



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment

Snapshot

Bangladesh

March 2026

Context

Period covered by the report: October 2025 – March 2026

Following the 12 February 2026 [parliamentary elections](#), Bangladesh entered a new political phase which ended the interim administration and returned the country to an elected government. The vote resulted in a decisive victory for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which [secured](#) a clear parliamentary majority, marking the party's return to power after nearly two decades. Tarique Rahman was subsequently [sworn in](#) as Prime Minister. While the election formally restored elected governance, reactions to the results were mixed. The election was perceived as marking the end of the interim administration and a return to constitutional government, while some opposition actors and commentators raised concerns regarding [electoral procedures and transparency](#). The new political landscape also brings its own tensions: the BNP's large majority, the strengthened presence of [Jamaat-e-Islami](#) as a significant parliamentary force, and post-election contestation by some actors over procedures and outcomes may continue to shape civic space dynamics, particularly around sensitive rights issues and accountability demands.

The new administration has [publicly committed](#) to pursuing institutional reform, restoring accountability, and strengthening protection of fundamental freedoms. At the same time, persistent risks remain in the post-election environment, including political polarisation, volatility in the law-and-order situation, and continued threats to independent civic and media actors. The post-election moment therefore represents both an [opportunity and a test](#). While expectations for reform and institutional rebuilding are high, the sustainability of democratic gains will depend on whether the new government can ensure protection of civic space, strengthen rule-of-law institutions, and address entrenched structural drivers of repression and political instability.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The [Constitution of Bangladesh](#) guarantees several fundamental freedoms, including the right to assembly (Article 37), the right to association (Article 38), and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and expression (Article 39).

However, there has been a worrying deterioration trend of freedom of expression and opinion. Recent developments illustrate continuing pressures on freedom of expression in both physical and digital spaces. For instance, media reports and monitoring by rights organisations documented a mob attack on the offices of [major newspapers in December 2025](#), raising concerns about the safety of journalists and the protection of independent media institutions. Cultural expression has similarly faced constraints, with an example from November 2025 when supporters of Baul singer Abul Sarkar were violently attacked in Manikganj during a peaceful rally and calling for his release after his arrest over alleged ["religious offence"](#)

[remarks](#) made during a performance. This reflects broader pressures on alternative and dissenting voices in public space.

In March 2026, some actors were [accused of publicly broadcasting](#) Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's [UNESCO-recognised historic 7 March](#) speech, raising concerns on the wide interpretation of "terrorist activity" under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Several individuals were also detained under the [Anti-Terrorism Act](#) in connection with commemorative and protest activities linked to the suspended operations of the Awami League, [including four people](#) attempting to lay flowers at Dhanmondi-32. On 12 March, Dhaka University professor AKM Jamal Uddin, was [arrested](#) for allegedly organising a procession associated with the party. Collectively, these developments highlight the persistence of risks to free expression despite expectations of improved safeguards in the post-transition environment.

Recent documentation by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) highlights the continued vulnerability of journalists and the broader climate of political violence. In a statement issued on 10 February 2026, ASK reported a sharp rise in [attacks on journalists](#) during the election period, documenting 11 incidents in December 2025, 16 in January 2026, and at least 47 attacks in the first 10 days of February. Journalists faced heightened intimidation during the election period. On 7 February 2026, [security forces detained](#) 21 journalists from the online outlet *Bangladesh Times* in Dhaka while they were covering protests and took them to a military camp for questioning before releasing them later the same day. The incident raised concerns among media observers and civil society actors about the safety of journalists and the broader implications for press freedom and civic participation during politically sensitive periods.

Freedom of assembly has also come under threat. Incidents of excessive force by law enforcement by the ousted government, such as during student protests or political demonstrations, have been [documented](#). In May 2025, Bangladesh passed amendments to [the International Crimes Act](#) and [Anti-Terrorism Act](#) that significantly expand government powers to ban or restrict political organisations and individuals, often without clear definitions or due process. These changes allow authorities to shut down activities, block online expression, and prohibit gatherings based on vague allegations such as "reasonable grounds", even without formal listings – opening chances for abuse by government.

On 6 February 2026, government officials and employees protesting in front of the Chief Adviser's official residence in Dhaka over the proposed ninth national pay scale [were dispersed by security forces](#) using baton charges, tear gas, and water cannons. Media reports indicated that at least 15 people were injured during the clashes. The incident highlighted the tense environment surrounding public demonstrations during the election period and underscored ongoing concerns about the proportionality of crowd-control measures during peaceful assemblies.

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

In Bangladesh, CSOs operate within a legal framework shaped by two main types of laws: incorporation laws and regulatory laws. Incorporation laws, including the [Societies Registration Act 1860](#), [Trust Act 1882](#), [Companies Act 1994](#), [Cooperative Societies Act, Bangladesh Labour Act](#) and [the Waqf Ordinance](#), provide CSOs with legal status and a governance structure. Regulatory laws such as the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation Act 2016](#) and the [Microcredit Regulatory Law 2006](#) are in place to oversee and monitor CSOs, especially those receiving foreign funding or engaging in financial services. In addition the [Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies \(Registration and Control\) Ordinance 1961](#) also plays a significant role in CSOs' operation as the majority of CSOs in Bangladesh are recognised as voluntary social welfare organisations (SWOs). CSOs working on women's and children's welfare are registered under this Act with the Department of Social Services (DSS) as well as with the Department of Women Affairs (DWA). While registration under regulatory laws is encouraged, a CSO remains legally valid if it's incorporated under any existing incorporation law, even if regulatory registration is denied.

NGOs in Bangladesh must register under the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation Act 2016](#), which places stringent conditions such as registration, project by project approval and fund clearance, on foreign-funded entities. However, the interim government has made some attempts to simplify the registration process for new NGOs through a new [circular](#) issued by the NGO Affairs Bureau on 3 March 2025. The time required for NGO approval has been reduced from 180 to 45 days – which is a quarter of the previous duration. Under the new rules, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Financial Institutions Division must provide their opinions within 45 days regarding the approval of a new NGO. If they fail to respond within this timeframe, it will be assumed that they have no objections. Additionally, any proposal to establish a new NGO will be subject to investigation by a government intelligence agency; previously, verification by two agencies was needed. The new guideline also instructs that the proposed executive committee members of an NGO must not be investigated based on political affiliation. Instead, their involvement in social service and public welfare activities should be assessed. While these procedural adjustments were intended to streamline registration, civil society actors continue to monitor how effectively these provisions are implemented in practice in the post-transition context.

A related legal development was the [Bangladesh Labour \(Amendment\) Ordinance, 2025](#), gazetted on 17 November 2025, which [significantly lowered barriers](#) to trade union formation by allowing unions to be registered with as few as 20 workers in factories with 20–300 employees, replacing the previous requirement of support from 20% of the workforce. The reform also banned the blacklisting of workers involved in union activities and expanded labour protections. As trade unions form part of the broader associational landscape of civil society, these changes are relevant to the overall enabling environment for collective organisation.

The NGO Affairs Bureau, under the Prime Minister's Office holds sweeping oversight, including the power to delay or deny project approvals. At times, experience from CSOs in Bangladesh includes some government harassment, such as repeated inspections or excessive demands for documentation. These practices are often perceived by civil society actors as being influenced by political considerations, especially when their advocacy work is

seen as critical of those in power. In such cases, seeking legal recourse can be extremely challenging, as the justice system is often slow, costly, and difficult to navigate, leaving affected organisations with limited options for protection or redress.

CSOs have long raised concerns that provisions under the FDRA could enable deregistration or punitive action on vague grounds linked to speech and advocacy; and based on that ground, NGOs' registration can be cancelled. [Section 14 of the FDRA](#) was amended on 11 December 2025 to remove language allowing punitive action for 'derogatory' remarks about constitutional institutions. This was an important step toward protecting peaceful expression, although concerns remain regarding discretionary oversight and administrative control.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Domestic fundraising for CSOs in Bangladesh remains limited considering the size and scope of available funding. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds, particularly from banks, telecom companies, multinationals, and Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs), support mainly small social initiatives. In addition, philanthropic contributions from wealthy individuals, families, and foundations play a limited role. The main challenge of domestic fundraising is that there are no significant tax incentives that encourage individuals or businesses to donate. Moreover, smaller CSOs often rely on community-based fundraising, including charity events and limited crowdfunding efforts, especially in areas like disaster relief and healthcare. This makes CSOs heavily dependent on foreign funding to sustain their operations and makes it more difficult for organisations to pursue independent priorities.

Diminishing foreign funding has also posed serious challenges for CSOs in Bangladesh. The 2025 USAID, which led to the [loss](#) of an estimated \$500–700 million in aid and leaving between 20,000 and 50,000 [development professionals unemployed](#), is still being felt. The abrupt shutdown derailed initiatives in education, health, food security, climate change, governance, and skills development, pushing many NGOs into acute financial crisis and, in some cases, forcing them to close down.

While there is no explicit ban on receiving foreign funding, the process is highly regulated. Foreign donations must be received through designated bank accounts and released in tranches following NGO Affairs Bureau approval, creating layered approval requirements for project implementation. A 2025 [amendment](#) to the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation framework introduced limited procedural easing by allowing foreign donations of up to BDT 50 lakh per year to be received without prior project-specific approval from the NGO Affairs Bureau. While this may reduce approval delays for smaller grants, core oversight, reporting, and compliance requirements remain unchanged for larger funding and project implementation. Additionally, restrictions on re-granting were introduced in a [November 2021 circular](#) issued by the Prime Minister's Office. Under this rule, only organisations registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau can receive grants from other Bureau-registered CSOs. As a result, organisations registered under other legal frameworks but not with the Bureau are excluded from receiving such funding, making sub-granting, including to

smaller grassroots organisations, more difficult. [A 2025 circular](#) has introduced a 45-day timeframe for the Bureau to issue final approval of project proposals, which was previously open-ended. Another provision states that projects exceeding five years in duration must receive approval from the Chief Advisor's Office/ the Prime Minister's Office (under which the NGO Affairs Bureau operates), depending on their significance.

CSOs also [face increasing challenges](#) in navigating financial regulations. Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing requirements have resulted in heightened due diligence by [banks and financial institutions](#), which can create operational challenges for CSOs seeking to receive and utilise funds. Taken together, resources remain technically available but unevenly accessible and structurally fragile, with long-term sustainability closely linked to external donor continuity and limited domestic financing alternatives.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Bangladesh enacted [the Right to Information Act \(RTI\) in 2009](#) which guarantees the right to access public information. Under this law, citizens, journalists, and civil society organisations have used the Act to access data on governance, social services, public spending, and more. On average, around [10,000 RTI applications](#) are filed each year, and about [90% of applicants](#) receive the requested information. The Act also emphasises the proactive disclosure of information by public and private organisations through their websites. [An assessment](#) showed that 75% of government entity websites published satisfactory information. To administer this law and ensure the free flow of information, an Information Commission was established. However, over the past year, the fate of the Commission has remained in limbo as the [government failed to appoint](#) new commissioners.

CSOs in Bangladesh do participate in decision-making processes, but their involvement is often [selective and shaped by political considerations](#). Many engage through consultative forums, partnerships with ministries, and donor-driven programmes that require civil society input. In the last 16 years, CSOs working on human rights and governance came under increasing pressure and were pushed to the brink of closure, while others shifted focus to basic service delivery to avoid conflict and protect their staff. This dynamic contributed to a shift toward service-oriented programming, while organisations focused on rights and accountability often faced greater scrutiny and operational risk. This created a [deep divide](#) within civil society, isolating rights-based organisations and forcing many CSOs to choose between alignment and survival, or advocacy and marginalisation.

The student-led “July Uprising” reshaped the political landscape, bringing an end to the authoritarian regime and igniting fresh hope across the country. Several [prominent CSO leaders](#) joined the Dr. Yunus-led interim government as advisers, with key reform initiatives like elections, anti-corruption and women's affairs being [spearheaded](#) by well-known rights activists and civil society figures. CSO leaders heading these initiatives are also part of the [National Consensus Commission](#), established by the new government to drive forward the reform agenda and build political consensus.

However, concerns were raised regarding the [inclusiveness and transparency](#) of certain legislative processes. For instance, key legal instruments adopted towards the end of 2025, including the [Cyber Protection Ordinance](#) (22 October 2025) and the [Personal Data Protection Ordinance](#) (6 November 2025), were developed with limited proactive disclosure of draft texts or consultation outcomes. This prompted civil society organisations to call for clearer safeguards and more structured engagement mechanisms. This prompted civil society [to call](#) for clearer safeguards and more structured engagement mechanisms. Overall, while limited engagement spaces emerged during the transition period, transparency and participation remain uneven and largely discretionary rather than institutionalised through enforceable procedures.

5. Political culture and public discourses on civil society

In Bangladesh, the relationship between civil society and the country's political culture is complex, often strained, and marked by deep polarisation. CSOs are meant to serve as [critical actors](#) in a democratic society, amplifying citizen voices, promoting accountability, and ensuring rights-based development. However, in practice, they face significant barriers rooted in a political culture dominated by rigid party loyalties, confrontational politics, and a "winner-takes-all" mentality. This environment leaves little room for dissent or independent civic action.

Rights-based CSOs operate under pressure and are sometimes branded as politically biased or as "[foreign agents](#)," "anti-state", or "foreign funded troublemaker"; a narrative used to discredit their work and weaken public trust. For instance, Transparency International Bangladesh has been branded as an [opposition](#) and foreign agent by politicians, while Odhikar has been branded as "[anti-state](#)" for documenting enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings by the fallen regime.

Despite these pressures, the public - particularly in underserved and rural areas - continues to rely on NGOs for essential services such as healthcare, education, humanitarian support, and advocacy across governance, rights, and climate-related issues. However, public recognition varies by geography and issue area, with urban, service-delivery-oriented organisations receiving greater visibility than rights-based or community-level initiatives. Media coverage reflects this duality: some outlets [highlight](#) civil society contributions, while others [adopt](#) more critical or politically aligned narratives. Lastly, over the years, civil society has played a key role in advancing women's rights, expanding access to education, and supporting marginalised communities. Initiatives aimed at increasing women's participation in politics and tackling gender-based violence have gained visibility and some policy traction. However, advocacy in more sensitive areas, such as [LGBTQI+](#) rights and religious freedom, continues to face intense resistance. Youth-led and community-based civic initiatives, particularly outside Dhaka, often operate with limited recognition and visibility, relying on informal networks, volunteer labour, and localised support structures. These groups often encounter not just societal stigma but also institutional obstacles and policy pushbacks, limiting their ability to operate freely or scale their efforts.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Over the last two decades, Bangladesh has made significant strides in transforming its [digital landscape](#), providing civil society actors with important avenues for communication, mobilisation, and advocacy. However, this growth has been accompanied by ongoing concerns regarding intimidation, censorship, surveillance practices, and online restrictions, particularly affecting those engaged in rights-based advocacy or critical commentary. In the last few years, journalists, human rights defenders, and women activists have been subjected to coordinated trolling, [targeted online abuse](#), and legal harassment under the Cyber Security Act 2023 – which has since been replaced by the interim government with the [Cyber Protection Ordinance 2025](#). While the new ordinance introduced reforms and repealed earlier punitive provisions, [concerns](#) remain regarding its compliance with international human rights standards. For instance, Section 8 gives authorities the power to block content - in the name of the integrity, security, or defence of the country- that is deemed as disrupting public order, containing religious or communal hate speech. These terms remain broadly framed and open to interpretation, raising concerns about potential discretionary application in practice.

Increasingly, digital platforms are still being [weaponised](#) as tools to suppress dissent and critical voices, narrowing the space for free expression. During the previous administration, security and intelligence agencies [expanded digital monitoring](#) capacities through the acquisition of advanced [surveillance technologies](#). The National Telecommunication Monitoring Cell (NTMC) built the Integrated Lawful Interception System (ILIS), a centralised infrastructure capable of intercepting, decrypting, and storing massive volumes of internet and telecom traffic in real time. Meanwhile, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and Bangladesh police procured a range of target-based snooping tools, including backpack IMSI catchers, GPS trackers, spyware injection devices, and satellite communication analysers. While justified as tools for crime prevention and national security, civil society actors have [warned](#) that without transparency and judicial oversight, this sweeping surveillance apparatus risks being weaponised against political opponents (allegedly used extensively during the July uprising) and citizens, eroding democratic freedoms and violating constitutional rights to privacy.

In the past, Bangladesh has also imposed internet and social media shutdowns during political unrest and protests. No comparable nationwide shutdowns were recorded during 2025, and the [Bangladesh Telecommunication \(Amendment\) Ordinance 2025](#) formally prohibits [internet and telecommunication shutdowns](#), marking a significant departure from previous practice. The 2025 Telecommunication Amendment Ordinance also [abolished the](#) National Telecommunications Monitoring Centre (NTMC) and introduced a revised interception approval framework requiring formal authorisation and reporting. While these reforms strengthen legal safeguards, concerns remain regarding the continued operation of legacy interception infrastructure under related legal frameworks. Civil society actors, particularly journalists, human rights defenders, and prominent activists have faced [digital repression](#) through coordinated harassment, threats, and smear campaigns. State-linked actors and partisan groups often spread disinformation and propaganda to delegitimise critical voices.

Digital accessibility remains uneven. Although connectivity has expanded, meaningful [access is constrained](#) by device affordability, data costs, inconsistent network quality, and digital literacy gaps. These barriers disproportionately affect rural populations, low-income communities, and marginalised groups. Government digital platforms frequently lack

accessibility features for persons with disabilities, limiting functional usability despite formal recognition of internet access as a right.

Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges

While the election has restored an elected government, the civic environment remains shaped by the conditions under which the transition unfolded. The sharp escalation in political violence and attacks on journalists observed during the pre-election period raises concerns that similar patterns of intimidation and pressure could persist if political competition intensifies in the coming months.

A second challenge is whether reform commitments made during the transition will be institutionalised rather than remaining personality- or moment-dependent. Some governance reforms were advanced under the interim period (including digital governance and telecom reforms), but sustaining an enabling environment will depend on consistent implementation, oversight, and restraints on discretionary power - particularly where national security, public order, and “religious harmony” rationales intersect with civic action.

Opportunities

At the same time, the post-election period offers a clearer pathway for civil society to push for institutional safeguards - especially if the new government seeks domestic and international legitimacy through improved governance performance. A key opportunity is to translate transition-era reforms into durable protections, including safeguarding internet openness and limiting arbitrary restrictions.

Civil society also has an opening to help normalise democratic practice after a turbulent period - through independent monitoring, documentation of violence and rights concerns, and constructive engagement with parliamentary and oversight processes. The transition has already shown that civic pressure and public demand can influence governance trajectories; sustaining that influence now depends on shifting from emergency mobilisation to structured engagement. This includes advocating for transparent law-making, predictable consultation, and functioning accountability bodies.

If the new government chooses to consolidate stability through reforms rather than discretionary control, CSOs can play a practical role. This includes through rebuilding trust through evidence-based monitoring, supporting inclusion of marginalised voices, and strengthening civic literacy (including digital literacy and misinformation resilience) in communities beyond Dhaka.

EU SEE

SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

EU SEE

SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



Funded by
the European Union

