



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Pakistan

July 2025

Context

The enabling environment in Pakistan continues to reflect persistent challenges alongside incremental progress across its political, economic, and civil society spheres. Politically, instability and governance concerns remain prominent, shaping the space available for democratic processes and civic participation. Ongoing mediation efforts among political stakeholders are visible, yet the state's growing reliance on regulatory controls, particularly over digital platforms and public expression, continues to raise concerns for freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly.

Civil society actors continue to operate in a complex environment marked by bureaucratic hurdles and regulatory restrictions. While these challenges hinder smooth functioning, civil society organisations remain active in advocacy, humanitarian response, and development initiatives. Fundamental freedoms including speech, peaceful assembly, and the press still face constraints, with government influence over media and online content having a direct impact on civic space.

Despite these persistent difficulties, there are pockets of resilience. Civil society and political actors maintain dialogue around reforms and civic freedoms, keeping alive the demand for greater openness and accountability. The current period, though fraught with challenges, holds potential for gradual transformation if steps are taken to safeguard basic freedoms, reduce political polarisation, and reinforce the constructive role of civil society in governance and development.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

In Pakistan, the protection of fundamental freedoms continues to face significant challenges, revealing a persistent gap between constitutional guarantees and their practical realisation. While the Constitution safeguards freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and religion, recurring state practices, restrictive legislation, and weak institutional safeguards undermine these commitments.

The [Human Rights Council of Balochistan](#) reported 814 enforced disappearances and 365 extrajudicial killings in the first half of 2025 alone, figures nearly equal to the previous year's totals. Victims included students, activists, and ordinary citizens, reflecting how enforced disappearances remain entrenched as a tool of coercion against marginalised communities.

A sweeping [judicial verdict sentencing 108 opposition figures to 10 years](#) in prison for protests following the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan demonstrated the narrowing of civic space. Civil society groups, which play a vital role in monitoring democratic commitments and mobilising public discourse, expressed grave concerns about the partiality of such measures and their chilling effect on dissent.

At the local level, [the arrest of Baloch social activist Gulzar Dost](#) further highlighted the state's contentious engagement with grassroots actors. Such actions not only restrict participatory governance but also deepen alienation, revealing that civil society's involvement in policymaking remains sporadic and heavily constrained by the political climate and institutional resistance.

This climate of repression was further illustrated by the [Tirah Valley incident](#) (27-28 July 2025), where protests against the alleged killing of a young girl by stray mortar fire escalated into a violent confrontation. Security forces opened live fire on demonstrators, resulting in seven civilian deaths and at least 17 injuries. The episode starkly exposed the risks associated with

exercising the right to peaceful assembly, as protests were met not with dialogue but with lethal force.

Adding to this complex environment, the federal government established the [Federal Constabulary](#), a newly empowered paramilitary force upgraded from the Frontier Constabulary. Announced through an [ordinance](#) without parliamentary debate, the move was justified as a measure to centralise internal security and manage protests more effectively. However, opposition parties and human rights observers cautioned that the force could be used to suppress dissent and restrict public demonstrations, particularly given its timing ahead of protests planned for August 2025. Despite it not having been used during the PTI protests, the risk for abuse remains.

This development deepened civil society concerns about securitisation, where activism and accountability efforts risk being framed as destabilising threats rather than constructive democratic engagement. For example, in July 2025, [authorities detained several activists, including Dr. Maharang Baloch](#), under the *Maintenance of Public Order (MPO)*, a law frequently invoked to suppress protests and carry out raids targeting activists, particularly in Balochistan. These actions were officially justified on the grounds of maintaining “public order”.

Further to this, the passage of the [Balochistan Anti-Terrorism \(Amendment\) Act, 2025](#) exemplifies the growing restrictions on fundamental freedoms in Pakistan. The amendment empowers security forces to detain individuals for up to three months without formal charges and was enacted without adequate consultation or legislative scrutiny. By framing such measures under the guise of “public order” and “national security”, the state effectively limits the right to liberty, freedom of expression, and peaceful assembly. This approach reflects a broader trend of securitising dissent, sidelining civil society voices, and weakening institutional accountability—all of which undermine the protection of fundamental rights and the democratic principle of participatory governance.

Collectively, these developments illustrate the complex interplay between security imperatives, political control, and societal intolerance that undermine Pakistan’s constitutional framework. Whether through digital censorship, misuse of counterterrorism and cybercrime laws, or direct violence against marginalised groups and protesters, the July 2025 trajectory showed that fundamental freedoms remain precarious, contingent on shifting state priorities rather than robust rights protections.

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

On 8 July, the government established the [Pakistan Virtual Assets Regulatory Authority \(PVARA\)](#) through a new ordinance. While the measure is aimed at curbing money laundering and ensuring compliance with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) standards, the regulatory scope may extend to NGOs or civil society organisations that explore digital fundraising. The additional licensing and compliance requirements may create new barriers for organisations that are already managing significant resource and regulatory pressures.

A notable development occurred when the [Sindh Assembly’s Public Accounts Committee \(PAC\) ordered the blacklisting of eight NGOs](#) for failing to submit mandatory audit reports on over Rs. 800 million in state funding allocated under the Community Development Programme. The committee further instructed the cancellation of their registrations and licences, signaling a decisive stance on financial accountability within the sector. While underscoring the critical expectation for transparency, this regulatory action also reinforced the dual perception of NGOs in Pakistan: respected for their role in service delivery and empowerment, yet simultaneously monitored and penalised under stringent compliance frameworks.

The most significant shift was seen in Balochistan, where the [Balochistan Charity and Regulation Authority \(BCRA\)](#) annulled the registrations of all NGOs and welfare organisations registered under the provincial department of social welfare, translating to more than 1,500 organisations, including NGOs, trusts, and community associations. All affected entities were directed to re-register by 31 July, failing which they would face penalties of up to one year's imprisonment, a PKR two million fine (ca. 6,000 Euro), or both. This decision created an immediate compliance burden, heightening operational uncertainty, resource strain, and legal risk for organisations in the province.

Collectively, these developments reflect a legal environment that remains highly restrictive, with civil society actors continuing to face layered compliance demands and risks of arbitrary restrictions that undermine their effectiveness and autonomy.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

In July 2025, advocacy-oriented NGOs in Pakistan faced heightened financial pressures as overall [foreign assistance to the country dropped by USD 4.55 billion](#), with disbursements shrinking to just USD 694.5 million compared to June, due to donor delays and stalled external loans. This steep decline has significantly constrained the operational capacity of rights-based organisations that rely heavily on international support to sustain their core functions and advocacy agendas.

Although there was a [partial resumption of USAID funding](#), the revival was restricted to specific initiatives such as the Need-Based Merit Scholarships (Phase II) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) Infrastructure Program. While these targeted programmes provided some relief to the education and infrastructure sectors, they offered little assistance to advocacy-driven NGOs. Most of these organisations continue to operate on a fragile financial footing, with little to no allocation for civic engagement, community mobilisation, or policy advocacy.

The sector continues to struggle with the long-term effects of global aid freezes, forcing NGOs to rely on domestic philanthropy and diaspora contributions that remain fragmented and unpredictable, limiting long-term stability. Donor-driven thematic priorities and entrenched Request for Proposal (RFP) cultures common among USAID, the Global Fund, and the European Commission further constrain locally informed, context-driven solutions by privileging service delivery and measurable outputs over sustainability and systemic reform. As a result, advocacy-oriented NGOs face sharper vulnerabilities, with civic space at risk unless donor priorities shift towards inclusivity, sustainability, and local ownership.

4. State openness and responsiveness

The relationship between the state and civil society reflects persistent challenges, with limited institutional responsiveness and mixed signals regarding openness. Civil society in Pakistan continues to face systemic barriers to access, accountability, and participation, despite the presence of frameworks such as Right to Information (RTI) laws, which are inconsistently implemented. These gaps reinforce mistrust between the government and citizens, weakening transparency and accountability mechanisms.

The passage of the [Balochistan Anti-Terrorism \(Amendment\) Act, 2025](#), which granted security forces authority to detain individuals for up to three months without formal charges, reflects a serious decline in state openness and responsiveness. The amendment was rushed through the provincial assembly without adequate debate or consultation with civil society, human rights bodies, or opposition lawmakers. By framing the law as a necessity for “public order” and “national security”, the state prioritised control over dialogue and transparency. This exclusion of civil input and the broad, unchecked powers granted to

security institutions highlight a governance model where dissent is securitised and oversight mechanisms are weakened, undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions.

Civil society reactions, including condemnation from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and legal experts, show that the state largely failed to respond meaningfully to legitimate concerns about fundamental rights and due process. Instead of revising or retracting the law, the government doubled down on its security narrative, portraying critics as disruptive or misinformed. This illustrates a pattern of low responsiveness where public feedback and human rights advocacy are treated as oppositional rather than constructive. As a result, the July 2025 amendment symbolises a broader erosion of participatory governance in Pakistan, where the state's preference for coercive stability continues to outweigh openness, accountability, and democratic responsiveness.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

In Pakistan, civil society engagement remained under heightened scrutiny, reflecting the ongoing contest between recognition of NGOs' developmental contributions and persistent suspicion about their legitimacy and accountability.

The creation of the Federal Constabulary, criticised for its implications on freedom of assembly, also reflects the broader trend of securitisation in Pakistan's political culture, where civic dissent is increasingly managed through paramilitary force rather than democratic dialogue.

[The Sindh Assembly's PAC decision to blacklist eight NGOs](#) for failing to submit audit reports while reinforcing the importance of accountability also influenced public discourse by framing CSOs as entities requiring constant scrutiny. Such actions fuel narratives that civil society, despite its service delivery and empowerment roles, is prone to mismanagement, thereby shaping political culture in ways that undermine trust and constrain CSOs' legitimacy.

These events echo broader, long-standing narratives that shape civil society's contested space in Pakistan. NGOs continue to be recognised globally for advancing human rights, promoting transparency, and fostering civic participation. Yet, in Pakistan the scepticism, often amplified by security agencies, casts doubts on their motives, funding sources, and questions their loyalty to their country. State institutions, wielding extensive discretionary oversight powers, have at times accused NGOs of serving as potential fronts for money laundering, terrorist financing, or anti-state activities. Such narratives filter into public discourse, complicating how communities perceive NGOs as both vital bridges between citizens and the state, and as entities whose legitimacy is frequently questioned.

Meanwhile, societal freedoms, equality and inclusion continue to be imperiled by cultural and structural violence. A viral video of the [honour killing of a newlywed couple in Balochistan](#) sparked national outrage. The arrest of 11 suspects provided a rare example of accountability, but the incident reinforced the ongoing failure of state mechanisms to ensure protection of women against gender-based violence. Civil society actors highlighted this case as emblematic of how patriarchal norms and weak enforcement of rights perpetuate systemic threats to the rights of minority groups. Discrimination, structural violence, and marginalisation of ethnic minorities, and especially women within these minority groups, result in their continuing exclusion from full participation in civil society.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

In Pakistan, many of the [digital concerns stem from government actions and policies](#). The most pressing issue is state surveillance, where online activity is closely monitored without

transparent oversight, raising serious privacy concerns. The government also frequently resorts to internet shutdowns and service disruptions, often during protests or sensitive events, which undermines citizens' right to access information and communicate freely.

Another major concern is online censorship. Authorities block or restrict websites, social media platforms, and news outlets under the pretext of security or morality, but in practice this limits freedom of expression and suppresses dissent. Laws like PECA 2016 are often criticised for being used less to protect citizens and more to control narratives, silence activists, and intimidate journalists. Together, these practices erode trust in the digital space and create an environment where fundamental rights, privacy, free expression, and access to information are at risk.

On 25 July, the [government formally requested global social media platforms to block 481 accounts](#) allegedly linked to banned militant outfits, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). While justified as a counterterrorism measure, this action highlighted the increasing securitisation of the digital sphere, where boundaries between legitimate regulation and suppression of civic discourse remain blurred.

In early July 2025, a judicial magistrate in Islamabad [ordered](#) YouTube to block 27 Pakistani channels, including those run by journalists, political commentators, and opposition supporters. The order was based on a 2 June 2025, report by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA), which accused these channels of spreading “anti-state” and misleading content. The directive included prominent names such as Asad Ali Toor, Matiullah Jan, and supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Following this, YouTube sent warnings to the affected content creators, stating that their channels could be blocked in Pakistan if they did not comply with local laws.

However, the order quickly drew backlash from journalists, civil society groups, and digital rights advocates, who condemned it as a violation of free speech and an excessive use of judicial authority. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and others [warned](#) that blanket bans without due process risk setting a dangerous precedent for censorship, undermining democratic norms and constitutional rights. In response, an Islamabad Additional District and Sessions Court [suspended](#) the ban on 11 July 2025, citing flaws in jurisdiction and procedure. The suspension was later extended to additional YouTubers, with further hearings scheduled. While the intervention temporarily protected the targeted channels, the case highlights [ongoing tensions](#) over digital censorship and freedom of expression in Pakistan.

Concerns over digital repression deepened when the Senate's Information Committee voiced alarm over the misuse of the [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act \(PECA\)](#). Originally enacted to combat cybercrime, PECA has frequently been deployed to intimidate journalists, harass political opponents, and silence dissenting voices. The Committee's decision to summon the Interior Secretary underscored a rare parliamentary acknowledgment of how such legal instruments risk eroding constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of speech and expression.

Challenges and Opportunities

For the coming months, the environment for civil society organisations (CSOs) in Pakistan will remain shaped by both persistent challenges and possible avenues for constructive engagement. The interplay of political dynamics, security measures, and regulatory frameworks will continue to define the scope of civic space.

1. CSOs are likely to face an increasingly complex regulatory framework. The federal government's renewed scrutiny of foreign funding and compliance requirements is expected to limit operational flexibility for both domestic and international organisations. Recent developments, such as the debates on foreign assistance oversight, signal potential restrictions ahead.

2. Activities that touch upon politically sensitive issues including human rights, governance, and accountability will remain vulnerable to state pushback. The heightened securitisation of civic space, coupled with mechanisms such as the proposed Federal Constabulary, may reinforce the perception of CSOs as political actors rather than development partners.
3. The growing pressure on media and restrictions on peaceful assembly continue to affect the broader enabling environment. Such measures indirectly restrict CSOs' ability to mobilise communities and advocate for marginalised groups.

In terms of opportunities:

1. Despite these challenges, CSOs retain an important role in policy engagement. With government bodies showing interest in structured dialogue on issues like social protection, climate resilience, and economic justice, organisations can leverage their expertise to influence evidence-based reforms.
2. The emphasis on constitutional rights and recent judicial actions upholding freedom of expression provide a limited yet significant opportunity for civil society to advocate for the protection of fundamental freedoms.
3. Expanding civic education and investing in digital advocacy platforms can help CSOs strengthen their outreach and connect with a broader segment of society, particularly youth and marginalised communities. To achieve this, civil society should develop youth-led campaigns, donors must provide long-term flexible funding for digital capacity, and the international community can amplify local voices through global platforms.

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