



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Botswana

December 2025

Context

Botswana's civil society operates in a dynamic, yet challenging environment. While constitutional freedoms of expression, association and assembly exist, events in 2025, such as interference and intimidation from the intelligence services, have constrained civic space. Additionally, civil society actors face hurdles such as resource constraints exacerbated by the country's middle-income status, as donors have redirected their funds to other countries which are low income and perceived to be in greater need of support.

Digital civic space in Botswana remains largely open, with no documented cases of disinformation campaigns or coordinated online harassment targeting civil society in the past year, although concerns about surveillance continue to influence how some actors engage online.

In this evolving context, civil society in Botswana continues to advocate for citizens' rights and freedoms. Opportunities for collaboration exist with the current government, which came into power after the 30 October 2024 general elections, and which expressed its commitment to constitutional and human rights reforms. Strengthened engagement between civil society and the new government could improve the enabling environment for civil society in Botswana.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Botswana's [Constitution](#) guarantees freedoms of association, expression, and assembly. However, these rights are regulated under the [Public Order Act](#), which requires permits for assemblies, including peaceful marches. While intended to maintain public order, the permit system can restrict civil society's ability to mobilise freely, as permits may be denied for administrative reasons, limiting effective advocacy and public engagement. This practice violates international standards on peaceful assembly, such as the [Amnesty International Guidelines on the Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly](#), which state that holding an assembly must not be subject to prior authorisation or permission. These guidelines emphasise that freedom of peaceful assembly is an entitlement, not a privilege, and therefore Botswana's permit requirement conflicts with these principles.

Early indications under the new government, ushered in October 2024, show that restrictions on civic expression continue. In August 2025, Student Power Botswana sought to hold a march in Gaborone to demand increased student allowances. The Botswana Police Service [denied approval](#), citing a clash with a national event requiring heavy police deployment, and advised students to reschedule. This demonstrates how administrative decisions under the Public Order Act continue to limit freedom of assembly, even for peaceful demonstrations, highlighting ongoing challenges for civil society in exercising constitutional rights and advocating publicly.

While the Constitution of Botswana outlines broad principles of freedom of expression, association and assembly, it does not explicitly enshrine the right to collective bargaining. In 2024, during the constitution review process, the proposed [Constitution \(Amendment\) Bill No. 4 of 2024](#) sought to address this through Clause 5, which aimed to enshrine the right to collective bargaining and strike action. However, the Bill failed to pass into law. Since then, no changes have been made to address this gap.

Under the new government, a new constitutional review process has been initiated, signalling an opportunity to revisit and potentially strengthen protections for expression, assembly and association. However, progress so far has been piecemeal, notably through the introduction of [Constitution Amendment Bill No. 14 of 2025](#), which proposes amendments to the Constitution and the establishment of a Constitutional Court. Civil society holds that the establishment of a Constitutional Court, as proposed in the Bill, is in principle essential, particularly as an apex institution of constitutionalism that can strengthen the protection of human rights and address judicial inefficiencies. Notably, civil society had previously proposed the establishment of a Constitutional Court during earlier constitutional review processes that had failed in 2024. However, civil society maintains that such a Court must be the outcome of a comprehensive constitutional review, rather than a piecemeal reform. Introducing a Constitutional Court in isolation means it will operate within the confines of a constitution that has already been found to contain significant gaps in the Bill of Rights. As a result, while the Court may exist institutionally, its ability to meaningfully safeguard fundamental freedoms will be inherently limited unless broader constitutional deficiencies are first addressed through a comprehensive constitution review process.

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

In Botswana, the [2022 Societies Act](#) governs the registration of societies, including NGOs, requiring them to register and obtain a registration certificate annually. Other types of civil society organisations, such as trusts, are recognised and their registration is governed and facilitated under the [Trust Property Control Act of 2022](#). As in 2024, civil society organisations in 2025 continued to encounter difficulties with registration. Although a digital system was introduced to streamline the process, it has proven inefficient and created additional hurdles. Organisations must still collect their login credentials in person from the Registration Office, and frequent system malfunctions often require submitting documents physically. This poses a particular challenge for organisations based outside Gaborone, where registration processes remain highly centralised.

The [Public Order Act](#) also continues to restrict civic space. Its requirement for police permits for peaceful assemblies and the possibility of having permits denied hinders CSOs' ability to mobilise, hold events, and advocate, and conflicts with international standards, including the [Amnesty International Guidelines](#).

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Sustainability remained a significant challenge for civil society organisations in 2025. Funding continues to be largely short-term and project-based, limiting institutional stability, staff retention, and long-term planning. The situation was exacerbated by the withdrawal of US funding.

Following the US withdrawal, BOCONGO conducted a [rapid assessment](#) that revealed severe impacts across multiple sectors, including healthcare (HIV testing, Tuberculosis screening, gender-based violence response), education, social protection for vulnerable children, LGBTQIA+ advocacy, and democratic governance initiatives. Many CSOs were forced to scale down operations, retrench staff, suspend programmes, or close entirely. Some organisations only survived temporarily under short-term waivers, which, upon expiration,

resulted in programme stoppages and permanent closures for some. These developments added to an already limited funding environment, further constraining the ability of CSOs to plan sustainably and maintain critical services.

4. State openness and responsiveness

The government of Botswana provides civil society organisations with opportunities to engage in policy processes, including through representation in technical working groups (TWGs), such as the TWG on the development of the National Health Insurance Policy, among others. These engagements demonstrate that collaboration is possible, allowing civil society to contribute expertise and ensure that policies reflect community needs.

However, such engagement is often selective. In 2025, the government initiated a new constitution review process and gazetted the [Constitution \(Amendment\) Bill No. 14 of 2025](#). Despite this, civil society, including BOCONGO, reported a lack of meaningful consultations, engagement, and transparency. In its [official statement](#), BOCONGO decried the absence of inclusive processes and called for genuine participation of civil society in the review. Similarly, a [joint statement](#) with BOCONGO, unions and faith-based organisations condemned the government's limited civic education and engagements, emphasising the need for transparent, participatory, and consultative processes that truly reflect the voices and concerns of citizens.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

In terms of political culture and public discourse, perceptions of civil society in Botswana remain mixed, even under the new government. A segment of the public and political actors continues to frame civil society organisations (CSOs) as agents of opposition political parties, particularly when civil society adopts positions that diverge from or challenge government. This perception has resurfaced during the current constitution review process, where CSOs have taken critical stances on issues of process, inclusivity, and transparency.

At the same time, other segments of society including ordinary citizens and sections of the media view civil society as rational and legitimate actors that play a critical role in promoting accountability, safeguarding democratic values, and representing public interests. This perspective reflects a level of trust in civil society as an essential pillar of democracy.

While the new government has positioned itself as human rights–oriented, it has yet to adopt explicit policies or commitments that substantively advance the rights of marginalised groups in Botswana, including women and LGBTQI+ persons. Civil society organisations remain at the forefront of advocating for inclusivity and human rights. Notably, in its [statement](#) responding to the November 2025 State of the Nation Address, LEGABIBO highlighted the absence of clear commitments to end gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, and to strengthen protections and rights for LGBTQI+ communities.

Overall, civil society continues to shape public discourse and advance democratic accountability, even as contested perceptions and uneven government engagement persist under the new administration. These dynamics underscore the ongoing need for sustained public discourse and civic education on the role of civil society organisations and their contributions to national development in Botswana.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Civil society in Botswana largely enjoys free access to the internet and online information, with no reported cases of internet shutdowns or systematic censorship of online content. Internet use is generally unrestricted, enabling CSOs to communicate, share information, mobilise, and advocate through digital platforms without interference. Government-led initiatives, including the [provision of free public Wi-Fi](#) in government buildings and selected public spaces, have further expanded digital access and supported online civic engagement.

The digital environment is relatively secure, with no documented incidents of cyberattacks, spyware deployment, hacking, or coordinated online harassment targeting civil society by either state or non-state actors. There have also been no reported cases of government-linked disinformation campaigns aimed at intimidating or discrediting CSOs. The [Data Protection Act](#) provides a legal framework for safeguarding personal data, although its enforcement and practical application remain important for ensuring meaningful digital rights protection.

Despite these positive conditions, concerns about surveillance persist. Civil society actors, particularly those working on sensitive issues such as human rights and governance, have reported perceptions of monitoring for intelligence purposes. While no official content takedowns or direct online censorship have been recorded, the possibility of surveillance has contributed to apprehension among activists and may discourage open digital expression.

Botswana's digital accessibility is relatively high, especially in urban and peri-urban areas, supported by satisfactory internet availability and affordability. However, a digital divide remains, with rural communities experiencing limited access and connectivity. Additionally, while basic ICT skills are widespread, CSOs face capacity constraints including limited training opportunities, outdated equipment, and restricted access to advanced digital tools.

Looking ahead, ongoing legislative and policy initiatives are expected to significantly influence Botswana's digital civic space. These include the proposed [Digital Services Bill](#) and [Cybersecurity Bill](#), which aim to establish a more comprehensive framework for regulating digital platforms and enhancing online security. If developed and implemented in line with human rights standards, these laws could strengthen protection for civil society by safeguarding freedom of expression, supporting online advocacy, and providing clearer safeguards against surveillance, cyberattacks, and other digital threats targeting CSOs' communications and platforms.

Challenges and Opportunities

In the next four months, civil society in Botswana is likely to face continued challenges related to limited engagement, inclusivity, and transparency in government-led processes. While the government provides opportunities for collaboration in some policy spaces, engagement remains selective, with civil society often excluded from critical and politically sensitive processes. This selective approach, particularly in processes such as the constitutional review, constrains meaningful participation, weakens trust, and undermines democratic governance. Limited consultation and information-sharing also reduce civil society's ability to contribute evidence-based inputs and represent community interests effectively.

At the same time, these challenges present important opportunities to improve the enabling environment. The ongoing constitutional review process offers a key opportunity for the government to reconsider its approach and adopt a more inclusive, transparent, and

participatory process that genuinely engages civil society and the public. In line with BOCONGO's demands, this would involve legislating the review process through the Constitution Review Act, providing a publicly accessible roadmap of the process, and ensuring that all engagements are preceded by comprehensive civic education on the Constitution to empower citizens to participate meaningfully, among others. Existing collaborative platforms, such as technical working groups, demonstrate that constructive state–civil society engagement is possible and can be expanded to other policy areas. Strengthening dialogue, institutionalising consultation mechanisms, and reaffirming commitments to human rights and democratic participation would improve trust and cooperation. With political will, openness to engagement, and respect for civic space, Botswana has an opportunity to strengthen collaboration with civil society and advance a more enabling environment.

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