



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Tanzania

July 2025

Context

After President John Magufuli's death in 2021, Vice President Samia Suluhu Hassan assumed office amid hopes for democratic renewal. Civil society cautiously welcomed her “[Four Rs](#)” philosophy – Reconciliation, Resilience, Reforms, and Rebuilding – as a potential roadmap for restoring civic trust and political openness. At first, this rhetoric suggested a shift away from authoritarian practices, raising expectations of genuine reform. However, these promises have largely gone [unfulfilled](#).

The political landscape has become increasingly restrictive, particularly in the lead-up to the October 2025 general elections. Arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and politically motivated prosecutions persist. In 2025, political party Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA)'s National Chairperson faced [treason charges](#), drawing international concern during a tense election year. [Recent reports](#) indicate that several opposition candidates have been barred from contesting the presidency, raising serious concerns about political pluralism and democratic participation. These developments heighten the risks for civil society actors engaged in governance and electoral monitoring, and underscore the need for closer scrutiny of civic space in the coming months.

Foreign activists seeking to observe the case were [denied entry](#), and some reported being assaulted. In a troubling escalation, the President [warned](#) outsiders against “disrupting peace”, while some members of parliament openly called for violence, suggesting activists should be “[beaten](#) and sent home in wheelchairs.” The Legal and Human Rights Centre recorded [63 cases](#) of arbitrary arrest and detention in 2024, up from 51 in 2023, evidence of mounting hostility toward dissent.

Digital space has also come under heavy restriction. Since 2021, the government has raised data costs, [criminalized](#) the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) without [registration](#), and imposed targeted platform bans. Social media services such as Clubhouse, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter) have faced disruptions, with X [blocked](#) entirely unless accessed through a registered VPN, an act punishable under current laws. Surveillance, censorship, and content removals further erode online freedoms, limiting transparency and civic dialogue.

Together, these trends illustrate a deepening democratic regression in Tanzania, where both physical and digital spaces for civic engagement are increasingly curtailed through legal, political, and technological controls.

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

While the [Constitution of Tanzania](#) guarantees freedom of expression, assembly, and association under Articles 18 and 20, these rights remain largely aspirational in practice. Article 18 affirms the right to opinion and communication, and Article 20 protects the right to freely associate and assemble. However, the legal and political environment continues to undermine these guarantees, creating a [repressed civic space](#).

Tanzania's [ranking of 97th globally](#) for freedom of expression by Reporters Without Borders in 2024, and a [CIVICUS Monitor](#) score of 36, reflect [persistent constraints](#). Arrests for allegedly spreading “false information” and publishing confidential reports point to a broader pattern of repression. Civil society and media actors operate under a regulatory framework that enables arbitrary censorship and punitive action. The Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) has [repeatedly ordered](#) media outlets, including JamiiForums, MillardAyo, JamboTV etc., to remove content without explanation, including during the 2024 Local Government Elections. Even statements made at press conferences—such as those by MP Pastor Josephat Gwajima—have been [censored](#) under vague verification claims.

The July 2025 [closure](#) of Bishop Gwajima's church following his [public criticism](#) of the security forces, and the 11 July 2025 [demolition](#) of the East African Lutheran Church (KKAM) in Ubungo Kibo, where his followers had relocated, illustrate how religious and civic expression are suppressed when they challenge state narratives. The [Media Services Act](#) (MSA) of 2016 further entrenches these restrictions through ambiguous provisions like “false statements” and “disturbing public peace”, with section 55 of this law granting the Minister sweeping powers to ban foreign publications and censor domestic content under the guise of national security and public safety.

The [Media Services Act](#) (2016) allows broad government control over media operations, including journalist accreditation, creating conditions that can suppress [independent reporting](#). Discretionary regulatory powers are used to narrow the work of civil society. The 2025 Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Government Election Regulations [[Regulation 16](#)] restrict CSOs accredited as election observers from publicly commenting on election irregularities or releasing reports before official approval.

These developments reveal a disconnect between constitutional guarantees and the lived reality of civic actors. The state's discretionary control over media and public discourse not only stifles dissent but also erodes democratic accountability. Without meaningful legal reform and institutional safeguards, fundamental freedoms in Tanzania remain vulnerable to political manipulation and repression.

2. Supportive Legal Framework for the Work of Civil Society Actors

Tanzania's legal framework allows for various forms of civil society organisations, including societies, trusts, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). CSOs in Tanzania are primarily governed by the [Non-Governmental Organizations Act](#), 2002, along with its [accompanying regulations](#). While the registration process is generally accessible, it is subject to the discretion of the Registrar, who operates under the Ministry of Community Development, Gender, and Children. This discretionary authority allows the Registrar to reject applications or revoke registrations based on subjective assessments, such as whether an organisation's activities are deemed contrary to the public interest. Section 5(2) of the NGO Act explicitly prohibits unregistered CSOs from operating, making legal recognition contingent on obtaining a certificate of registration.

However, the regulatory landscape is fragmented. CSO registration is influenced by multiple overlapping laws, including the [Trustees Incorporation Act](#), and [Societies Act](#), among others. This multiplicity of legal instruments has led to confusion and inconsistencies in registration procedures and oversight, complicating compliance and governance for CSOs. The Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women, and Special Groups maintains a public [database](#) of registered NGOs. Recent amendments in 2024 to [Section 64](#) of the Income Tax Act have slightly advanced CSO advocacy efforts by expanding the scope of charitable activities eligible for tax exemptions, now including non-profit organisations focused on health and environmental work.

The combination of broad discretionary powers and a fragmented legal framework creates vulnerabilities for civil society, particularly for organisations engaged in advocacy or governance work. While the system allows for registration, it does not guarantee protection from arbitrary interference, nor does it foster a coherent and enabling environment. Streamlining the legal framework and ensuring transparent, impartial registration processes would be essential steps toward strengthening civil society's operational security and independence.

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

The resource environment for Tanzanian civil society is shaped by external dependency, restrictive regulation, and selective incentives. Civil society organisations in Tanzania remain heavily dependent on foreign funding, which accounts for [approximately 72%](#) of their financial resources. While international aid has played a foundational role in shaping the sector, this reliance has fostered a structural dependency that limits the emergence of locally driven, sustainable initiatives. The lack of diversified domestic funding sources undermines long-term resilience and autonomy, particularly for organisations engaged in rights-based advocacy.

Regulatory frameworks further complicate resource accessibility. Section 13 of the [Non-Governmental Organizations \(Amendments\) Regulations of 2018](#) impose stringent reporting obligations on NGOs receiving over 20 million Tanzanian Shillings, requiring bi-annual public disclosures in widely accessible media. Section 12 of this law requires submission of all funding contracts to the Registrar of NGOs and the National Treasury within 14 days of signing. These measures, while framed as transparency mechanisms, also serve as tools for surveillance and control, especially in politically sensitive contexts.

Moreover, donor priorities have shifted toward business development and support for international or UN-affiliated agencies, many of which are restricted from engaging in human rights work. This trend has left grassroots Tanzanian CSOs underfunded and marginalised. External constraints, such as [U.S. executive orders](#) limiting development aid, have further narrowed the funding landscape.

Although tax incentives exist under laws like the [Income Tax Act](#), the [VAT Act](#), and the [Tax Administration Act](#), they are conditional and bureaucratically burdensome. Only CSOs deemed to be of “public character” and operating in sectors like health, education, or

infrastructure qualify—excluding many advocacy and governance-focused organisations. Even for eligible groups, the benefits are limited, with deductions capped at 25% of gross income and subject to approval.

Without reforms to promote domestic philanthropy, simplify access to tax benefits, and protect funding for rights-based work, the sector’s sustainability and impact will remain constrained.

4. State Openness and Responsiveness

Tanzania enacted the [Access to Information Act](#) in 2016, which promotes transparency and supports the right of access to information, as guaranteed under Article 18 of the Constitution. However, it also imposes severe penalties for wrongly releasing information to the public. The authorities may also withhold information if its disclosure is deemed likely to, *inter alia*, undermine Tanzania’s international relations, hinder or cause substantial harm to the government’s management of the economy, or distort records of court proceedings before the conclusion of a case.

Communication between the government and citizens has improved in recent years, with many state actors now using social media to engage with the public. Minister [Dorothy Gwajima](#) has been particularly active on these platforms, including JamiiForums, alongside other ministers such as [Kitila Mkumbo](#) and Mwigulu Nchemba. Several government institutions have also adopted similar practices.

Despite these improvements, officials often provide limited responses when asked for clarification on sensitive matters, or dismiss inquiries as confidential. Reforms in local government, public sector management, and financial administration are frequently presented as signs of openness, but in reality, they tend to be symbolic—designed to impress external observers rather than deliver genuine accountability or meaningful change.

Laws such as the [Statistics Act](#) (2015) limit access to government data, imposing heavy penalties for unauthorised publication, further constraining freedom of information and expression. Also, Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC) reported different CSAs that were [prosecuted](#) by different laws.

In another development, stakeholders and various CSOs have been included by the government to [provide input](#) on different issues, including the drafting of laws. However, this participation is often more symbolic than substantive, with CSO recommendations rarely being fully taken on board. That said, [government–CSO](#) engagement has increased in recent years, even if not to a satisfactory level or given due consideration by the authorities. Still, it marks an initial positive step.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

In Tanzanian public discourse, certain CSOs are frequently depicted as vehicles of foreign influence, accused of advancing moral decline or serving external “imperialist” interests. Only

a limited number of organisations enjoy broad approval from both the public and government authorities. For example, in 2023, journalist Catherine Kahabi and former Minister for Information, Culture, Arts, and Sports, Prof. Harrison Mwakyembe, [publicly accused](#) some CSOs of promoting homosexuality.

Concerns have also been raised by politicians who allege that CSOs may be misused for [illicit activities](#) such as money laundering. In 2025, government officials issued [warnings to CSOs](#) in this regard. Organisations focusing on governance and accountability are particularly vulnerable to being framed as disruptive actors seeking to create tension between the state and its citizens.

Within the sector itself, [debates persist](#) about organisational positioning. Intermediary CSOs often face difficulties determining the appropriate level of engagement with government institutions. Conversely, activist-oriented organisations tend to avoid government funding or operating as agents of ministries, citing concerns that such relationships may compromise their independence and limit their ability to exert external pressure in advocacy.

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Tanzania's digital environment is increasingly restricted by legislative measures. The [Cybercrimes Act](#) of 2015 and the [Online Content Regulations](#) of 2020 continue to limit online freedom of expression. Section 32 of the Cybercrimes Act grants police broad surveillance [powers to search](#), seize, and access electronic devices, to search homes, and demand protected data from service providers without judicial oversight. Section 38 allows ex parte surveillance requests, preventing individuals from effectively contesting state interference with their privacy. The law also criminalises certain online activities, including the publication of false, misleading, or inaccurate information, and unauthorised access to information.

The [Cybercrimes Act](#) also contains a “sedition” provision that carries severe penalties. A 2024 study by Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition ([THRDC](#)) on Human Rights Defenders and Civic Space in Tanzania 2024 revealed that the Cybercrimes Act of 2015, particularly Section 16, has frequently been invoked in [cases](#) involving the publication of allegedly false, defamatory, or misleading information. Section 16 emerged as the most commonly cited provision across numerous cases. Under this law, the government has prosecuted independent online activities of bloggers, [journalists](#), and ordinary citizens.

According to the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA), [internet penetration](#) in Tanzania stood at 37% as of June 2025. Feature phones remain the most owned digital devices (84.97%), followed by smartphones (36.75%). Ownership patterns reveal a gender gap, with men having greater access to [digital devices](#) than women. This digital divide limits the reach of civil society organisations, particularly in rural and marginalised communities. Despite these challenges, CSOs are increasingly adopting digital tools, including AI, and some are actively engaged in digital rights advocacy. For example, in 2023, JamiiAfrica established the Digital Rights Coalition, which now has 25 member organisations.

However, restrictive regulations significantly limit these activities and undermine freedom of expression. The [Online Content Regulations](#) of 2020 require online platforms to register under Section 7, and prohibit vaguely defined “disparaging” content, enabling selective enforcement against critical voices. Violations of Section 16 carry penalties of up to TZS 5 million in fines or 12 months’ imprisonment. Because “disparaging” is vaguely defined, authorities have broad discretion to apply the law selectively, often targeting CSOs critical of government policies, especially during politically sensitive periods such as elections.

In 2024, access to information was further undermined when the use of platforms such as [X Spaces](#) and Clubhouse was restricted, threatening digital rights and freedom of expression. These platforms had been widely used by CSOs for online discussions. Additionally, the requirement for permits from TCRA to use Virtual Private Networks ([VPNs](#)) has been criticised as a violation of the right to privacy, a fundamental aspect of digital security and online freedom. Cybersecurity threats also persist: in 2023, police recorded [475 cases](#) of cyberbullying, including verbal abuse, defamation, disinformation, coercion during voting, and sextortion, with women in electoral processes particularly targeted.

Challenges and Opportunities

Civil society organisations in Tanzania face a complex set of challenges that constrain their autonomy, reach, and impact. A key structural vulnerability lies in their financial model, which is heavily reliant on foreign donors. This dependency not only limits flexibility in agenda-setting but also reinforces public and political narratives that portray CSOs as externally driven, undermining their legitimacy in the eyes of communities and state actors.

The upcoming October 2025 general elections present an additional layer of risk. As political tensions escalate, CSOs—particularly those engaged in governance, rights monitoring, and electoral advocacy—are likely to encounter increased scrutiny, surveillance, and restrictions. The narrowing of civic space during electoral periods threatens both operational security and the broader democratic role of civil society.

Digital exclusion further compounds these challenges. Limited internet penetration, low ownership of digital devices, and uneven digital literacy—especially in rural areas—restrict CSOs’ ability to engage marginalised populations and leverage digital tools for outreach and advocacy. This digital divide not only limits access but also deepens inequalities in civic participation.

The relationship between CSOs and the government remains marked by mistrust, which hinders collaboration and policy influence. Without deliberate efforts to build trust and institutionalise inclusive engagement, CSOs will continue to be sidelined from key decision-making processes.

Yet, opportunities persist. Legal advocacy offers a strategic pathway for CSOs to challenge unconstitutional provisions and defend civic space. Additionally, targeted efforts to improve digital capacity and diversify funding sources could enhance resilience. Strengthening

cooperation with government actors—particularly in non-sensitive sectors—may also open avenues for constructive engagement and policy reform.

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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