



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Tanzania

December 2025



JamiiAfrica

Context

Although the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania guarantees freedoms of expression, assembly, and association under Articles 18 and 20, the civic and political environment has become increasingly restrictive in recent years. These constitutional rights have been significantly tested in the period surrounding the October 2025 general elections, during which state actions raised serious concerns on human rights, democracy, good governance, and the rule of law.

The pre- and post-election 2025 period was marked by a pattern of enforced disappearances, unexplained killings, mass arrests, and the suppression of dissent. High-profile incidents including the disappearance of former Ambassador Humphrey Polepole, the killing of four young men in the Coast Region, and the arrest of opposition leader John Heche, highlighted a climate of fear and impunity. At the same time, civil society organisations (CSOs), journalists, and human rights defenders faced harassment, surveillance, and regulatory pressure, including the suspension of online platforms and intimidation of legal advocacy groups such as the Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC).

The regulatory framework governing CSOs, particularly the NGO Act of 2002, concentrates significant discretionary power in politically appointed bodies, raising concerns about political interference. Financially, CSOs remain heavily dependent on foreign funding, which accounts for the majority of their resources, while regulatory delays and donor funding suspensions have disrupted operations, reduced staffing, and weakened service delivery. Despite being formally consulted in policy processes, CSO contributions are rarely reflected in final decisions, underscoring the largely procedural nature of stakeholder engagement.

Media freedom and digital rights have also deteriorated. The first nationwide internet shutdown in Tanzania's history during the 2025 elections, coupled with threats to ban social media platforms and restrictions on activist accounts, illustrate growing state control over information. While recent reforms such as the Personal Data Protection Act offer some safeguards, enforcement remains limited within an increasingly constrained civic space.

Collectively, these developments point to a narrowing democratic environment, where constitutional guarantees exist in law but are inconsistently upheld in practice, placing civil society, independent media, and citizens at heightened risk.

Reporting period covered: August 2025 – December 2025

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania guarantees fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, assembly, and association, under [Articles 18 and 20](#). Article 18 protects the right to hold opinions and to seek, receive, and impart information, while Article 20 affirms the right to freely assemble, associate, and cooperate with others.

In recent years, however, Tanzania's civic and political space has faced increasing restrictions, particularly in the period leading up to the general election scheduled for October 2025. [Amnesty International](#) reports that authorities have "intensified their repression of dissent against the opposition, journalists, civil society and human rights defenders," citing arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings.

On 29 October 2025, Tanzania held its [General Election](#) to elect the President, Members of Parliament, and Councillors. On the same day, protests that had been mobilised for months,

largely through social media platforms such as TikTok, erupted across the country. Police responded by using tear gas and live ammunition to disperse demonstrators, resulting in [numerous deaths](#). Although the exact number remains unclear, reports suggest that [thousands of people](#) may have been killed. Authorities also imposed a nationwide internet blackout as well as a partial lockdown, restricting free movement.

Following the election and the swearing-in of the President, several individuals including social media influencers and journalists who had been reporting on the protests [were arrested](#). In total, around 200-300+ people [from various regions](#) were [reportedly](#) detained and [charged with treason](#) or conspiracy to commit treason. Many of those arrested were young people in their early twenties from areas where demonstrations were most intense, including Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Njombe, and Mwanza.

On 14 November 2025, during the inauguration of the 13th Parliament, President Samia Suluhu Hassan directed the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) to [withdraw charges](#) against young people who appeared to have joined the protests simply by following the crowd, noting that some may not have fully understood their actions. In her inauguration speech, however, the President did not address the underlying public grievances and instead blamed “youths from a [neighbouring country](#)” for instigating the protests. Days later, police announced mass arrests and [treason charges](#). Despite claims of foreign involvement, no foreigners were among those detained—a fact underscored when the President later instructed the DPP to drop charges.

Between 6 October and 24 October 2025, the country experienced a series of disturbing incidents involving prominent political figures and unexplained acts of violence. On 6 October, former Tanzanian Ambassador to Cuba, Humphrey Polepole, was [reportedly abducted](#) and remains missing to date. Following his resignation as Ambassador to Cuba, Polepole [became an outspoken](#) critic of both the government and the ruling party, CCM. He questioned their performance and accountability, accused the party of violating internal procedures in selecting its presidential candidate, and alleged the existence of a “deep state” controlling government affairs, reportedly led by former President Jakaya Kikwete and businessman Rostam Aziz. He also criticised the Sixth Phase Government, arguing that it prioritises its own interests over those of the public, citing ongoing economic hardship, delayed development projects, and the widespread misuse of public funds.

Ten days later, on 16 October 2025, the [bodies of four](#) unidentified young men aged between 19 and 22 were found along the Mapinga–Kibaha roadside in the Coast Region. The victims, believed to be residents of Dar es Salaam, had sustained severe injuries to their faces and legs, raising serious concerns about possible extrajudicial killings.

On 22 October 2025, John Heche, Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA)’s Vice Chairman (Mainland), [was arrested](#) outside the High Court of Tanzania (Dar es Salaam Sub-Registry) in Dar es Salaam while attending court hearings related to key party cases. His arrest, which was captured on video and widely circulated, sparked public concern when his whereabouts remained unknown for two days. Initial reports suggested the arrest was linked to claims by the Immigration Department that Heche had illegally crossed into Kenya. He was later charged with terrorism before being released on bail.

Civil society organisations and media platforms have also [faced mounting pressure](#). In September 2025, the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) [suspended](#) the JamiiForums online platform for 90 days, accusing it of publishing “misleading and insulting

content” about the President and the government. In addition, [NGOs were warned](#) against being used for alleged “money laundering for political interests” in the lead-up to the election.

Human rights observers have consistently noted that CSOs, NGOs, and human rights defenders in Tanzania are operating under increasingly restrictive conditions. In a September 2025 update, UN human rights [experts expressed alarm](#) over harassment, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and other violations targeting opposition members, journalists, and civil society organisations.

Media freedom in Tanzania continues to face significant challenges, according to media freedom monitors, human rights organisations, and industry assessments. While independent journalists and media houses continue to operate, the overall environment remains restrictive. Structural and systemic pressures including self-censorship, political interference, and unequal access to coverage continue to shape media narratives and limit opportunities for balanced, in-depth reporting.

Similarly, the 2025 Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Government Election Regulations, specifically [Regulation 16](#), restrict accredited CSOs serving as election observers from publicly commenting on election irregularities or releasing reports without official approval. Other laws, such as the [Statistics Act of 2015](#), further constrain access to government data and impose severe penalties for unauthorised publication, limiting freedom of information and expression. In addition, the Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC) has reported multiple cases of CSOs being [prosecuted](#) under different legal provisions, further shrinking civic space.

These developments form the broader context surrounding the disappearance of Humphrey Polepole, the roadside killings of four young men, and the arrest of John Heche. The recurring pattern of disappearances, unexplained deaths, detentions lacking clear legal basis, and the absence of official accountability points to a growing climate of fear, placing both political actors and ordinary citizens, including those in civil society, at heightened risk.

2. Supportive Legal Framework for the Work of Civil Society Actors

NGO and CSO registration in Tanzania is governed by the [Non-Governmental Organisations Act](#), 2002 (as amended), which grants the NGO Coordination Board authority to approve, deny, or cancel registrations. The Board is composed of the Registrar and Chairperson, both appointed by the President, along with additional members appointed by the Minister for Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups. This appointment structure has raised concerns about potential political influence, particularly over NGOs and CSOs whose work may be perceived as critical of the government.

In a post-election incident on 12 November 2025, staff from the Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC) were [harassed and intimidated](#) while working at the White Sands Hotel in Dar es Salaam. Their laptops, identification documents, and mobile phones were confiscated, and they were ordered to report to the Zonal Crimes Office the following day. Although the devices were later returned, the incident raised serious concerns about potential data compromise and the broader safety of human rights defenders.

Democratic governance depends on accountability, transparency, and the protection of fundamental freedoms. When human rights organisations are targeted and hundreds of

citizens face severe charges that are later dismissed through presidential intervention, it signals a concerning erosion of democratic norms.

The harassment of staff from the Legal and Human Rights Centre, a prominent civil society organisation, further [deepens these concerns](#). Democracy thrives on trust, openness, and respect for rights, not fear and intimidation. LHRC has continued to provide legal support to individuals, including political leaders charged before the election. Alarm was heightened when Senior Advocate Mpale Kaba Mpoki and the Tanganyika Law Society's President Boniface Mwabukusi were [questioned](#) over planned Independence Day demonstrations, though both were later released without conditions.

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Civil society organisations in Tanzania face significant financial and operational constraints due to restrictive funding arrangements and regulatory barriers. Most donor support is project-based, offering limited coverage for core operational costs and restricting long-term planning. Foreign funding accounts for more than half of CSO resources. While international assistance has played a crucial role in developing the sector, it has also created dependency and limited the growth of locally driven and sustainable initiatives.

Recent [funding disruptions](#) illustrate these challenges. In 2024–2025, USAID implemented a funding freeze that affected several Tanzanian CSOs, leading to suspended awards, halted disbursements, and the need to re-plan projects. Similarly, the [World Bank suspended](#) disbursements for the REGROW tourism project following allegations of human rights abuses, forcing implementing partners and government institutions to adjust project modalities. [CSO reports indicate](#) that such funding suspensions often compel organisations to pause activities, reduce staff, shift to remote programming, or scale back monitoring and evaluation work. [Donor guidance](#) and sector analyses further show that crisis or contingency funding mechanisms are designed to allow rapid reprogramming in response to security or operational challenges, demonstrating that donors retain flexibility to adjust funding terms when necessary.

Delays and interruptions in funding cycles have had serious operational consequences for CSOs. Regulatory requirements such as the mandatory submission of donor-funded contracts for government approval often result in prolonged delays. In some cases, grant-funded projects [reportedly](#) remained unapproved for more than three months, placing employment and project timelines at risk. Media reports confirm the scale of these disruptions: during the USAID funding suspension, more than 60 NGOs working in agriculture, youth, and women's empowerment experienced [operational setbacks](#). Surveys found that over 40% of affected CSOs were forced to suspend or terminate staff contracts, [cut budgets](#) by up to 90%, and in several cases close offices, halt projects, or suspend community services. These disruptions undermine long-term planning, weaken service delivery, and erode community trust in CSOs.

Despite these challenges, CSOs in Tanzania may access certain tax incentives under laws such as the [Income Tax Act](#), the [Value Added Tax Act](#), and the [Tax Administration Act](#). However, these benefits are not automatic and require formal application and compliance with strict eligibility criteria. To qualify, CSOs must demonstrate a public character and operate exclusively for purposes such as poverty alleviation, education, health services, water supply, or infrastructure development. Approved organisations may deduct up to 25% of their gross income, as well as expenditures on charitable activities and approved savings allocated for future projects.

4. State Openness and Responsiveness

In Tanzania, the contributions of civil society organisations to government-led consultations are often overlooked or given limited consideration. Although CSOs are formally invited to participate in policy dialogues and development planning processes, their input rarely results in meaningful action. Efforts by CSOs to hold government institutions accountable are frequently constrained by legal, institutional, and political barriers. In some cases, restrictive measures such as heightened compliance requirements, tax audits, and, in extreme instances, harassment or enforced disappearances of activists have been reported.

The existing legal and institutional framework does not require the government to provide feedback on CSO submissions. As a result, stakeholder engagement is often procedural, aimed more at demonstrating participation than at genuinely incorporating diverse perspectives. There is no public reporting on which CSOs were consulted, what issues were discussed, or which recommendations were submitted unless CSOs themselves disclose this information. This lack of transparency limits public oversight and makes it difficult to assess the impact of consultations. Consequently, many CSO recommendations, particularly those related to governance and policy reform, are ignored, with only minor technical or administrative suggestions occasionally acknowledged.

CSOs are sometimes consulted during the early stages of drafting policies and regulations, but this practice is inconsistent and highly dependent on political context, donor influence, and the sensitivity of the policy area. Government institutions often engage CSOs to access technical expertise, enhance legitimacy, demonstrate openness, reduce political criticism, meet procedural participation requirements, or leverage CSO networks for public awareness and implementation support. For example, in May 2025, during World Press Freedom Day, the then Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa [tasked](#) JamiiAfrica with [convening](#) stakeholders to contribute to the development of a National AI Strategy aimed at helping citizens adapt to advances in artificial intelligence. The strategy remains in draft form and is expected to be finalised soon. On the same occasion, the Prime Minister also announced that a [National AI Policy](#) was forthcoming. Although it has not yet been finalised, stakeholders remain eager to review it and see it implemented, given its potential to spur innovation. Sector-specific initiatives in this area are also under way.

Communication between the government and citizens has improved in recent years, with many public officials increasingly using social media platforms to engage directly with the public. Minister [Dorothy Gwajima](#) has been particularly active on platforms such as JamiiForums, alongside other ministers including [Kitila Mkumbo](#) and Mwigulu Nchemba who was appointed as Prime Minister on 13 November 2025. Several government institutions have adopted similar approaches.

Despite these improvements, responses from officials are often limited when inquiries seek to address sensitive issues, which are frequently dismissed as confidential. While reforms in local government, public sector management, and financial administration are often presented as evidence of openness, they tend to be largely symbolic—designed to reassure external observers rather than to deliver genuine accountability or substantive change.

On 28 October 2025, during the launch of ruling party CCM's election [campaign](#), presidential candidate Dr. Samia Suluhu Hassan unveiled a [13-point plan](#) that she pledged to implement within her first 100 days in office if re-elected for a second term (2026–2030). The plan outlines priorities across key sectors, including education, health, employment creation, access to

clean water, and the formalisation of small-scale food vendors and motorcycle taxi operators. Notably, one of her central commitments is to strengthen collaboration between the government, political actors, civil society organisations, and the private sector. She also announced plans to establish a Commission for Dialogue and Reconciliation to promote inclusive national dialogue and reinforce democratic participation, in line with her “Four Rs” philosophy of Reconciliation, Resilience, Reform, and Rebuild.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Civil society organisations in Tanzania are frequently portrayed as agents of foreign agendas or cultural influence, despite national regulations formally [prohibiting](#) such characterisations. This narrative has fuelled ongoing debates over what constitutes “Tanzanian norms and traditions,” a concept made complex by the country’s ethnic, cultural, and social diversity. The lack of clear statutory or codified definitions has resulted in reliance on informal or subjective interpretations of national values.

Despite these challenges, CSOs have played a vital role in advancing public discourse on human rights, fundamental freedoms, democratic governance, and constitutionalism. Nevertheless, government narratives often depict certain NGOs as instruments of foreign interests, particularly those engaged in political reform, governance accountability, or advocacy for LGBTIQ+ rights. [Such framing erodes](#) public trust in these organisations and significantly limits their ability to operate effectively or engage in rights-based advocacy.

In the lead-up to the October 2025 elections, Human Rights Watch [documented](#) incidents of harassment, arrests, and abductions of activists, contributing to a climate of fear that discourages critical reporting. A [2025 media review](#) noted a decline in public trust in traditional media, with many citizens describing outlets as “disconnected” or “self-serving.” As advertising revenues continue to decline, media houses face severe financial pressures that weaken editorial independence and heighten vulnerability to external influence. These economic challenges, combined with regulatory risks and political sensitivities, often result in cautious, selective, or softened coverage.

Following the disputed 2025 elections and allegations of violence, the government [publicly accused](#) both international and domestic media of biased reporting and “slander,” urging foreign outlets to adhere to what it termed “balanced and ethical journalism.” This response reflects the government’s sensitivity to unfavourable coverage and reinforces pressure on the media to align with official narratives. Domestically, authorities have continued to call on media outlets to be “patriotic” and to prioritise stories that project a [positive image](#) of the country, arguing that foreign media should similarly avoid reporting that could damage their national reputations.

Online platforms play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of CSOs by enabling outreach, mobilisation, awareness-raising, and public debate, particularly among youth and urban populations. However, these spaces are often polarised, noisy, and subject to censorship, which can expose CSOs to misinformation, public distrust, and regulatory pressure. To remain credible and influential, CSOs must balance online engagement with offline outreach and prioritise transparent, consistent, and evidence-based communication. Recent [analysis highlights](#) that platforms such as [JamiiForums](#) and other online community spaces have become important “virtual public spheres,” where citizens debate politics, human rights, civic activism, and CSO-led initiatives, including criticism of government actions.

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

In Tanzania, nationwide internet shutdowns were virtually unheard of prior to the 2020 election period. However, as civic participation, government accountability, and political openness have declined, digital rights and freedoms have also come under increasing pressure. Between 29 October and 3 November 2025, during the general election period, Tanzania experienced its first [nationwide internet shutdown](#), leaving citizens unable to access websites or mobile applications. The government reportedly justified the shutdown as a measure to restore public order in [response](#) to widespread protests. Before this incident, although full shutdowns were rare, authorities frequently imposed app-specific restrictions, forcing users to rely on virtual private networks (VPNs) to access blocked platforms.

In June 2025, the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) [warned](#) that it could ban any social media platform that failed to comply with national content regulation laws, stating that platforms unwilling to meet moderation requirements would not be permitted to operate in the country. In December 2025, Meta confirmed that it had [restricted access](#) to activist Maria Sarungi-Tsehai's Instagram account within Tanzania. Meta also removed the Instagram and WhatsApp accounts of U.S.-based activist Mange Kimambi, although it stated that these actions were not the result of direct government pressure. Meta's acknowledgment was significant, as it marked one of the rare instances in which the company publicly confirmed acting on a government request to limit access to an activist's account. Meta further disclosed that, during the election period, Tanzanian [authorities threatened](#) to ban Facebook and Instagram unless certain critical posts and activist accounts - many documenting alleged human rights violations - were taken down.

The nationwide internet shutdown illustrates a shrinking civic space in which state control over information increasingly outweighs democratic principles of openness and accountability. If left unchecked, such measures risk normalising digital repression and undermining the foundations of participatory governance in Tanzania.

With respect to access to digital services, TCRA [reported in September](#) 2025 that Tanzania had 56.3 million internet users. This figure includes all mobile, fixed fibre, and wireless connections that accessed the internet at least once in the three months preceding September, across technologies such as FTTX, 2G (GPRS/EDGE), 3G, 4G, and 5G. By contrast, [DataReportal](#) estimated that 20.6 million people were internet users at the end of 2025, representing an internet penetration rate of 29.1%. The country also recorded approximately 89 million mobile connections, of which 90.6% were classified as broadband, meaning they connected via 3G, 4G, or 5G networks.

For the quarter ending September 2025, [TCRA reported](#) overall network availability of 99.62% in monitored areas. Mobile network coverage stood at 98.6% for 2G, 93.8% for 3G, 94.2% for 4G, and 28.9% for 5G. Population coverage rates were lower: 78.2% for 2G, 75.9% for 3G, 76.9% for 4G, and 8.6% for 5G. Meanwhile, [DataReportal estimated](#) that 50.4 million people in Tanzania remained offline at the end of 2025, meaning approximately 70.9% of the population did not use the internet. According to [Ookla](#), the median fixed broadband download speed in Tanzania was 19.54 Mbps by the end of 2025.

In terms of digital security and privacy, there is no verified evidence that government agencies or other actors in Tanzania have conducted cyberattacks, deployed spyware or malware, or used hacking tools to infiltrate the devices, networks, or online communications of civil society actors. Nevertheless, there is widespread belief that such practices may occur.

In 2023, Tanzania enacted the [Personal Data Protection Act, 2022](#), which established the Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC). The Commission is mandated to receive, investigate, and adjudicate complaints related to personal data misuse and violations of privacy. With the law and Commission in place, Tanzania now has a formal framework for protecting digital privacy. The PDPC has already issued several decisions. For example, in August 2025, in *Nyangoma Mwesingwa v. Cecilia Maliganya* (PDPC/CMP/002/2025), the respondent was found liable for posting and commercialising images of a newborn without parental consent. The PDPC classified the images as “[sensitive personal data](#)” and ordered their deletion within 14 days, along with payment of TZS 20 million in compensation to the complainant and a TZS 5 million fine to the Commission.

Challenges and Opportunities

Tanzania’s civic space presents a complex mix of deepening challenges alongside emerging opportunities. Although the Constitution guarantees freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, recent developments, particularly around the 2025 general election, have revealed a significant gap between constitutional principles and practice. Civil society organisations, journalists, and political actors increasingly operate in an environment marked by intimidation, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, internet shutdowns, and restrictive laws. Incidents such as the disappearance of Humphrey Polepole, the arrest of opposition figures, mass detentions of protesters, harassment of human rights defenders, and pressure on independent media highlight a climate of fear and weakened accountability. Regulatory frameworks governing CSO registration, funding approvals, election observation, data access, and online content further constrain civic engagement, while heavy reliance on foreign, project-based funding undermines sustainability and long-term planning.

At the same time, important opportunities remain. CSOs continue to play a critical role in defending human rights, supporting victims of abuse, providing legal aid, and sustaining public discourse on governance and constitutionalism, often under difficult conditions. Digital platforms - despite censorship risks - have expanded avenues for citizen engagement, mobilisation, and debate, particularly among youth and urban populations. Government use of social media has also increased transparency in some areas, creating new entry points for dialogue. Policy initiatives such as the draft National AI Strategy, promises of a National AI Policy, and proposals for a Commission for Dialogue and Reconciliation indicate recognition, at least rhetorically, of the need for broader stakeholder engagement.

Legal developments, including the establishment of the Personal Data Protection Commission, offer a foundation for strengthening digital rights and privacy if implemented independently and consistently. Tax incentives and formal consultation mechanisms, though limited, provide additional leverage points for CSOs. Going forward, opportunities lie in strengthening CSO coalitions, diversifying domestic funding, combining online and offline engagement, and leveraging constitutional guarantees, regional mechanisms, and international partnerships to push for accountability. Sustained advocacy and inclusive dialogue remain essential to reversing civic space contraction and translating formal commitments into meaningful democratic practice.

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