



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Papua New Guinea

June 2025

Context

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a constitutional monarchy with a Westminster-style government and a unicameral Parliament that holds elections every five years. The current government is under the leadership of Prime Minister James Marape, who was first elected to power in 2019. The last elections were held in 2022, amidst some [allegations](#) of irregularities and manipulations during voter registration, voting, and ballot counting. This led to a public outcry over the elections, resulting in a parliamentary committee established to examine the issues, which [published](#) its findings and recommendations in 2023. One of the recommendations was to include at least two representatives from civil society in the Inter Departmental Election Committee to provide inclusiveness in election coordination. Yet, with less than two years remaining until the 2027 national general elections, [no progress](#) has been reported on putting these recommendations into effect.

While the government remains responsive to public outcries on issues of national concern, several examples outlined in this snapshot demonstrate how legal reforms implemented over the last decade are negated by weak enforcement as chronically under-resourced state enforcement agencies struggle to give effect to legal protections and safeguards afforded by the law.

The PNG governance landscape is characterised by extreme political diversity, with [over 50 political parties](#) contesting the last elections. This is only further exacerbated by the lack of publicly available data and access to government records. In the absence of objective data, persistent political narratives and agendas can sometimes be difficult to challenge or verify and are allowed to fester in the public conscience. This has led to a rise in distrust and cynicism among PNG citizens.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Freedom of conscience, the press, information, expression, and assembly and association are guaranteed under the Constitution (see Sections 46, 47, and 51 of the PNG Constitution). However, several events and legislative developments between 2022 - 2025 have been indicative of the executive government's increasingly aggressive posture toward the regulation and restriction of these fundamental civic freedoms.

The [Cybercrime Act 2016](#) has been abused to [suppress](#) freedom of expression through initiation of SLAPP (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation) lawsuits against activists. For instance, in December 2024, police arrested and [charged](#) human rights defender and ACT NOW Campaign Manager Eddie Tanago under section 21(2) of the Cybercrime Act 2016, accusing him of making defamatory statements on social media about the Managing Director of the PNG Forest Authority. In addition, there are ongoing attempts to implement state regulation on mainstream media through [public policy](#) and [public inquiries](#). There have also been terminations of journalists from state-owned media companies for reporting opinions that were critical of the executive government. The recent [Media Development Policy](#) also attempts to regulate mainstream media outlets through the establishment of a National Media Commission. These trends are also captured in the [2024 CIVICUS report on PNG](#), which contributed to PNG earning an "obstructed" rating on the CIVICUS Monitor.

The [National Counter-Terrorism Act 2024](#) was enacted by Parliament in December 2024 and has raised concerns about the overly broad definition of “terrorist” within the law. Civil society actors are concerned that it may be applied to stifle dissenting voices, public protests, and other expressions of thought and opinion that may be critical of the government. Powers provided in this law have been used to implement [a blanket shutdown](#) of Facebook access in 2025, which has raised serious concerns among civil society about the executive government’s intentions in enforcing this law. This shutdown occurred in the week of a potential vote of no confidence in Parliament against the Government, indicating the stifling of public discourse.

Freedom of assembly to protest the government is recognised and understood by the state, particularly [by student groups](#) in tertiary institutions. However, [police violence](#) has been used to subdue protestors, [as in the case of the 2016 UPNG Protests](#). In January 2024, certain police officers went on strike, which precipitated [major looting and rioting](#) in urban centres, indicating the level of public dissatisfaction that exists within PNG. These acts of rioting have made peaceful public protests more difficult to organise.

Despite being condemned by [members of Parliament](#), [civil society actors](#), and the wider public, many objectively problematic new laws (such as the new Counter Terrorism Act and Cybercrime Code Act) have been passed almost unanimously in Parliament. Hence, some commentators have posited that this is largely due to the current state of executive dominance in the PNG Parliament, whereby the government coalition retains [about 84% of House votes](#).

Furthermore, an increased populist strain on the government has prompted a number of high-level government interventions, which are inconsistent with constitutional principles – including freedom of association, thought and conscience. In March 2025, Papua New Guinea’s Constitution was amended to formally declare the nation a Christian country. As the Prime Minister [pushed](#) for this in part to recognise “the role of Christian churches” in PNG’s development, the country’s largest denomination, [the Catholic Church](#), and other concerned groups raised concerns that this would undermine the secularity of PNG and constitutional principles of [freedom of thought and conscience](#). Although Papua New Guinea is 96% Christian, this may have implications for practitioners of other faiths and those impacted by Christian ideologies, e.g., the LGBTQI community or those seeking reproductive healthcare in PNG. This is also evidenced by a [recent](#) Morobe Provincial Government initiative to pay church pastors out of public funds, and Prime Minister Marape’s [commitment](#) of K10 million for churches to conduct awareness and crusades as part of PNG’s pre-independence celebrations.

However, it is important to note that there has also been some progress on the implementation of longstanding GoPNG commitments, such as the [Freedom of Information Bill](#) and the establishment of a [National Human Rights Commission](#).

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

Civil society actors have generally been free to identify and advocate issues of concern at the national, sub-national, and community levels. However, a new [Community Development](#)

law was passed in June 2025 for the first time in PNG. Among other things, news reports (*Post Courier*, June 10th, 2025, Pg 10 - no online reference) have highlighted that the law also provides for non-government and civil society organisations (CSOs) to register their plans and activities with the Department of Community Development and Religion (DfCDR).

It is important to note that while DfCDR has partnered with CSOs at an implementation and community engagement level in the past, early impressions of the government's new CSO policy seem to reposition the DfCDR as a national CSO regulatory body. However, the extent to which these new legal parameters will shape the relationship between the DfCDR and CSOs is still unclear, as copies of the new law have not been made available to the public at the time of drafting this paper. Meanwhile, questions remain on why such a law was necessary, as this work is already being facilitated at the national and subnational levels by existing government agencies and departments.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for civil society actors in PNG is relatively accessible, with support from international donors, private foundations, and local contributions - including government support in some cases. Many organisations successfully secure resources to implement impactful programmes, and there are no major government interruptions to funding sources. While administrative requirements exist, they are generally manageable, allowing organisations to focus on their core functions.

The current PNG tax regime also allows for non-profit organisations to receive refunds for Goods and Services Tax on expenditures. This amounts to 10% of the cost of any goods or services procured by non-profit organisations in the course of their operations. Moreover, the current tax regime provides for corporate and other donors who fund CSO operations under their corporate social responsibility programmes to earn rebates. This applies to charitable donations in cases where the recipient meets the Internal Revenue Commission's legal requirements and has a proper deed of trust.

While these legal provisions significantly improve access to funding for legitimate CSOs, gaps in the legal framework (i.e., [Criminal Code Act](#) and [Organic Law on the Independent Commission Against Corruption](#)) also leave room for these provisions to be exploited by corrupt actors; notably, the absence of criminal, civil, or administrative liability of "legal persons" (as opposed to that of "natural persons") as required by [Article 26](#) of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption to which PNG is a party. Although no precedents of such a nature have been prosecuted in PNG, this is more of a pre-emptive consideration, given that serious and sophisticated crimes are frequently committed under the cover of legal entities, such as companies, corporations, or charitable organisations, in comparable legal jurisdictions.

Furthermore, some requirements under PNG's ongoing Anti-Money Laundering and Counter Terrorism-Funding (AML/CTF) reforms are vulnerable to being abused to make it difficult for CSOs to formally incorporate, receive foreign funding, or open bank accounts. In other jurisdictions, AML/CTF reforms have been used as a pretext to [shrink civic freedoms](#), and PNG has recently added [new requirements](#) for Associations to comply with for registration [following AML/CTF reforms](#). While they haven't been abused yet to shrink civic freedoms,

this is a possibility as the government has shown a similar intent in relation to media registration.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Freedom of information (FOI) is formally enshrined in Section 51 of the PNG Constitution. However, progress on drafting an FOI framework has been sporadic and discontinuous. The most recent attempt under the PNG Open Government Partnership began in 2020, although this effort has yet to deliver a complete PNG FOI policy or bill. The executive government's decision to prioritise and expedite the regulation of constitutional freedoms over addressing the lack of transparency and [accountability](#) in government administration and the management of public funds is a cause for concern.

Some GoPNG initiatives have facilitated a notable improvement in areas such as public sector partnership and engagement with civil society. Notably, the [PNG Open Government Partnership](#) (OGP), which was established in 2015, is now in its 10th year of implementation and undergoing co-creation on its third National Action Plan. The [PNG Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative](#) (EITI) was established in 2013. PNG scored moderately in its 2022 validation and recently held a pre-validation workshop, ahead of its next country validation in January 2026. Also, the Special Parliamentary Committee on the 2022 National General Elections engaged in public participation. For instance, Transparency International PNG (TIPNG) was invited to be a member of the technical working group and contributed to the final report and recommendations.

Each of these high-level multi-stakeholder partnerships has facilitated structured engagement with a broad range of PNG stakeholders, including civil society, churches, and the private sector. This has enabled greater representation in formal discourse on national issues and allowed civil society actors to have a direct impact on national government policy and legislative reforms. The increase in high-level GoPNG engagement with CSOs can also be attributed to recognition of the specialist knowledge, public confidence, or operational capacity of civil society. This has been notable in areas of service delivery and welfare, as well as in politics and governance.

However, many of these engagements between civil society and GoPNG have been superficial and have not resulted in any meaningful impact on government policy or legal reform. Concerns have been raised that some of these consultations are merely attempts by GoPNG to legitimise their programmes and decision-making processes, especially in cases where CS consultation is required by donors. An example of this has been the Special Parliamentary Committee on the 2022 General Elections, where over 70 recommendations were identified in [the final report](#) after one year and three months of consultations and over K1.06 million in public funds spent. However, with less than two years left before the 2027 national general elections, there has been no update on the implementation of these recommendations.

In other cases, such as the Electoral Boundaries Commission review and development of the National Budget, government consultation processes are [restricted or selective](#), undermining the ability of civil society to fully contribute to relevant legal or policy developments. There has also been a proposed State-CSO Policy within [PNG's OGP 2nd](#) National Action Plan; however, this has also been drafted with minimal consultation with

CSOs. At the last consultation in September 2024, participants were advised that this policy would enable the state to directly fund CSOs, which raises the concern of state capture, coupled with the amendments under the Associations Incorporation Act 2023, which could stifle freedom of association.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

There are not many known records of PNG government officials using language that discourages civil society actors from conducting their activities. A few examples are: in 2022, the Prime Minister had warned the media against anti-government narratives by indicating that press freedom was not absolute, which was [pushed back](#) by the Media Council of PNG. In 2024, he also warned university students about petitioning and protests, cautioning them not to be swayed by “[anti-government agitators/elements](#)” allegedly trying to provoke unrest.

CSOs have continued to voice stern and frequent opposition to specific developments and actions by the executive government, while the relationship between CSOs and the government remains a cordial one. There has been an increase in cases of CSOs working alongside constitutional and government agencies in advocating for stronger financial, legal, and policy support. Recent examples of this include CSO support for the implementation of the [Organic Law on the Independent Commission Against Corruption](#) and the [PNG Electoral Commission](#).

Marginalised groups, particularly women, children and youths, have gained more visibility in civil society. Some notable support from the government includes the recent establishment of the [Parliamentary Committee on Gender](#) to respond to specific issues of gender based violence and sorcery accusation-related violence, and the [Parliamentary Committee on Children & Youth](#) focused on addressing youth-oriented issues. Despite this progress, barriers remain, and marginalised groups still struggle to be heard in political discussions. Civil society continues to play a vital role in promoting inclusivity and democratic participation.

Given the populist strain of the government, there has also been a visible response to national issues of concern, e.g., [the Prime Minister responded](#) to allegations that journalists had been suspended and terminated, reiterating democratic norms - at least publicly.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

There has been a steady [increase](#) in the accessibility and use of digital technologies in PNG. However, online penetration still stands at only [24.1 per cent](#), and mobile cellular usage now sits at about [47.2 per cent](#). Internet coverage is especially bad in rural areas where the lack of trunk infrastructure (road links, electricity, etc.) continues to present a barrier to progress. As a result, CSOs in PNG have limited internet access, which restricts their reach and limits their opportunities to utilize web-based applications and other digital technologies to enhance the impact of their outreach and advocacy.

Apart from these technical limitations, the recent push by GoPNG to adapt digital technologies in regulation and enforcement has also brought a new threat to digital freedom.

This was demonstrated in March 2025, when the Ministry of Police implemented a [test restriction](#) on Facebook. While both the CEO of National Information and Communications Technology Authority and the Minister of ICT denied any knowledge of the test prior to its implementation, Police Minister Peter Tsiamalili Jnr. later came out with a statement claiming that the Facebook blackout was the result of a successful test of a new government “ICT Control System”. He mentioned that the system was designed to regulate the use of Facebook and other online platforms to mitigate hate speech, misinformation, pornography, and other detrimental content impacting Papua New Guinea.

In December 2024, human rights defender and ACT NOW Campaign Manager Eddie Tanago was arrested and charged by police under [section 21\(2\) of the Cybercrime Act 2016](#) for allegedly publishing defamatory remarks on social media about the Managing Director of the PNG Forest Authority. Tanago was taken to the Boroko Police Station holding cell and released on bail the same afternoon. While the court ultimately dropped all charges against him for lack of evidence in May 2025, the seriousness of the offence could have resulted in a maximum sentence of 15 years’ imprisonment for re-posting a picture of a public official. [The ongoing abuse](#) by the police and state of the Cybercrime Code Act remains a risk to the right of CSOs and citizens to exercise their freedom of expression. While a more thorough review of these provisions and amendments must be carried out to prevent the further abuse of constitutional rights, in the interim, the threat of severe and oppressive repercussions remains.

There has been a push by the government towards digitalisation; however, coupled with [poor procurement](#), weak [cybersecurity](#), and [siloing of data](#), there is a clear risk that citizen rights will be impacted if digitalisation is not done holistically and based on citizens' needs. For example, the launch of a government ID Sevis Pass could be abused during the next election period (expected in 2027) to prejudice voters. This threat is evidenced by the slow onboarding of national government initiatives such as the PNG National Identity project. Despite [spending](#) over K460 million in public funding over the last 10 years, the National ID project has only registered 3.3 million of PNG’s estimated 11 million citizens. Without an effective rollout and the application of the ID Sevis Pass initiative to biometric voting for elections, this may prejudice millions of PNG voters.

Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges

Over the next four months, civil society in PNG will continue to face challenges with the government's application of provisions in the Counter-Terrorism Act 2024, which continues to pose a threat to anyone who expresses a voice that is critical of the executive government. This risk also applies to the government’s liberal interpretations of powers and offences provided under new pieces of legislation, such as the Cybercrime Code Act and the Community Development Act 2025. While CSOs continue to advocate for changes to the legal and policy provisions that are most injurious to civic rights and freedoms, the courts will also play an important role in establishing strong precedents and interpretations of law, as more opportunities to test and examine these new legal principles present themselves.

Opportunities

Although [PNG’s low literacy rate](#) continues to be a barrier to greater civic participation in holding the government to account, recent efforts to simplify new legislation, coupled with

ongoing efforts to develop a Freedom of Information bill, are poised to have a significant impact on public demand for accountability and transparency in government. Greater and more meaningful involvement by CSOs in supporting the rollout of GoPNG awareness initiatives or engaging in consultations on the development and implementation of government policy and laws can help to strengthen the impact of community concerns on ongoing government interventions.

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.

EU SEE

SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



Funded by
the European Union

Hivos
people unlimited



 **DEMOCRACY
REPORTING
INTERNATIONAL**

 **European
Partnership for
Democracy**

 **forus** CONNECT
SUPPORT
INFLUENCE

 **TRANSPARENCY
INTERNATIONAL**
the global coalition against corruption