



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Trinidad and Tobago

February 2026

Summary

Between November 2025 and February 2026, civil society continued to operate in a generally open civic space, with protests and advocacy visible despite a strongly security-focused policy context. The State of Emergency declared in July 2025 was extended to its constitutional maximum and expired on 31 January 2026, prompting intensified public debate about preventive detention transparency, review processes, and accountability. Security-linked law reform remained prominent, with the Zones of Special Operations (ZOSO) bill defeated in the Senate and bail reforms debated, reinforcing a legislative climate likely to shape rights safeguards and public discourse.

At the same time, state engagement showed openings, including multi-stakeholder consultations on AI readiness (explicitly inviting civil society participation) and accession to the Escazú Agreement (entry into force scheduled for 27 April 2026). Resource sustainability remained uneven and largely project-based, but tax-list delisting and clarified AML/CFT expectations for NPOs may reduce reputational and compliance frictions for cross-border partnerships. Digital space remained accessible, yet official warnings about monitoring and arrest for “destabilising” online conduct, and debate on sharing police footage highlighted growing sensitivity around online speech and accountability practices.

Context

The reporting period (Nov 2025–Feb 2026) was dominated by security policy and its spillover into civic space. The July 2025 State of Emergency was extended to the constitutional maximum and expired on 31 January 2026, with public debate focusing on preventive detention safeguards, oversight and accountability.

Security-related legislative activity continued after expiry: Parliament debated the Bail (Amendment) Bill (which passed in early February) and the Senate defeated the Zones of Special Operations bill, following intense scrutiny of constitutional checks and proportionality. Political and civic dynamics also reflected regional developments. The government announced that it would open national airports for logistical support to the United States military amid escalating U.S.–Venezuela tensions, prompting local debate and civil society mobilisation.

In parallel, Tobago’s sub-national politics drew attention through the Tobago House of Assembly election held on 12 January 2026, with preliminary results issued by the Elections and Boundaries Commission. Civic mobilisation remained visible, including peace vigils, protests linked to Venezuela, and demonstrations calling for police accountability.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Trinidad and Tobago generally respects constitutional freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and is [rated](#) “open” on the CIVICUS Monitor. NGOs, unions, and advocacy groups operate [without formal restrictions](#). Between November 2025 and February 2026, civic mobilisation remained visible, including vigils and [protests on regional security](#) and later [demonstrations calling for police accountability](#) following a fatal police-involved shooting. Media reporting indicates these gatherings generally proceeded, though sometimes amid heightened police presence and public controversy.

On 18 July 2025, the Government declared a new State of Emergency, citing security threats linked to organised criminal networks, and Parliament later extended the measure. During the reporting period, the State of Emergency was [extended again](#) on 31 October 2025, bringing the total duration to the constitutional maximum of six months and setting expiry for 31 January 2026.

The State of Emergency regulations expanded policing powers, including warrantless searches, arrests and preventive detention, although they did not formally suspend constitutional freedoms such as expression, association or peaceful assembly. As the State of Emergency approached expiry, public debate increasingly focused on the operation of preventive detention safeguards, including [delays](#) in detainees receiving Review Tribunal outcomes and the scope of ministerial discretion in communicating those determinations. Public [reporting](#) indicated that 117 individuals detained under Preventive Detention Orders were released when the State of Emergency ended, while authorities stated that some detainees were expected to face criminal charges once emergency detention powers lapsed.

These developments prompted wider discussion about the balance between security measures and civil liberties. While the regulations did not directly restrict civil society activity, the expansion of exceptional policing powers raised concerns among some observers about potential implications for constitutional protections and due process safeguards.

These concerns were reinforced by parallel legislative debates. In January 2026, [the Government introduced the Law Reform \(Zones of Special Operations\) \(Special Security and Community Development Measures\) Bill, 2026](#), which proposed granting extraordinary security powers in designated zones as a successor framework following the State of Emergency. Although framed as a targeted crime-reduction measure, the bill raised questions among legal commentators and civil society actors about the long-term institutionalisation of exceptional policing powers. The Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago [expressed conditional support](#) for the bill's security objectives but called for stronger safeguards, including clearer definitions, time limits and oversight mechanisms, to prevent undue erosion of constitutional rights. The bill ultimately failed to secure the required majority in the Senate following scrutiny from Independent and Opposition Senators, illustrating the continued operation of institutional checks within Trinidad and Tobago's legislative system.

In January 2026, Court of Appeal of Trinidad and Tobago delivered a [decision](#) arising from a case in which police officers had ordered an individual to cease a peaceful one-person protest. The Court affirmed that such interference could amount to a constitutional breach of freedom of thought and expression and protection of the law, and upheld an award of damages to the claimant to vindicate the importance of that right.

This period also saw expression-related concerns linked to transnational pressure points. In November 2025, Fishermen and Friends of the Sea corporate secretary Gary Aboud said his [U.S. visa had been revoked](#) and warned of a chilling effect on civil society advocacy, while the government denied involvement.

Press freedom in Trinidad and Tobago remains largely protected, though not without pressures. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [noted](#) a steep fall in ranking from 6th in 2023 to 24th in 2024, citing rising threats and self-censorship. By 2025, the country had rebounded to 19th globally and first in the Caribbean, demonstrating resilience despite ongoing risks related to politically charged rhetoric, expanded police powers, and selective enforcement of defamation or cybercrime laws.

Fundamental freedoms continue to be shaped by contested rights jurisprudence: anti-sodomy provisions reinstated by the Court of Appeal in March 2025 remained operative, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [urged alignment with international standards](#); no reversal occurred in this reporting period.

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

Although Trinidad and Tobago has generally maintained a supportive legal environment for civil society, the [Non-Profit Organisations Act](#), 2019, has increased regulatory complexity. NGOs must comply with annual reporting and registration requirements aimed at strengthening financial transparency, but a [2025 review](#) found overlapping and inconsistent obligations, particularly burdensome for smaller organisations. While the Registrar General may cancel registration for specific compliance breaches, the Act does not permit deregistration on political or national interest grounds.

On the compliance side, the Financial Intelligence Unit of Trinidad and Tobago issued an official circular confirming that the Miscellaneous Provisions (FATF Compliance) Act, 2025 was fully proclaimed and came into effect on 17 November 2025. The [circular](#) also stated that non-profit organisations were removed from the list of “Listed Businesses,” and that only those meeting the FATF functional definition would be subject to FIUTT risk-based oversight to mitigate exposure to terrorist-financing abuse, potentially reducing compliance burdens and reputational risk for most CSOs.

Civil society organisations operate freely, without new legal restrictions on advocacy, formation, or foreign funding. However, compliance demands have risen due to global anti-money laundering norms. NGOs are expected to maintain clear financial records and may face audits. These measures, while well-intentioned, may burden smaller CSOs lacking technical capacity.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Trinidad and Tobago’s civil society relies on a mix of limited state funding, corporate donations, international grants, and community fundraising. Government subventions exist but are modest and come with [specific conditions](#), which can pose challenges for smaller NGOs. With limited corporate philanthropy and most international grants being project-based and administratively demanding, sufficient and sustainable funding remains a challenge for civil society.

Public and private funding streams in the period remained programmatic rather than core. In early November 2025, The Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services [stated](#) that it had no active financial relationship with the Trinidad and Tobago Red Cross Society due to outstanding audited financial statements, underscoring how compliance can directly affect access to public subventions. The same Ministry reported providing a [TT\\$50,000 grant](#) to Cause An Effect in November 2025. Separately, the United Nations Development Programme reported a [partnership](#) with the Digicel Foundation to award grants supporting entrepreneurship for persons with disabilities, illustrating the continued reliance on small, project-based funding rather than sustained institutional support for civil society organisations.

Following the European Union’s August 2025 announcement of a [phasing down of EU operations](#), uncertainty remained during November 2025–February 2026 about the future of EU support to civil society in Trinidad and Tobago. While existing projects continue, no new

long-term funding has been signalled. Given that the EU has been the primary donor for rights-based and governance-focused programming, its gradual withdrawal is likely to leave a significant funding and advocacy gap for CSOs.

At the same time, organisations supporting Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers continued to face resource pressure amid enforcement-related uncertainty, with media [reporting](#) that fear of deportation contributed to onward movement in November 2025. Despite small gains, civil society's financial landscape remains fragile, as it is highly susceptible to funding cuts, regulatory burdens, and shifting international priorities.

4. State openness and responsiveness

State openness and responsiveness remain mixed. Formal access mechanisms, such as the [FOIA framework](#) and the Office of the Ombudsman of Trinidad and Tobago's role in complaints and review, remain in place, but the practical experience of access and consultation can vary across institutions and issue areas.

In the reporting period, transparency and responsiveness were tested by State of Emergency governance. In early November 2025, media [reporting](#) highlighted attorneys' concerns that detainees held under preventive detention had not received Review Tribunal recommendations. The Tribunal [publicly stressed](#) that, under the Emergency Powers framework, its recommendations are submitted to the Minister, who must then provide the relevant portion to the detainee, highlighting a transparency bottleneck where access to official determinations depends on executive follow-through rather than direct communication. On 12 November 2025, the Minister of Homeland Security [released redacted copies of several recommendations](#) after these concerns were raised publicly.

At the same time, the Government pursued consultation processes and international commitments that may strengthen participatory governance over time. In January 2026, the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence [launched a national survey](#) to inform AI policy development and announced sector-based consultations (19–23 January 2026) explicitly including civil society stakeholders, framing the process around ethics, human rights, inclusion and transparency.

Internationally, Trinidad and Tobago [deposited its instrument of accession to the Escazú Agreement](#) on 27 January 2026, establishing a clearer future framework for public access to environmental information, participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters, thereby strengthening formal channels for civil society engagement in governance. In the security domain, the failure of the [ZOSO bill](#) to secure the required special majority in the upper house in late January demonstrated the continued operation of institutional checks and balances within the legislative process, even amid contentious debate. This outcome also illustrated how parliamentary scrutiny and public commentary can shape security legislation, highlighting the role of institutional processes and external stakeholders in influencing policy outcomes.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Public discourse toward civil society remains mixed: civic voices continue to participate in national debate, but issues linked to security and foreign policy have generated sharper rhetoric and more polarised narratives in the reporting period.

In November 2025, a coalition of groups [held a peace vigil](#) at Woodford Square, warning against escalation in U.S.–Venezuela tensions and calling for dialogue and regional stability; the Joint Trade Union Movement publicly supported the mobilisation. Public debate intensified after Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar [described](#) the vigil as a failure and criticised civil

society groups as “gimmickry and fakeness,” reflecting a delegitimising tone toward some forms of civic mobilisation on geopolitical issues.

Tensions between state actors and elements of civil society had already become visible in mid-2025. In July 2025, relations between state actors and civil society were strained when Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar publicly [criticised](#) the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago (LATT) for defending Independent Senators in a pensions debate. The UNC reinforced this criticism in a statement labelling LATT’s stance ["anti-democratic."](#) Although no formal action followed, the rhetoric framed civil society oversight as partisan interference, signalling a deterioration in civic discourse and risking a chilling effect on independent voices.

Political discourse sharpened further during the January 2026 debate on the proposed Zones of Special Operations framework. Following the Senate’s rejection of the bill, allegations that independent senators had sought personal favours in exchange for votes prompted significant public controversy. The Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago [condemned](#) attacks on the independent senators and urged that grave allegations be substantiated or withdrawn, signalling concern about the effects of polarised rhetoric on democratic institutions and public oversight. The debate also reflected a broader securitised framing in public discourse. Official messaging repeatedly urged the public to “beware of fake news” framed as undermining anti-drug and security operations, reinforcing a narrative that can contribute to sharper social division around dissent and criticism.

At the same time, the government’s rhetoric has reflected a shift toward conservative global ideologies, [criticising “wokeness,”](#) [endorsing “stand your ground”](#) laws, and questioning established human rights principles. While not yet embodied in policy, such statements risk narrowing space for rights-based advocacy and discouraging CSOs from addressing sensitive issues such as equality, migrant rights, and LGBTQI+ protections. Additionally, the tone of media coverage varies by topic. A 2022–2024 analysis of local media revealed that while [reporting on LGBTQI+ issues](#) was largely free of slurs, it often lacked inclusivity.

The security-focused policy climate also raised concerns about uneven social impacts. While the State of Emergency regulations did not formally suspend constitutional freedoms such as expression or peaceful assembly, the expansion of police powers, including warrantless searches and arrests, renewed debate about profiling and disproportionate enforcement. Civil society observers and commentators noted that such measures historically affect some groups more than others, including Afro-Trinidadian youth in urban communities, Venezuelan migrants, and lower-income households.

Regarding migrants and refugees, public attitudes are still mixed and sometimes harsh. While civil society groups like Living Water Community advocate for inclusion, [Freedom House](#) notes that some officials and citizens have made derogatory remarks. Social media allows civil society to speak directly to the public, and during recent protests, many users expressed solidarity with demonstrators.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Digital platforms remain central to public mobilisation and civil society visibility, including around late-2025 peace advocacy and early-2026 policing accountability protests. However, during the reporting period, online speech was increasingly framed by authorities within a national security context, resulting in heightened official attention and raising concerns about potential chilling effects, even where enforcement is justified by threats, harassment, or incitement risks. The [Cyber and Social Media Unit](#) of the Trinidad and Tobago Police continues to track public online content for criminal activity, including human trafficking and terrorism. In November 2025, [the Unit was monitoring online activity](#) and gathering evidence against users making threats, inciting violence, or attempting to “destabilise” the country, and warned that “freedom of speech” would not shield unlawful conduct from prosecution. Reporting in the same period [described at least one arrest](#) using preventive detention powers linked to alleged

online incitement. [Public commentary](#) warned that the government risked “crossing the line” in how enforcement and messaging were being framed, underscoring a contested boundary between legitimate crime prevention and broader deterrence of critical speech.

Digital accountability norms were also debated. In February 2026, the Minister of Homeland Security Roger Alexander [stated](#) that the Government did not intend to introduce legislation restricting the public’s ability to record or share footage of police-involved incidents. At the same time, he encouraged members of the public to first provide such footage to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to assist with investigations, while clarifying that police may obtain privately held CCTV recordings through voluntary submission, consent, or a warrant where there is non-cooperation. While no civil society groups reported targeted cyberattacks in the past year, the threat of phishing, trolling, and misinformation—particularly ahead of elections—persists. Groups like the [Media Institute of the Caribbean](#) are offering digital safety training to NGOs and journalists.

Challenges and Opportunities

Over the next four months, civil society will likely continue to face pressure from a security-driven governance climate, including the risk of renewed emergency-style measures if violence escalates (a possibility publicly signalled as the State of Emergency ended). Implementation and possible litigation around post-SoE security legislation, especially bail reform, may also heighten polarisation around due process and judicial oversight. Continued public mobilisation around police accountability (and official responses to protests) is likely to remain a flashpoint, while online monitoring and enforcement rhetoric describing “destabilising” speech may amplify chilling-effect concerns for activists and citizen commentators.

Opportunities include Escazú accession, with entry into force for Trinidad and Tobago on 27 April 2026, and a near-term regional COP process that may catalyse domestic implementation discourse on access to information, participation and justice in environmental matters. The February 2026 EU tax-list delisting and clarified NPO oversight approach (risk-based, FATF-aligned) may also modestly reduce reputational and compliance friction for cross-border partnerships.

To address risks and utilise openings, civil society will need coordinated legislative advocacy, stronger legal capacity (including strategic litigation readiness), and strengthened digital safety and documentation practices, while sustaining engagement in available consultation spaces.



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