



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# **Enabling Environment**

## **Snapshot**

**Republic of the Congo**

**March 2026**

## Disclaimer

*Some of the information presented in this document is based on the researcher's experience and engagement with civil society organisations. Although no online sources were available for these points, the information reflects the professional and practical knowledge gained through direct interaction with the relevant stakeholders.*

## Context

Period covered by this report : October 2025 -March 2026

Since the end of 2025 and the start of 2026, [the socio-political climate has become increasingly tense](#) in the run-up to the March 2026 presidential election. This context is having a particularly adverse effect on the environment for civil society, with a considerable impact not only on access to rights and freedoms but also on the security situation in the country. Indeed, [numerous accounts point to a growing tension, or even an unusually harsh](#) tone on the part of the authorities, [particularly the military](#), as the election date draws nearer.

For example, the vitriolic speech by the Director-General of Presidential Security (DGSP) – General Serge OBOA – who, during a ceremony on 10 January 2026, made public threats against civil society, opposition parties and citizens, promising them [severe and ruthless reprisals](#) in the event of unauthorised demonstrations to contest the results of the presidential election, is evidence of a deterioration in the favourable environment. These [remarks, condemned](#) by civil society organisations, follow [the operation to combat urban organised crime known as 'zero kuluna'](#), launched, curiously, in September 2025, and which culminated on 11 January 2026 in [armed clashes in the Pool department](#), near Brazzaville and reputed to be the stronghold of Pastor Ntoumi's rebellion.

This operation, of rare violence, has caused widespread fear amongst the population, given the number of public summary and extrajudicial executions of [alleged offenders](#), as well as [the abuses committed](#).

Similarly, in January 2026, Mr Anatole LIMBOGO NGOKA, a declared candidate in the presidential election, was [formally barred](#) by the police [from travelling](#) within the department of Likouala, on the basis of a verbal instruction from the prefect of that department, Mr Jean Pascal KOUMBA, whilst he was conducting a pre-campaign in his home department. Yet, during the same period, and for months prior, supporters of the majority candidate have been campaigning in the departments without any ban or even restriction. This ban violated Article 22 of the Constitution of 6 November 2015, which guarantees the right of every citizen to move freely throughout the national territory. Consequently, the elections will be held in a context that raises serious concerns for rights and freedoms. This undermines the favourable environment for civil society during the electoral period and limits its ability to monitor the integrity of the process.

Civil society remains a key actor in promoting transparency, human rights and democratic governance. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social movements and community groups continue to defend justice, monitor public policies and encourage reforms, even in a restrictive environment. However, unequal treatment persists within the CSO community: CSOs aligned with the government's priorities enjoy preferential access to consultations, whilst CSOs independent of the government are excluded from decision-making processes, which limits their influence on public policy.

## 1. Respect for and protection of freedoms

Freedom of assembly and demonstration is guaranteed by Article 27 of the [Constitution](#), but its exercise remains limited in the Congo. CSOs may indeed assemble, but exclusively in enclosed spaces. [Ordinance No. 62 of 1962](#) on public demonstrations prohibits any gathering on public roads without prior authorisation, thereby establishing a prior authorisation regime in place of a notification regime, which paves the way for the suppression of public demonstrations. Despite the authorities' commitment to repeal this provision, notably through the adoption of the recommendations of the Congo's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) by the United Nations on 25 January 2024, and the endorsement by [several](#) local [CSOs](#) in 2023 [of a](#) draft law on the regulation of public demonstrations and meetings in the Republic of the Congo, no progress in this regard has been observed.

The CSO members interviewed considered that the 2026 electoral calendar did not lend itself to the prompt resolution of this request, given that, in practice, such a context tended to pave the way for restrictions on civic space.

The arrest of Mr Bob KABEN MASSOUKA is a prime example of a violation of the freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration. Detained since July 2025 for supporting a group of young people who wished [to organise](#) a [peaceful march](#) in Brazzaville – [which was](#) ultimately [suppressed](#) by the security services – he is being prosecuted for undermining state security and criminal conspiracy. However, his case was not heard during the recent criminal session held from 5 December 2025 to 5 January 2026.

Freedom of expression and opinion, although guaranteed by Article 25 of the Constitution, is subject to serious restrictions. The pressure exerted on certain independent media outlets, the growing self-censorship within newsrooms and the difficulties in accessing public information and sources support this observation, thereby justifying the country's decline in the global press [freedom ranking](#) established by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Online media, [broadcasting](#) and the print media are monitored by media regulatory bodies, and media reports or articles deemed critical of the government are subject to censorship.

In December 2025, the reactions of independent CSOs denouncing the abuses by the DGSP during the 'Zero Kuluna' operation were not reported by the state media, notably Télé Congo and Radio Congo: only the [international broadcaster RFI reported](#) on this stance taken by civil society. Messages from political opponents regarding this operation were also not covered by the public media. Following their stance on the said operation, the Executive Director of the Congolese Human Rights Observatory (OCDH) and the Director of the Centre for Action for Development (CAD) were subjected to open threats by activists close to the government on social media in October 2025, in line with the alert issued to this effect by the RPDH on the EU SEE network in late October 2025.

Also in December 2025, in Ntam, in the Sangha department, agents from the Information and Documentation Centre (CID) confiscated the work equipment (camera, recorder, mobile phone and national identity card) from the editor-in-chief of the online newspaper Mayilanews, whilst he was reporting on the ban on the export of timber in the form of logs. The equipment was returned after approximately two hours of negotiations, according to his account.

Another example concerns [the arrest of the Congolese influencer and activist Jonas Fred Makita](#). On 9 January 2026, he was arrested in Pointe-Noire by members of the judicial police,

before being transferred on 10 January to Dolisie, in the Niari department. He appeared on 12 January 2026 before the Public Prosecutor at the High Court of Dolisie, following a warrant issued against him on charges of contempt of court and defamation of an institution.

Finally, [the refusal on 27 February 2026 by the United Nations Information Centre](#) to grant the OCDH use of its meeting room for the launch of its 2025 annual report on human rights in the Congo, despite the fact that it had been duly paid, on the grounds that the government perceived this activity as likely to disturb public order, contributes to the erosion of civic space and freedom of assembly.

## 2. A legal framework conducive to the work of civil society actors

Although freedom of association is guaranteed by the Constitution, NGOs and associations are required, under the [Law of 1 July 1901](#), to register with the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry is then required to issue them with a receipt certifying their existence and government approval, even though the 1901 Law establishes a declaratory system. This registration procedure can be [cumbersome](#) and subject to the government's discretion, particularly for groups critical of the authorities. CSOs, particularly those active on human rights, governance and environmental issues, face considerable obstacles: their registration may be delayed or rejected, they may be subject to arbitrary arrest, and many practise self-censorship to prevent reprisals.

Another concern is the absence of a specific law for the [protection of human rights defenders](#), an issue raised by the [Rencontre pour la Paix et les Droits de l'Homme \(RPDH\)](#) and the [Service International des Droits de l'Homme \(SIDH\)](#) during advocacy activities with the public authorities. These organisations have drafted and submitted to the relevant authorities a preliminary bill on the protection of defenders, which has not yet been adopted. The issue has been taken up by the National Human Rights Commission with the support [of the United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#), as well as by the [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), and has been included as a recommendation in the [United Nations Universal Periodic Review \(UPR\)](#).

Article 238 of the 2015 Constitution establishes the Civil Society Advisory Council. In practice, this institution – created and governed by Organic Law No. 32-2017 of 2017 – is a body of the executive. Although it is presented as the umbrella organisation for Congolese CSOs, it is not representative of the sector's diversity. Experience shows that the leadership of the Civil Society Advisory Council, as well as the NGOs that are members of this council, operate within a sphere close to the government; they focus more on promoting rights rather than defending and protecting them; they never criticise the government's actions; and they do not engage in advocacy. Thus, Organic Law No. 32-2017 [stipulates](#) in Article 2 that the Council is placed under the authority of the President of the Republic, which leaves no doubt as to its lack of independence.

Independent CSOs that are not members of the Council are often marginalised, stigmatised or portrayed as being close to the political opposition because of their critical stance on governance. In accordance with the provisions of Organic Law No. 32-2017, the President of the Republic regularly refers to the Council when addressing the issue of citizen [participation](#), thereby consolidating its position as the state-sanctioned voice of civil society. These facts were confirmed during [the recent Djambala dialogue](#) in the Plateaux department, a prelude to

the presidential election held from 16 to 19 February 2026, a dialogue intended to address concerns regarding the consensual organisation of the election of the President of the Republic. No CSOs critical of the Government, and moreover not members of the Council, were invited to this dialogue.

### 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for CSOs in the Congo comes from development partners, foreign governments and foreign foundations. Sources include restricted or open calls for proposals from technical and financial partners such as the French Development Agency (AFD), the European Union, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (FCIL) and foreign embassies. In some cases, funding is provided through direct agreements, based on trust and established relationships between donors and CSOs.

Ideally, a national funding mechanism should be established to support CSO activities and reduce dependence on external sources, but no such mechanism currently exists. The problem of excessive dependence on foreign funding has been exacerbated by the freeze on US funding in January 2025.

Concerns have been raised regarding unequal access to co-financing agreements between the Congolese state and international partners. In practice, the government appears to favour CSOs affiliated with *the Civil Society Consultative Council* (CCSC) at the expense of independent groups.

It is also worth mentioning another obstacle related to the processing of external funds received by local banks. According to accounts from CSO representatives, international transfers have sometimes been blocked pending verification of the origin of the funds, the stated objective of the project and the recipient organisation's compliance with the Bank's requirements. These checks are sometimes carried out at the request of *the National Financial Investigation Agency* (ANIF). Although intended to prevent money laundering and the financing of terrorism, this process can lead to lengthy delays, disrupting planning, implementation, and the reporting process to donors.

### 4. Openness and responsiveness of the State

The Republic of the Congo does not have a general law on public access to information. The main framework is the [Constitution, Articles 9 and 20](#), and the [2001 Law on Freedom of Information and Communication](#), which predates international standards on access to information. The latter has been [criticised](#) in an analysis [by](#) the Centre for Law and Democracy (CDD) [as being outdated and overly restrictive](#). The 2001 law is geared more towards access to information for media professionals. Furthermore, the [Code of Transparency and Accountability in Public Finance Management](#) (Law No. 10-2017) aims to improve transparency and accountability in public finance management. Although it guarantees CSOs' access to information, particularly regarding governance in the extractive and forestry sectors, this law remains inoperative due to the lack of implementing regulations.

It is also worth mentioning Law No. 22 of 11 March 2022 on the prevention and combating of corruption and related offences, which establishes the High Authority for the Fight against Corruption, and Directive No. 6/11-ueac-190-CM-22 on the Code of Transparency and Good

Governance in Public Finance Management. Government departments are reluctant to share certain information, particularly that relating to governance, resource management or national security, which limits the transparency of public action.

Interaction between civil society and the state is sector-specific and targeted. A structured framework for engagement exists through constitutional advisory councils for civil society, women, young people, people with disabilities, and traditional elders and community leaders. However, these mechanisms are often ineffective, and their interaction is not very inclusive, given the limited number of CSOs consulted. The appointment of council leaders takes place through closed, state-led processes; furthermore, the issues discussed in these bodies tend to avoid politically sensitive topics. For example, the Civil Society Advisory Council is not open to CSOs that address sensitive issues and advocacy relating to public governance and that denounce both corruption and human rights violations, which limits the pluralism of representation. Given its influence with decision-makers, the Council shapes the perception and treatment of certain organisations by the government, leading to the exclusion of critical CSOs from dialogue and political processes.

However, certain thematic forums do allow for collaboration and the inclusion of CSOs, such as, for example, the technical session of [the 22nd Joint Implementation Committee \(JIC\)](#) of the VPA-FLEGT held on 25 November 2025 in Brazzaville, and the session of the National Implementation Committee [of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative \(EITI\)](#). [The political dialogue held from 16 to 19 February](#) 2026 in Djambala in the Plateaux department once again illustrated the practice of excluding from public consultations all CSOs critical of the Executive that demonstrate independence of action and thought.

The government's accountability to civil society is limited. Civil society organisations – whether acting individually or through networks such as the Network for Natural Resource Justice/Publish What You Pay in Congo or Turn the Page in Congo – regularly [publish](#) reports and analyses on public governance. However, they are not systematically invited to participate in official discussions on the issues they raise. In this regard, there is no evidence of any substantial improvement. There is also a certain degree of inclusion, for example, where recommendations from NGOs (whether government-aligned or independent) are taken into account by Member States during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), endorsed by the government, and applied in public policy and official discourse.

## 5. Political culture and public discourse on civil society

Public discourse is negative and stigmatising towards CSOs critical of public governance and those denouncing human rights violations and electoral governance, as exemplified [by the comments](#) made by the Government Spokesperson following the publication of a report by the 'Tournons la Page Congo' campaign in the wake of the legislative and local elections; this discourse stigmatises denunciations of poor governance and acts of corruption.

During the government's fortnightly briefing on 29 October 2025, [the same minister lambasted](#) civil society organisations in these terms: "*when the kuluna attack citizens, civil society does not intervene, and when it is the DGSP that reacts, civil society jumps into the fray*".

These CSOs are branded as organisations acting on behalf of the political opposition and as agents of foreign powers. As such, they are discredited and [harassed](#). To a certain extent, they are tolerated only when supported by development partners and when they participate in governance improvement initiatives driven by international commitments. In other cases, the executive acts as if it were unaware of the existence of civil society, whilst relying on its

analyses. This dynamic makes it crucial for CSOs to strengthen their communication strategies in order to increase their visibility and improve public understanding of their work.

Independent civil society in the Republic of the Congo is recognised as a key player in promoting transparency, accountability and human rights. NGOs, social movements and community groups play a central role in raising public awareness, championing justice and democracy, and contributing to sustainable development initiatives. Despite these contributions, civil society faces significant challenges in making its voice heard and gaining acceptance. Government-aligned media and certain public institutions often marginalise independent CSOs, portraying them as supporters of the opposition or influenced by foreign interests. However, the influence of CSOs is evident when their recommendations are taken into account within the framework of international mechanisms such as [the Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI), etc.; this proves that even critical organisations can influence policy when their work is evidence-based and receives international attention.

Socio-economic status continues to influence access to opportunities, including civic participation. People from disadvantaged backgrounds may find it difficult to get involved due to a lack of resources, inadequate education or marginalisation. Women and certain ethnic minorities also face additional barriers. Gender stereotypes and discrimination limit their access to decision-making and political processes. Despite these obstacles, civil society movements and NGOs are working to promote equal rights and encourage civic participation. These groups strive to raise awareness and educate people about citizenship.

It is worth noting, however, a certain degree of openness following the enactment of [Law No. 19-2025](#) of 25 July 2025 on the protection and promotion of the rights of older people, *driven by civil society*.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

Digital rights and freedoms are governed by a number of legislative texts guaranteeing freedom of expression online, access to information and protection against censorship and unjustified surveillance. Article 25 of the 2015 Constitution guarantees every citizen the freedom of expression and the dissemination of their opinions through speech, writing, images or any other means of communication. Law No. 09-2009 of 25 November 2009 regulates the electronic communications sector, with Article 3 guaranteeing the right to access electronic communications services. The Republic of the Congo has also ratified the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and the Protection of Personal Data, also known as the Malabo Convention. This convention aims to establish a harmonised legal framework for cybersecurity in Africa, to protect citizens' personal data and to promote trust in digital services.

However, the implementation of these digital rights and freedoms remains limited by the fact that civil society actors are not entirely free to operate online. They are constantly monitored and are therefore unable to share certain information freely and securely. The country's authorities frequently criticise online content, citing the "dangerous manipulation of information", particularly via social media platforms.

In June 2020, the President promulgated Law [No. 27 of 5 June 2020](#) on combating cybercrime in the Congo, which defines and punishes offences related to information and communication technologies. Whilst the law provides some protection for sensitive personal data, it also creates potential avenues for the authorities to restrict civil society activities on digital platforms. Internet and mobile phone networks are sometimes cut off during election periods.

Such measures create an environment of uncertainty and limit the ability of CSOs to communicate, coordinate and mobilise citizens online.

In this regard, and since the start of the year, observers have noted [disruptions in the provision of internet access](#) in the Congo. Whilst technical reasons are cited by the main internet service providers, the proximity of the presidential election nevertheless raises questions about the true basis for this claim, given the Congolese authorities' past and well-documented history of suspending internet and mobile phone network access during previous elections. The [publication of a memo attributed to the Minister of the Interior](#), signed by him and dated 5 March 2026, during the election campaign, requiring mobile phone companies to block all communications, including text messages, from 10 to 15 March 2026, raises questions; although this [memo was denied by the Minister of Foreign Affairs](#) and dismissed as fake news. This context illustrates, in any case, the importance of digital communications during an election period.

As the 2026 presidential election approaches, these trends suggest a continuing interest on the part of the authorities in monitoring, filtering and controlling the digital environment, which has a negative impact on the environment conducive to civil society and limits its ability to operate freely.

## Challenges and opportunities

### Challenges:

1. Lack of a law protecting defenders and whistleblowers. The draft law submitted by the RPDH and the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) has not been adopted, leaving human rights defenders and whistleblowers without formal legislative safeguards. This remains a challenge for the safety of civil society actors in the coming months.
2. Exclusion of independent CSOs from election preparations: Independent organisations are being sidelined from the dialogues and preparatory activities for the 2026 elections, which undermines their ability to influence governance and electoral transparency: This is illustrated by the exclusion of independent civil society from the consultation with key stakeholders held from 16 to 19 February 2026 in Djambala.
3. The unjustified retention of the provisions of [Ordinance No. 62 of 1962, unless](#) motivated by a persistent desire to control the freedom of action of citizens and civil society organisations: The requirement for prior authorisation for public demonstrations should be lifted in the run-up to the 2026 elections and future elections.
4. Lack of implementing regulations to ensure the effective implementation of laws that strengthen civil society's participation in the decision-making process and the conduct of public affairs: Urge the government to adopt implementing regulations for Law No. 33-2023 of 17 November 2023 on sustainable environmental management in the Republic of the Congo, the MOUEBARRA Law No. 19-2022 of 4 May 2022 on combating violence against women, Law No. 33-2020 of 8 July 2020 on the Forest Code, and Law No. 05-2011 of 25 February 2011 on the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples.

## Opportunities for improvement:

1. State commitment to responsible and accountable governance of natural resources, climate and the environment: CSOs can continue to make use of forums such as the VPA/FLEGT through [Annex IX](#), the work of the Joint Implementation Committee of the VPA involving the participation [of CSO experts](#), and [the negotiation of](#) the new [CAFI](#) letter of intent [on the civil society support initiative](#). These governance processes provide a forum for CSOs, which can use them to raise a number of concerns with decision-makers.
2. Ownership and implementation of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI): through the EITI Civil Society Protocol and the validation process, CSOs can lobby for commitments to protect civic space and influence transparency in the extractive sector.
3. [Universal Periodic Review \(UPR\) recommendations](#): CSOs can monitor and follow up on commitments, including the protection of defenders, whistleblowers and [women](#) human rights [defenders](#), in order to hold the government accountable for respecting [human rights](#) and protecting defenders, and the European Union-funded programme to support civil society actions aimed at implementing UPR recommendations from 2026 onwards, through UN agencies in the DRC.
4. Civil society actors can also capitalise on the Congolese government's commitment to [abolish](#) the prior authorisation system for peaceful assemblies in July 2024, following the country's fourth Universal Periodic Review by the UN Human Rights Council. CSOs can use this commitment to mobilise, organise and advocate more freely, thereby strengthening civic engagement.

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