



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Benin

July 2025

Context

Since [President Patrice Talon](#) came to power [in 2016](#), Benin has undergone profound institutional reforms, accompanied by political tensions unprecedented in the post-1990 democratic era. This dynamic culminated in the [electoral crisis of April-May 2019](#), which had a significant impact on the country's political stability and democratic reputation. [The 2019 legislative elections](#) took place [without the participation of the opposition](#), which was excluded for non-compliance with the new electoral rules of 2018. Only [two pro-government parties](#) closely linked to President Patrice Talon were allowed to participate. This situation led to the establishment of a parliament entirely loyal to the executive branch, with no opposition representation, and enabled the president to undertake major reforms without any real countervailing power. The constitutional revision of November 2019 was carried out without a referendum or public consultation. It amended several [key provisions](#) of the Constitution, such as the introduction of mandatory sponsorship of presidential candidates by elected officials, the [reform of the electoral calendar](#), and the institutionalisation of gender promotion, albeit without any clear binding mechanism. In response, between April and May 2019, [protests](#) broke out in several cities across Benin. These were violently [suppressed](#). There were also numerous injuries, arbitrary arrests, [the exile](#) of opposition figures, [internet blackouts](#) and [a marked restriction of civic space](#).

In 2024-2025, civic space in Benin continued to shrink gradually. The adoption of a new electoral code in March 2024, deemed restrictive by the opposition, and the draft law on associations and foundations submitted to the National Assembly without prior consultation in April 2025 illustrate this [trend](#). Furthermore, the arbitrary arrests of political and trade union figures, the violent repression of peaceful demonstrations and the closure of critical media outlets confirm the fragility of the environment for civil and political rights.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

In Benin, **fundamental civil liberties** are guaranteed by a set of constitutional provisions that must be read in conjunction with one another ([Articles 15, 24, 25 and 26](#)). Although progressive in its constitutional provisions, the legal framework is **applied inconsistently** in reality. The score of 51/100 awarded by the CIVICUS Monitor in 2024 places the country in the "[obstructed](#)" category, due to restrictions on [demonstrations](#), arrests of activists and pressure on the media.

Incidents of repression of demonstrations were reported during [political demonstrations](#) by the Democrats, the main opposition party, raising concerns about the government's commitment to respecting this right. With regard to freedom of assembly, the violent repression of a trade union demonstration against the high cost of living in Cotonou in April 2024 and the arrest of [trade union leaders](#) attest to systematic restrictions. Furthermore, civic space is shrinking with a draft law on the functioning of associations and foundations, aimed at replacing the [1901 law](#), the

content of which remains unknown to the public and is causing concern among civil society organisations. Freedom of expression remains under threat with the imprisonment of cyber activists such as [Steve Amoussou \(Frère Hounvi\)](#), who is being prosecuted for "inciting rebellion" and "publishing false news". The suspension and freezing of the accounts of the main private press group, La Gazette du Golfe, accused of "apologising for the coup d'état", illustrates the continuing censorship. With regard to freedom of assembly, the following trade union activists were arrested during a trade union demonstration against the high cost of living in April 2024 in Cotonou: Anselme Amoussou (CSA-Benin), [Moudassirou Bachabi](#) (CGT-Benin), [Noël Chadaré](#) (COSI-Benin), [Stanislas Ouikotan](#) (SYNFOMAP-Benin) and [Kassa Mampo \(May 2025\)](#). Finally, civil society organisations are concerned about the submission to Parliament of a bill on the functioning of associations and foundations, replacing the historic 1901 law without its content being made public or accessible to citizens. These events testify to a significant narrowing of civic space.

[In the latest Global Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, the country has fallen to 121st place](#) . In 2016, before President Talon came to power, Benin was still in 78th place.

In 2021, Benin also introduced the [Digital Code](#). Presented as a tool for regulating the digital sphere, in practice it serves to restrict freedom of expression. It exposes journalists, citizens and political opponents to prosecution for simply publishing content online, including sharing a link. This climate of intimidation has led to the imprisonment of journalists such as [Ignace Sossou](#) .

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

The Beninese legal framework allows civil society organisations (CSOs) to register without major obstacles, thanks to a set of fundamental texts, including the constitutional and legal framework. The 1990 Beninese Constitution, revised in 2019, guarantees several essential rights: Article 25 enshrines freedom of association, assembly and demonstration, subject to the conditions laid down by law. French law inherited from the colonial period, in particular the [Law of 1 July 1901](#), continues to apply. This law defines an association as a permanent non-profit agreement (Article 1) and prohibits those based on an illegal purpose or contrary to public morality (Article 3). The regulation of NGOs is specified by [Decree No. 2001-234 of 12 July 2001](#) , which requires prior notification to the competent authorities (Prefecture or Ministry of the Interior), accompanied by strict formalities: minutes of the constituent general meeting, articles of association, internal regulations, criminal records of the directors, and publication in the Official Journal. Other texts supplement this provision, in particular:

- [Ordinance No. 59 of 28 December 1966](#), which specifies certain procedural aspects of the 1901 law;

- [Decree No. 2006-132 of 29 March 2006](#), which regulates the creation of trade unions and their criteria for representativeness;
- Interministerial decrees (2002-2003), which establish an ad hoc disciplinary council for NGOs, set the conditions for obtaining public utility status and regulate headquarters agreements for foreign NGOs.

In addition to this national legal arsenal, there are international standards, notably the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(1966\)](#), which protects freedom of association (Articles 21 and 22), and the [African Charter on Human and People's Rights](#), which reinforces associative rights (Articles 10 and 11).

However, despite this theoretically favourable framework, CSOs face practical obstacles: cumbersome administrative procedures and controls on foreign funding.

Furthermore, the legal framework is undergoing worrying changes. In April 2025, a draft law on associations and foundations was tabled without prior consultation. Repealing the 1901 law, this draft raises [serious concerns about a shrinking civic space](#).

CSOs in Benin enjoy a certain degree of autonomy in their governance, but face difficulties in accessing funding, exacerbated by donor requirements. The strict application of laws on money laundering and terrorist financing has led to the closure of bank accounts, complicating transfers and threatening their financial viability. This development reflects increased state control, without sufficient guarantees to protect fundamental freedoms. Despite a legal framework designed to prevent interference, there have been reports of interventions in the activities of CSOs.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

The financial sustainability of CSOs is generally stable. The sector is heavily dependent on foreign funding. The main foreign partners were the governments of Germany, the United States, Switzerland and the Netherlands, Global Affairs Canada, and the European Union (EU). State subsidies, which are still very rare, are virtually non-existent. Several corporate foundations, such as [MTN](#) and [MOOV Africa](#), fund CSOs or directly implement social projects within communities. Very few CSOs have financial sustainability strategy documents. Many CSOs, particularly new organisations and those operating in rural and remote areas with limited geographical reach, have struggled to cover their operating expenses. Although the legal and policy framework provides a favourable context for mobilising local resources, almost no CSOs receive financial support from local sources. The culture of philanthropy towards CSOs is not developed or encouraged, and CSO members do not contribute. On the other hand, several CSOs active in agriculture and livestock farming sell products to generate income. Most organisations still do not have systems for managing their financial resources, although donors are increasingly requiring activity reports and certified accounts before funding new projects. Most donor-funded organisations hire financial officers to prepare financial reports. CSOs do not generally publish their financial reports.

There are no major national initiatives in place to promote sustainable internal funding. A few international programmes still support local governance and social accountability, notably the [Accountability Initiatives Support Fund \(FoSIR\)](#), but their scope remains limited, particularly for small rural associations. This dependence on external aid undermines the stability and independence of CSOs in Benin.

4. State openness and responsiveness

The issue of the openness and responsiveness of the Beninese state remains marked by numerous contradictions. Although some progress has been made, particularly through the digitisation of public services via platforms facilitating administrative procedures, as well as through ad hoc collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs) in sectors such as health, education and microfinance, these efforts remain insufficient to demonstrate genuine openness. Several institutional reforms have been undertaken to improve administrative efficiency, but these have rarely included the active participation of citizens or CSOs. At the same time, significant limitations remain. The lack of transparency in the management of public affairs, illustrated in particular by the failure to publish official documents such as the [salaries of members of the government](#), is regularly denounced by civil society and opposition parties.

Reform processes, such as the 2019 constitutional review and the 2025 draft law on associations, have been conducted without prior public consultation, which weakens their democratic legitimacy. Citizen accountability mechanisms struggle to function effectively, and CSO inquiries often go unanswered. Dialogue between the state and civil society remains deeply asymmetrical: although CSOs are called upon to implement public policies, their monitoring, advocacy and questioning initiatives are frequently equated with political opposition. Furthermore, despite a professed desire for openness, this remains mainly technocratic and instrumentalised, with no real willingness to incorporate proposals or criticism from civil society. As a result, CSO involvement in national decision-making remains marginal.

Although a few meetings have taken place between certain CSOs and ministries for the implementation of sectoral projects, particularly in the areas of health and education, the contribution of organisations led by women or from minority groups is rarely taken into account in strategic decisions. The government has engaged in significant cooperation with certain representative structures, such as [the Federation of Associations of Persons with Disabilities in Benin and the Network of Associations of Persons with Disabilities in Benin](#), in the development and implementation of national policies promoting the rights of persons living with disabilities through [Law No. 2017-06 on the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Benin](#).

Despite this, the dialogue established remains essentially top-down and informative, without a genuine participatory or co-construction process being put in place. Finally, access to public information remains limited. Although some efforts have been announced to enhance transparency, many important government decisions are not

made available to the public, which undermines citizen participation and reinforces the lack of trust between the state and civil society. Ultimately, the Beninese state's openness to civil society remains weak, fragmented and not very inclusive.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

The role of Beninese civil society is gaining recognition among the population, particularly in the areas of education, health, local governance and human rights advocacy. Many associations are seen as indispensable actors in complementing public action, particularly in rural and peripheral areas where the state has a limited presence.

The population often values civil society for its proximity to social needs and its commitment to promoting citizen participation. CSO initiatives in the areas of rights awareness, poverty reduction and women's empowerment enjoy broad popular support.

However, the discourse remains ambivalent: while CSOs are seen as essential for development and social justice, some criticisms are emerging, particularly due to a lack of understanding of funding methods and suspicion about the independence of certain organisations, which are sometimes accused of being too close to the government or international donors.

Civic education and citizen mobilisation are seen as important levers for strengthening trust between civil society and the population, as well as for encouraging broader involvement, particularly among young people and marginalised groups.

Finally, the media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion about CSOs. Media coverage can be positive when it highlights concrete actions, but political polarisation affects the visibility and reputation of organisations.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Law No. 2017-20 of 20 April 2018 on the Digital Code, amended by [Law No. 2020-35 of 6 January 2021](#), provides a detailed framework for access to a secure digital environment in Benin. This legislation defines the rights and obligations of users, service providers and public authorities, particularly with regard to cybersecurity, personal data protection and the fight against cybercrime. Within this regulatory framework, the digital environment remains broadly accessible, with no internet shutdowns recorded since 2020. However, surveillance and criminalisation of critical voices online persist. [The case of Frère Hounvi \(Steve Amoussou\)](#), who was arrested for his online columns, encourages a climate of self-censorship and digital harassment. It should be noted that Stève Amoussou has never admitted to being Frère Hounvi, nor has he admitted to being the author of the columns published by the

person known as Frère Hounvi. There is no specific mechanism in place to protect civil society against cyberattacks, targeted disinformation or communications surveillance.

Challenges and Opportunities

The major challenges facing Beninese civil society include the imminent adoption of a legal framework without any open consultation with CSOs, the increasing criminalisation of critical CSO activities online, and the lack of incentive laws promoting sustainable and attractive funding for these organisations. Furthermore, the repression of fundamental freedoms, particularly those of assembly and expression, remains a persistent obstacle. Added to these difficulties are the significant risks associated with the upcoming general elections in Benin in 2026, where internet shutdowns, increased repression of peaceful demonstrations, and heightened pressure on independent media are anticipated.

Despite this context, opportunities remain. The potential diplomatic and financial support of international partners and donors also offers a window of strategic support. Furthermore, the vitality of local community initiatives in key sectors such as health, education and the environment provides fertile ground for strengthening citizen participation and the impact of CSOs.

To take full advantage of these opportunities, civil society must strengthen its internal coordination, develop its legal expertise and improve its strategic advocacy with national policy makers and international partners.

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