Transitional National Assembly, marking a shift toward modernizing the legal framework governing civic actors. While still pending final enactment, the proposed legislation [introduces clearer distinctions](#) between NGOs and associations, addressing long-standing legal ambiguities that have hindered sectoral development. Notably, the Bill establishes a declaratory regime for NGO recognition, coupled with a “silence equals acceptance” clause—whereby legal recognition is automatically granted if no response is issued within three months. This provision is designed to reduce bureaucratic inertia and enhance predictability in administrative processes. The Bill also promises access to public funding, formal recognition of public interest status, and a structured framework for collaboration between NGOs and the State, all of which are critical for institutional legitimacy and sustainability.

If effectively implemented, these reforms could offer pathways to reduce administrative delays, improve transparency, and foster more equitable access to resources. However, the transformative potential of the Bill hinges on institutional accountability, digital modernization, and consistent enforcement. Without these, risks of exclusion, favoritism, and resource capture remain.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Gabon's legal, regulatory, and fiscal framework presents significant structural barriers to resource access for CSOs, undermining their autonomy and sustainability. The system is shaped by Law No. 35/62, which lacks clear distinctions between associations, NGOs, and foundations. This legal ambiguity complicates registration, recognition, and eligibility for funding, especially for organizations outside the state-aligned development sector.

CSOs working in health, education, and social development—such as the National AIDS Control Programme (PNLS) and the Lambaréné Medical Research Centre (CERMEL)—benefit from institutional support and public funding due to their alignment with government priorities. In contrast, NGOs focused on human rights, governance, and environmental protection face systemic exclusion. These groups rely heavily on international donors, whose funding is competitive, technically demanding, and often inaccessible to under-resourced organizations.

The fiscal environment further restricts access to resources. Tax regulations do not incentivize donations or provide exemptions that could ease financial burdens. Moreover, the absence of digital tools and streamlined procedures exacerbates delays in registration and recognition, limiting CSOs' ability to formalize partnerships or apply for grants.

International actors like the European Union have stepped in to fill gaps, issuing [calls for proposals](#) and funding capacity-building initiatives—particularly for [organizations working on prisoner rights](#), budget transparency, and natural resource governance. However, these efforts require robust implementation and oversight to ensure equitable access and long-term impact.

In sum, while opportunities exist through external partnerships, Gabon's domestic legal and fiscal framework remains a restrictive environment for independent civil society. Reform is [essential](#) to foster a more inclusive, transparent, and enabling ecosystem that allows all CSOs to contribute meaningfully to national development.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Gabon's legal framework formally recognizes the right of access to information through the [2024 Constitution](#) (Title VII, Articles 94–102) and international instruments such as Article 9 of the [African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights](#). However, this recognition remains largely symbolic due to the absence of a dedicated national law that operationalizes the right. The existing [Communication Code \(Law No. 07/2001\)](#) focuses on the dissemination of information, not access to it, leaving a critical gap in enforceable rights.

In practice, citizens and [CSOs lack legal recourse](#) when denied access to public documents. Administrative secrecy is routinely invoked without justification, and no independent oversight body exists to adjudicate disputes. This legal vacuum enables opacity in governance and undermines democratic accountability.

Journalists and CSOs frequently report denials of access to sensitive data, including ministerial budgets, audit reports, and procurement contracts. These restrictions hinder investigative journalism, limit civic oversight, and weaken public trust in institutions. The lack of transparency also constrains CSOs' ability to engage in evidence-based advocacy and policy dialogue.

Despite these challenges, the 2023 political transition and the [Inclusive National Dialogue](#) have opened new avenues for civic engagement. The 2024 Constitution explicitly recognizes civil society as a legitimate actor in participatory governance (Article 7), leading to [increased involvement](#) in institutional reforms and public consultations. While no organic law yet formalizes this collaboration, emerging practices signal a shift toward more inclusive governance.

Nevertheless, without a robust legal framework guaranteeing access to information, civil society's role remains constrained. During the April 2025 presidential election, several CSO election observers encountered obstacles to their monitoring mission. Although they had their accreditations, some were [denied access](#) to polling stations and offices, notably in Mitzi, Mbimbi, Mounana village, Akieni, École Avenir and Dakar in Lambaréné. These incidents, reported by the Citizen Observers Network (ROC), were compounded by delays in issuing accreditation and intimidation of some observers. Institutionalizing transparency through legislation is essential to empower CSOs, enhance public accountability, and consolidate democratic gains.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Since the 2023 transition, Gabonese CSOs have gained increased visibility and legitimacy in public affairs, evolving from peripheral actors to recognized contributors to democratic governance. Their structured involvement in the [Inclusive National Dialogue](#) (April 2024) marked a turning point, with CSOs actively contributing proposals on transparency, rights, and institutional reform. Their [advocacy for representativeness](#) quotas and inclusion of marginalized groups signaled a shift toward more participatory governance.

CSOs further consolidated their public image during the November 2024 [constitutional referendum](#), where they led voter education and citizen observation campaigns. Their role was instrumental in ensuring a process deemed transparent by both national and international observers. This visibility continued into the April 2025 [presidential election](#), with over 200 CSO observers deployed nationwide in coordination with international partners. The CSO Election Observation Mission (MOE-OSC) mission's [endorsement](#) of the election as “transparent and inclusive” reinforced their credibility, while also highlighting areas for improvement.

Public media and political discourse increasingly portray CSOs as partners in governance, rather than adversaries or fringe actors. [Endorsements](#) from figures like MP Pepecy Ogouliguende reflect a growing political acknowledgment of their role in legitimizing democratic processes. However, this positive portrayal is not uniformly extended to all CSOs—particularly those engaged in rights advocacy or government accountability—which may still face skepticism or marginalization.

The evolving discourse around civil society, coupled with institutional overtures, has created a more enabling—but still evolving—environment. While recognition and visibility have improved, the sustainability of CSOs' impact depends on consistent access to resources, legal

protections, and media narratives that reflect the diversity of their work. The challenge ahead lies in translating symbolic inclusion into structural empowerment.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Despite legislative progress, Gabon's digital environment remains marked by unequal access to the internet, recurring interruptions and targeted surveillance, posing significant constraints on CSOs. With [an internet penetration rate](#) exceeding 71%, access is heavily concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural communities—where advocacy and citizen engagement are equally critical—largely disconnected. Initiatives like the [RuralStar programme](#) and Universal Service efforts to connect over 200 villages have yet to bridge this digital divide, limiting CSOs' ability to mobilize, monitor elections, and conduct outreach in underserved regions.

Infrastructure weaknesses are compounded by strategic internet shutdowns, such as the [nationwide blackout](#) during the August 2023 general elections. Justified by the government as a measure against misinformation, this action was condemned by the #KeepItOn coalition as a violation of democratic norms. Such disruptions not only suppress civic participation but also signal a readiness to prioritize regime stability over transparency.

Frequent power outages, particularly in Libreville in 2024, further undermine digital reliability. These interruptions—rooted in [financial disputes and mismanagement](#)—affect both public services and CSO operations, impeding access to information and [continuity of advocacy](#) efforts.

Surveillance adds another layer of constraint. CSOs engaged in environmental monitoring and electoral oversight report targeted scrutiny, as evidenced by the [final report](#) of the ACP-FLEGT Phase II project. Led by the NGO Brainforest, the report shows that members of civil society trained to collect information on forestry offences are exposed to increased surveillance when they report illegal practices in the forestry and mining sectors. Legal provisions under [Ordinance No. 15/PR/2018](#) prohibit illegal access to computer systems but allows the recording of communications and traffic data in a professional context, paving the way for regulated but potentially intrusive surveillance. According to [Media Défense](#), government digital surveillance may include the interception and analysis of metadata, making it possible to reconstruct individuals' behaviour and relationships, which, without strict judicial oversight, may violate the right to privacy and freedom of expression.

Collectively, these conditions reflect a digitally fragile and politically sensitive environment, where civil society's operational space is constrained by infrastructure gaps, surveillance risks, and selective access. For digital tools to truly empower civic actors, reforms must prioritize equitable access, institutional safeguards, and the protection of digital rights.

Challenges and Opportunities

Over the next four months of 2025, Gabonese civil society will play a central role in strengthening democracy, but it will still face significant challenges. After playing a key role in the inclusive national dialogue, the constitutional referendum and the presidential election (with more than 900 [citizen observers deployed](#)), civil society organisations (CSOs) are now recognised as strategic partners of the government and enjoy a positive public image.

Despite this progress, CSOs face several obstacles: internal rivalries, lack of coordination, limited resources and little influence on electoral reforms. Access to digital tools also remains

uneven, penalising organisations in rural areas. However, opportunities are emerging thanks to training provided by the [PACEM-Gabon](#) programme, the rise of the Réseau des Observateurs Citoyens (Citizen Observers Network) coalition, the digitisation of observation practices, and recommendations for better inclusion of vulnerable populations.

To consolidate their impact, CSOs must professionalise their approach, improve their financial transparency, and institutionalise their role in public policy development. These efforts will help build an active and inclusive citizenry, firmly establishing civil society as a pillar of Gabonese democracy.

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.

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