



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Philippines

June 2025

Context

The Philippines' path to democracy traces its origin in the 1986 People Power Revolt, a non-violent uprising that toppled two decades of authoritarian rule under Ferdinand Marcos Sr. The 1987 Constitution was drafted and ratified in response to the rampant human rights violations and corruption during the Martial Law regime, guaranteeing essential civil and political rights. And yet, the fundamental structural issues remain – political dynasties, corruption, and embedded inequality. Elite and corporate influence over politicians and government officials has festered across all levels of government and resulted in the elite-business alliance among the prime violators of human rights and disablers of civil society in the country.

Despite legal and democratic safeguards, civil society in the Philippines faces significant challenges, including chronic threats and a narrow civic space, largely due to the dominance of political dynasties and prioritisation of familial interests in policymaking. Furthermore, internal armed conflicts and heavy-handed government policies, especially magnified during the Duterte administration, have led to human rights crises, extrajudicial executions, red-tagging, and judicial harassment, trends that persist under the current administration.

Amidst the prevalence of securitised policies, democratic reforms have paved the way for effective spaces for engagement between government and civil society that has of late achieved global recognition for the country, such as the Philippine Open Government Partnership and the National Women, Peace, and Security (NAP WPS) Center for Excellence. Such a conflicted approach to development and peacebuilding has characterised the complex environment for civic space in the country where threats are extreme against dissent yet opportunities for meaningful engagement are available for constructive civil society.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Despite safeguards in the [1987 Constitution](#), domestic laws restrict fundamental freedoms and all administrations since the People Power Revolt have excelled in human rights violations with a brazen policy to kill dissent. As such, the Philippines consistently occupy global top positions in the killing of media personnel, lawyers, human rights defenders, labour union leaders, and land and environment defenders. While the Duterte administration was characterised by extrajudicial killings in the War on Drugs, the current administration primarily uses judicial harassment, including red-tagging and fabricated charges, against CSOs, with dismissed cases often highlighting the dubious nature of these lawsuits.

The [Revised Penal Code](#) of 1930 penalises both libel and slander, and punishes the publication of "false news which may endanger the public order, or cause damage to the interest or credit of the State." Cyber-libel is even punished through the [Cybercrime Prevention Act](#) with up to eight years in prison—compared to traditional libel, which carries a maximum penalty of four years and two months. Civil society [contends](#) that criminal libel and cyber-libel has been used as a tool to silence opposition, intimidate the press, and limit democratic space.

Media entities and their content are regulated through legislative franchises by the National Telecommunication Commission (NTC), Movie and Television Review and Classification Board, National Council for Children's Television, and Optical Media Board. In 2020, the franchise of the largest broadcast network in the country, Alto-Broadcasting System and Chronicle Broadcasting Network (ABS-CBN), was not renewed following a cease-and-desist order issued by the NTC. The non-renewal was widely viewed as politically motivated due to the network's reportage on the administration, and had a chilling effect on press freedom. In addition, private ownership of the majority of media entities has enabled influence of business

elites and allied politicians over media reporting, including cracking down on critical media workers. Additionally, censorship was imposed on films and documentaries critical of the government— three were pulled from public circulation; [two](#) of these tackled conflict of interest involving politicians and illegal gambling syndicates.

Defamation laws prohibit acts considered “notoriously offensive to the feelings of the faithful” and have been [used against artists](#) involved in political commentaries. One example involves leaders of the Iglesia ni Cristo, a Christian religious sect, that filed cases against standup comedian [Goldeiner Dagal](#) who was later summarily executed by vigilantes during a live show in March 2025.

Freedom of assembly is regulated primarily through the Public Assembly Act of 1985, which stipulates that the conduct of rallies and protest actions require permits from concerned local governments. A permit can only be denied if the public demonstration poses a real threat to public safety. Law enforcement agencies are prevented from interfering in demonstrations, but are required to be present at least 100 metres away for the purpose of maintaining peace and order. These provisions have been used against rallyists to [deny the issuance of protest permits](#) to groups critical of the government.

A sector that is particularly affected by harsh restrictions on the freedom of association is the labour sector, where only five percent of publicly registered companies are unionised. Unionisation is stifled due to the prevalence of contractualisation— the practice of employing workers for up to five months only, preventing their access to government mandated benefits and denying them the right to organise workers’ unions.

The Philippines has consistently ranked as the [most dangerous country for land and environment defenders in Asia](#), with five massacres of land and environment defenders that took place during the Duterte Administration according to Global Witness. Among the sectors that experience the highest number of killings and non-lethal attacks for land and environment defenders are mining, agribusiness, and water infrastructure.

Several political prisoners still remain deprived of liberty, and conditions for release are often politically motivated. One such example is the release of former Senator Leila de Lima who opposed former President Duterte and is now being weaponised to stir political tensions between the Marcos and Duterte dynasties.

The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) has actively criminalised the expression of dissent through accusations of affiliation with the Communist Party of the Philippines, National Democratic Front, and New People's Army (CPP/NPA/NDF) or ‘red-tagging’ and Strategic Law Suits against Public Participation (SLAPPs) against civil society groups. The NTF-ELCAC enforced disassociations through the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), where citizens held in duress accused as members of the CPP/NPA/NDF are made to surrender, then forced to provide names and groups to be linked with terror-tagged groups. These were further enabled by the passage of the [Anti-Terrorism Act](#), the [Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2001](#), and the [Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act of 2012](#).

Specific laws penalising unlawful possession of firearms and explosives have been employed as instruments of oppression through the fabrication of charges and planted evidence against members of the political opposition, journalists, development workers, human rights and environmental advocates, labour organisers, and peasant and land rights activists. Some brought to trial under these statutes are later denied access to their bank accounts, subjected to surveillance, and intimidated by arbitrary detention.

The Supreme Court, in a milestone July 2023 decision, held that “red-tagging, vilification, labelling, and guilt by association are threats to an individual's right to life, liberty or security.”

Between January and June 2024, the [Ateneo Human Rights Center](#) documented 456 red-tagging cases countrywide, with civil society practitioners, youth, and journalists being the most targeted. In the 2025 midterm elections, approximately three percent of election abuses substantiated by Vote Report PH were red-tagging. Red-tagging has made CSOs reluctant to openly express dissent and use advocacy methodologies such as protests, hunger strikes and marches that are historically associated with progressive groups.

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

The 1987 Constitution guarantees freedom of assembly and association, the right to organise, and promotion of non-governmental and independent people's organisations. National laws have a direct impact on civil society operations, such as the [Local Government Code of 1991](#), [Revised Corporation Code](#), [National Internal Revenue Code](#), [Volunteer Act of 2007](#), [Microfinance NGOs Act](#), among others. The implementation of these laws is enriched by issuances from the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR), and Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG).

Most civil society organisations acquire juridical personality by registering with the SEC as a prerequisite to obtain necessary permits, open bank accounts, and pay taxes. Meanwhile, labour unions register through the Department of Labour and Employment, cooperatives through the Cooperative Development Authority, homeowners' associations through the Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board, and indigenous people's organisations with the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples. Several government agencies offer accreditation and licensing for civil society organisations that can provide goods and services. For example, the National Youth Commission oversees accreditation of youth-led and youth-serving organisations. These enable legal recognition of CSOs and of their operations within reasonable terms of regulation.

SEC regulations applied to for-profit organisations are also applied to NPOs, leading to excessive requirements and costs imposed on CSOs. One such burdensome requirement is the declaration of beneficial ownership. In addition, SEC offices are only in regional centres, which are highly inaccessible to CSOs that operate in remote areas, especially given the archipelagic geography of the country.

Declaration of organisational operations (i.e. submission of lists of members, audited financial audits, annual reports of activities) are required by most of the said agencies. In 2018, the SEC issued [Memorandum Circular No. 15](#), requiring non-profit organisations (NPOs) and politically-exposed persons (PEPs) to disclose sources of funding, beneficiaries, and location of operations under the rationale of preventing money laundering and terrorism financing. Non-compliance by some NPOs has led to [non-renewal of their registration](#). These stringent compliances were issued arbitrarily as part of anti-terrorism measures launched during the Duterte Administration.

The Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLAC) has consistently assessed NPOs as medium risk to money laundering and high-low risk to terrorist financing. Similarly, state forces have been engaging extensively in red-tagging for years. CSOs, even those not critical of the state, have been branded as accomplices of terrorist groups. It was [reported](#) that the country's previous position on the Financial Action Task Force's Grey List was exploited by the national government to conduct surveillance against civil society groups and file fabricated terrorist financing charges against development organisations and workers.

Local government units (LGUs) also accredit CSOs and can be seen as a cheaper and more accessible pathway for legal recognition. However, LGUs impose the same requirements on

NPOs as on for-profit organisations, including a Business Permit, which carries exorbitant processing fees depending on local regulations. Some LGUs are also vulnerable to manipulation by local authorities discriminately denying CSO accreditation based on political alignment.

The Philippine Council for NGO Certification (PCNC), a self-regulatory mechanism aimed at ensuring integrity, transparency, accountability, and service among non-government organisations, has been recognised by the Philippine government as an accrediting entity to determine the qualification and fitness of NGOs seeking donor institution accreditation with the BIR. While PCNC accreditation is voluntary, some financial institutions have required PCNC accreditation as a prerequisite for opening bank accounts, which many NGOs are unable to comply with.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Operations and programmes of civil society organisations are sustained through grants from international and domestic funding facilities, collaboration with national government agencies and local government units, support from private enterprises, social entrepreneurship, endowment funds, membership dues, and/or donations

Due to previous scandals of public funding being irregularly channeled to bogus non-profits acting as fronts for politicians, such as the [Pork Barrel Scandal](#) and irregularities related to the Development Assistance Program in 2013, heightened restrictions are imposed on government financing for civil society. In addition to difficult-to-access public funding, the country has limited domestic philanthropy because corporations tend to establish their own foundations that become beneficiaries of their own corporate social responsibility donations. As such, the broader non-profit sector has to rely on foreign grants and other sources of funding.

Recent events have precipitated unique challenges for CSO funding in the Philippines. Civil society organisations continue to recover from the [fiscal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), as the pandemic forced international funding agencies to scale down and divert development aid towards pandemic prevention, response, and relief.

The impact of the international community intervening in disaster and armed conflict areas has had a major impact on local economies and raised prices of goods and services, especially in Eastern Visayas and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The practice of compensation for tasks formerly undertaken through volunteerism, such as tasks related to relief and recovery work post-disaster and post-armed conflict, dismantled volunteerism systems that local CSOs had built through decades of community organising.

Red-tagging has led to some CSOs and civil society leaders losing access to their bank accounts as a result of financial sanctions. In May 2024, the AMLAC issued a resolution linking award-winning development organisation [Leyte Center for Development](#) to terrorist financing. The AMLAC ordered banks to suspend the organisation's bank accounts, including the individual accounts of its executive director and staff, along with the bank accounts of their providers. It was [reported](#) that the country's previous position on the Financial Action Task Force's Grey List was exploited by the national government to conduct surveillance against civil society groups and file fabricated terrorist financing charges against development organisations and workers.

After January 2025, several US-funded development programmes were abruptly terminated due to US President Donald Trump's Executive Order on foreign aid. The withdrawal of American foreign aid [disrupted crucial development projects](#) in the Philippines, especially in the areas of health, education, and environmental conservation.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Philippine laws, particularly the Local Government Code of 1991, promote state openness by mandating public posting of documents and providing platforms for citizen participation, such as Barangay Assemblies where residents can propose ordinances. Civil society organisations are encouraged to engage in local special bodies to influence policy, and the DILG has pushed for the establishment of CSO Desks and People's Councils. Additionally, several laws and policies ensure sectoral representation in local councils, including mandatory representation for Indigenous Peoples and the youth.

The Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act created the National-Anti Poverty Commission, which has representatives from 14 basic sectors as its members in respectively sectoral councils, each representing a basic sector¹. Other national statutes guarantee public participation in various decision-making processes and mechanisms.

Participatory governance mechanisms, though promoted in policy, are still wanting in terms of their full realisation. Some participation mechanisms can be manipulated through co-opted selection processes and marginalisation of sectoral representatives such as tokenistic importance in policy discussions, non-allocation of budget, and other forms of political disenfranchisement. The capacities of most sectoral representatives also need to be enhanced to fully enable their effective participation in governance bodies. There are some instances where local officials organise their own CSOs that become beneficiaries of CSO engagement projects, effectively cartelising citizen participation mechanisms and, at times, serving as a smokescreen to corrupt practices.

Though some genuine sectoral representation has been secured through the partylist system, they are [outnumbered by partylists](#) aligned with political personalities and big business.

There is a presumption of guilt towards CSOs, as enshrined in policy in the [Anti-Terror Law](#) that provides few checks and balances against abuse by state armed forces in accusing CSOs of affiliation with non-state armed groups. As such, government agencies and LGUs are wary to work with CSOs and development workers who have been accused of affiliation with terror-tagged groups.

The Philippines became a founding member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2011, a platform promoting open government reforms. The Philippine OGP (PH-OGP) was formalised in 2023, establishing a national steering committee and national action plan (NAP) that initiated various open government reforms like Citizen Participatory Audits and Bottom-Up Budgeting. A key commitment in the PH-OGP NAP is the passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill, which remains pending in Congress, though some local government units have enacted their own FOI ordinances.

Despite some advancements in open governance, state transparency remains limited in certain decision-making areas. For instance, CSOs have criticised Congress for its deliberations on the 2025 national budget, which resulted in significant cuts to essential social services and infrastructure, while adding financial aid programmes prone to political patronage. Additionally, some government agencies involved in major projects have implemented policies that restrict public access to information and due process, particularly concerning infrastructure, environmental impact assessments, and land reform.

¹ (1) farmers and landless rural workers, (2) artisanal fisherfolk, (3) indigenous peoples, (4) formal and migrant workers, (5) workers in the informal sector, (6) urban poor, (7) women, (8) youth and students, (9) children, (10) persons with disabilities, (11) the elderly, (12) victims of disasters and calamities, (13) cooperatives, and (14) civil society organisations.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

The Philippine Observatory on Democracy [found](#) that while most Filipinos associate democracy with freedom, most respondents identified strongmen Rodrigo Duterte and Ferdinand Marcos Sr., both known for widespread human rights [violations](#) and the suppression of civil liberties, as having had a positive impact on Philippine democracy. The study saw that a vast majority of Filipinos favour “a strong president supported by people, Congress, and courts — over other paths like limiting Presidential power, balance between branches, functioning institutions, credible and efficient judiciary, and people’s participation.”

The Observatory also determined that most Filipinos see political engagement as limited to elections despite the availability and openness of mechanisms for civic engagement at various levels of governance. Citizens do not actively engage these mechanisms due to limited knowledge and skills. Non-importance of active citizenship is consistent with the broad support of Filipinos for authoritarian rule, which supports the political ideology that compliance and loyalty to the state are seen as good citizenship, while criticism and dissent are seen as counter-productive to nation-building. This view of citizenship is also taken advantage of by political dynasties, with political group formation highly polarized, formed along lines of loyalty to political personalities and families instead of to political agenda.

‘Ayuda politics’ or the framing of government as (sole) providers of aid has cultivated a culture of dependency and entitlement among some Filipinos. This is most especially felt during elections where vote buying, despite stringent national regulations and enforcement mechanisms, survives if not thrives due to patron-client relations expressed in the distribution of rewards to compensate voters for their loyalty.

Apart from the limited value assigned to civic engagement, public trust in civil society has been undermined by the Pork Barrel Scandal, which exposed the sector’s vulnerability to exploitation and corruption. This trust crisis persists to this date, as revealed in [EON Philippine’s 2024 Trust Study](#) that non-government organisations experience a “unique trust challenge” with 66% of Filipinos unable to identify an NGO or elaborate on the sector’s purpose and functions.

On the other hand, the World Giving Report 2025 revealed that Filipinos distrust charities less than the global average. This points to the differing notion of CSOs as service providers being good CSOs fulfilling the utilitarian view of civil society, while there are negative views on CSOs that fulfill the political purpose of civil society as watchdog of government and mobiliser of the people.

The success of these parts of civil society and volunteerism is rooted in cultural values like *bayanihan* (communal unity) and *pakikipagkapwa* (relating to others)². These values highlight the function of civil society as mobilisers of mutual aid and social interdependency, and underpin the sector’s vibrant and voluntary nature, with its role in nation-building explicitly recognised in the 1987 Constitution and various enabling laws. At the same time, actions that express criticism and dissent are seen as disruptions of social cohesion.

Mass media has long used the term ‘militant groups’ to pertain to protesters. This has framed public opinion to see civil society as hindrances to peace and order, reinforcing the practice of red-tagging in social media and common discourse. Self-censorship due to the chilling effect inflicted by red-tagging has been observed among some civil society groups. Especially rampant during the Duterte Administration is a warped concept of human rights among his

² as highlighted by scholar Grace Aquiling-Dalisay and the Philippine National Volunteer Service Coordinating Agency

supporters where he has called human rights a hindrance to human lives, and human rights advocates as hindrances to national unity and peace. The universality and indefeasibility of human rights continue to be put into question in public discourse, with political CSOs framed negatively for undertaking their work.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Around 97.5 million, over 80% of individuals in the Philippines, used the internet at the start of 2025 according to [DataReportal](#). [Meltwater](#) affirmed that the country maintains the highest social media use in the region. It must be noted that the prevalence of digital divides remains significant with rural areas experiencing limited internet access and slower speeds compared to urban centres, hindering opportunities for rural populations. This is intimately tied to the education crisis in the country, which finds literacy at 93%, but those with high reading comprehension only at 70%, which makes many with access to the internet vulnerable to misinformation.

The telecommunications industry in the Philippines has been dominated by a few companies, with the national government having attempted on several occasions to break monopolies. There are ongoing efforts for the passage of the Konektadong Pinoy (Connected Filipino) Bill by Congress. The proposed legislation aims to widen competition among internet service providers and address the high cost of internet services, but has been [opposed](#) at varying degrees by some of the country's biggest players in the telecommunications industry.

The Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 imposes harsh penalties on “cyber-libel”—up to eight years in prison—compared to traditional libel, which carries a maximum penalty of four years and two months. This law has been criticised for potentially stifling freedom of expression and enabling the [weaponization of legal tools](#) against journalists and dissenters. The implementation of the 2022 SIM Card Registration Act, which mandated the registration of over 113 million SIM cards and corresponding personal information to the government, has sparked [debates](#) over privacy and surveillance.

During the National and Local Elections, disinformation is most widespread. The [University of the Philippines](#) reported that in both national elections that resulted in the Duterte and Marcos Jr Presidencies, disinformation benefitted winning candidates and parties across platforms, most especially on Facebook. Conspiracy theories, troll accounts, red-tagging and other methods were used to manufacture a positive image for winning candidates while disparaging opponents.

Challenges and Opportunities

Several lawmakers have proposed legislation to institutionalise mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders in the country. The Human Rights Defenders Protection [Bill](#) was passed by the House of Representatives on third and final reading several times. Meanwhile, its [counterpart measure](#) in the Senate has yet to pass through the committee level. Despite this, local government units from provincial to the city level have passed similar ordinances. Other proposed bills are also filed in Congress, including the Anti-Redtagging Bill and the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression (SOGIE) Equality Bill. The Philippine Commission on Human Rights has also conducted inclusive consultations in the drafting of the fourth [Philippine Human Rights Action Plan](#) (PHRAP).

Recent political developments are likewise expected to further galvanise civil society in the country. These include the conclusion of the recent 2025 national and local polls, which saw the election of candidates hospitable to civil society groups from the Senate to the municipal level. Furthermore, CSOs are closely monitoring the ongoing trial against strongman Rodrigo Duterte at the International Criminal Court and the impeachment proceedings against his

daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte, which are seen to have major implications on the upcoming presidential elections in 2028, and the general state of rule of law and accountability in some of the highest offices of the nation.

CSOs must at all costs protect the 1987 Constitution and key legal mandates that ensure the protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms. It must engage Congress and government agencies to review laws and ensure a human rights-based approach to the enforcement of key policies that are used to restrict civic space, such as:

- Revised Penal Code and Cyber-Crime Act on provisions of libel, slander, censorship, and defamation;
- Media Franchise Laws;
- Public Assembly Act;
- Anti-Terror, Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Terrorism Financing Laws on provisions that enable red-tagging;
- Revised Corporation Code on legal registration of CSOs; and,
- Local Government Code, Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act, and other key sectoral mandates that ensure CSO and sectoral representation in national and local decision-making bodies.

Legislative advocacy is needed to ensure legal frameworks are in place to enjoy fundamental freedoms and in order to address key threats to civic space:

- Legislation regulating political dynasties;
- Charter of the Commission on Human Rights, including the National Preventive Mechanism on Torture and Forced Disappearances;
- Human Rights Defenders and Anti-Red Tagging;
- Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Law;
- Freedom of Information; and,
- Regulation on Misinformation.

CSOs must enhance their efforts to ensure sustainability and effectiveness by diversifying their sources of funding and reducing their reliance on foreign aid, which of late has been significantly declining due to shifting priorities and the rise of isolationism. Capacity development on security protocols, including digital security, and constructive modes of engagement are crucial to enable CSOs to operate more safely and to maximise available spaces for participation such as the PHRAP, PH OGP, and the NAP-WPS.

It is crucial to reclaim public discourse and trust in civil society while questioning prevalent political ideologies that support political dynasties and authoritarianism through effective and compelling political communication. Philippine CSOs must return to their roots of civic engagement such as through political mobilisation, and programmatically promote democratic values to realise a Filipino political culture that celebrates rather than persecutes the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms.

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