



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment

Snapshot

Zambia

March 2026

Context

Period covered by the report: July 2025-March 2026

Zambia commences the year 2026 with a strong historic democratic legacy rooted in [peaceful transfer of power in 2021](#). These transitions entrenched public expectations for competitive politics, economic reforms, judicial independence, and respect for fundamental freedoms. However, Zambia’s pre-election periods have historically been associated with [heightened political intolerance, selective law enforcement, and securitisation of dissent](#). This is so even with the government being elected on the firm [promise of addressing issues related to restrictive laws like the colonial Public Order Act](#), with only promises in the form of a Public Gathering Bill being drafted. These promises that are yet to materialise four years down the line after being elected.

Following the optimism that accompanied the 2021 political transition, early governance reforms over the subsequent years improved the operating environment for civil society and opposition actors. This year, however, political polarisation has intensified. [The ruling party frequently engages communities through official state visits](#) that blend governance messaging with political mobilisation, benefiting from unrestricted access to public space and state resources.

In contrast, opposition political parties and allied civic actors report increasing reluctance to convene public meetings or rallies due to fear of arrest, harassment, or disruption. Notification requirements under the archaic [Public Order Act of 1955](#) are applied inconsistently, with delays and restrictive conditions discouraging political participation. This imbalance has contributed to a shrinking competitive environment and undermines the principle of political equality.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Fundamental freedoms remain constitutionally protected but continue to be unevenly realised in practice, with rising constraints on expression, assembly, and civic participation. Key evidence/events include:

- [Violent clashes](#) on 6 July 2025, linked to small-scale mining in Chingola and at Kikonge Gold Mine in Mufumbwe, resulting in [deaths, injuries, and arrests](#).
- Ongoing [selective enforcement](#) of the Public Order Act continues to restrict opposition and civic assemblies. On 28 November 2025, the Oasis Forum [postponed its planned peaceful march](#) against Bill 7 after repeated police “advice” not to proceed, opting instead for a Day of Prayer—illustrating how regulatory pressure is used to deter lawful protest.
- Growing [pressure on media freedom](#), including concerns about the potential restrictive use of the Cyber Security Act 2025 and [Cyber Crimes Act 2025](#) to restrict online speech, as was shown in the [arrest](#) of the leader of the opposition party, the Socialist Party of Zambia Fred M’embe (March 2026), for comments made during a radio interview.
- Rising intimidation, surveillance, and informal warnings leading to increased self-censorship among opposition, journalists and activists: on 19 March 2026, Opposition Tense Alliance President Brian Mundubile was arrested and [charged with aiding, abetting and counselling to commit hate speech, contrary to Section 55 read together with Section 65 of the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act](#), illustrating how cyber legislation is increasingly used to pressure and deter critical voices.

These developments reinforce the perception that enjoyment of fundamental freedoms is conditional rather than guaranteed. The uneven application of public order and cyber laws risks shrinking civic space, heightening fear among journalists and activists, and undermining public confidence in democratic processes ahead of the 2026 elections.

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

The legal framework remains formally supportive but practically fragile, shaped by uncertainty over proposed NGO reforms and expanding digital regulation. Key events include:

- The [deferment of the NGO Bill](#) by government announced [in August 2025](#) in order to conduct additional stakeholder discussions enabled [CSOs to engage in consultations](#), however, there is [continued uncertainty](#) surrounding the Bill, contributing to sector anxiety and self-censorship.
- Enactment and implementation of the [Cyber Security Act No. 3 2025](#) and the [Cyber Crimes Act No. 4 2025](#), containing broad surveillance and data-interception powers, [raised concerns](#) over [likely weaponisation](#) to restrict online expression and civic activism.
- Increased [use of cyber-related laws](#) in politically sensitive cases, including arrests of opposition figures, namely [Fred M'membe](#), leader of the Socialist Party (SP) and [Brian Mundubile](#), leader of the Tonse Alliance, in early March 2026.

Legal ambiguity and the broad scope of cyber legislation increase compliance burdens and discourage open political engagement. CSOs working on governance, human rights, and electoral accountability face heightened regulatory risk, potentially affecting their operations and ability to contribute meaningfully to public debate.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Civil society resourcing is increasingly constrained by economic pressures and shifts in donor modalities, reducing financial flexibility and operational capacity. Key evidence during the research period include:

- Rising [operational costs](#) driven by inflation, fuel prices, transport expenses, and foreign exchange fluctuations.
- Continued effects of reduced funding from some major development cooperation partners (e.g., [USAID, PEPFAR](#)) across governance, [health](#), and accountability sectors.
- Shift by the United States toward [government-to-government funding](#), reducing direct access to flexible civil society resources.
- Increased competition for limited grant opportunities and greater reliance on short-term or sub-granted funding.
- Stronger reliance on CSO coalitions, such as the [CSO Alliance Against Bill 7](#) and the Zambia CSO Coalition on Digital Rights, to sustain advocacy.

Resource insecurity undermines CSO independence and long-term sustainability, especially for organisations working on democratic governance. Reduced flexibility diminishes the ability

of civic actors to respond quickly to emerging issues or sustain election-related engagement, weakening the broader enabling environment.

4. State openness and responsiveness

State–civil society engagement remains formal but inconsistent, with openness narrowing notably around politically sensitive reforms. Government consultations on constitutional reforms in 2025 lacked meaningful feedback mechanisms or influence over outcomes. Key events include:

- Passage of the [Access to Information Act No.24 on December 2023](#), offering potential for transparency, although some civil society [analyses indicate](#) that its impact will rely on robust implementation by the Human Rights Commission.
- [Appointments](#) of prominent CSO and FBO leaders to the Human Rights Commission in July 2025 sparked [debates](#) over the independence and neutrality of the commission and its ability to objectively address human rights concerns.
- On 22 November, 2025, the Zambia Police issued an official caution through a press statement to the Catholic Church and the Oasis Forum regarding the planned peaceful demonstration, prompting the [Oasis Forum to replace](#) a planned march with [a national prayer](#) gathering held on 28 November 2025.
- On 23 November 2025, the government [extended invitations](#) to selected civil society actors for consultations, including meetings at State House, signalling an official willingness to engage. Civil society actors have since reported that these engagements often lacked clear follow-up, feedback mechanisms, or tangible influence on policy outcomes, leading to frustration and questions about the authenticity of state openness.
- A [meeting](#) between Oasis Forum leadership and the President at State House occurred on 28th November 2025, yet follow-through [weakened](#) afterwards.
- [Breakdown in dialogue](#) between the state and the [Oasis Forum](#) (comprising key civil society and faith-based organisations) during the debate on the Constitutional Amendment Bill 7.
- Passage and assenting of [Constitutional Amendment No. 13 of 2025](#) on 18 December 2025 following limited public consultation, disregarded [civil society concerns](#) over inadequate public consultation, and a June 2025 Constitutional Court [ruling in the case](#) brought by Hon. Munir Zulu and Celestine Mukandila, affirming inadequate public participation in the amendment process.
- Pre-election pressures in early 2026 further constrained responsiveness to civic input.

While consultative structures exist, inconsistent responsiveness undermines trust and casts doubt on the state’s commitment to participatory governance. Civic actors increasingly perceive engagement as symbolic rather than substantive, leading to cautious participation and reduced influence over key reforms.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Public discourse is increasingly polarised, with civic actors facing reputational risks and accusations of partisanship, particularly around governance and electoral accountability. Key evidence and/or events include:

- Growing sentiments framing CSOs as politically biased or foreign-influenced, especially those engaging in constitutional reform advocacy.
- Increased online and public criticism toward organisations promoting accountability and electoral integrity.

Erosion of public trust in CSOs diminishes their legitimacy and hampers their watchdog role. Heightened reputational risks discourage critical engagement and may limit civic participation in key democratic processes, narrowing civic space.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Digital civic space has become more restrictive, characterised by heightened regulation, surveillance concerns, and increased risk of selective enforcement of cyber-laws. Key evidence includes:

- Enforcement of cybercrime laws in politically sensitive cases, including [the arrest](#) of opposition leader, Dr. Fred M'membe on 2 March 2026, under the Cyber Crimes Act.
- Cyber laws [perceived by opposition party leaders](#) as disproportionately applied to dissenting voices, contributing to digital self-censorship.
- Ongoing national debate following the President's [decision](#) to return proposed CCTV legislation to Parliament, reflecting concerns about surveillance oversight.
- [Limited data protection](#) safeguards reinforce public mistrust of digital platforms.

The digital environment is increasingly viewed as unsafe for political expression and civic engagement. Expanded surveillance risks and a lack of clarity in cyber regulations undermine online organising, limit public debate, and weaken civil society's capacity to mobilise effectively ahead of the 2026 elections.

Challenges and Opportunities

The convergence of constitutional reform, proposed amendments to electoral laws, boundary delimitation, and a tightening of civic space presents serious, interlinked challenges to Zambia's democratic trajectory in 2026.

Civil society organisations face heightened risks of intimidation, legal uncertainty, funding contraction, and restricted access to public and digital spaces. The selective enforcement of public order regulations, combined with the operationalisation of cyber laws and prolonged uncertainty surrounding the NGO Bill, has created an environment in which civic actors increasingly self-censor, scale back mobilisation, or avoid politically sensitive engagement altogether. These pressures are particularly acute for grassroots organisations, women-led initiatives, and election-focused CSOs, whose work relies heavily on physical outreach, public convening, and digital mobilisation.

Electoral reforms implemented close to the polls, including boundary delimitation overseen by the Electoral Commission of Zambia, further complicate the advocacy environment. Limited transparency, compressed timelines, and weak public consultation processes heighten the risk that reforms are perceived as politically motivated, undermining public trust. For CSOs, this poses the challenge of engaging in highly technical electoral issues while operating under legal and political constraints that restrict access to decision-makers and expose organisations to reputational and regulatory risks.

Despite these challenges, the 2026 context also presents strategic opportunities for advocacy and civic action.

- Coalition-based approaches remain among the most viable pathways to influence, enabling CSOs to pool resources, share risk, and amplify collective messaging. Alliances focused on electoral integrity, constitutionalism, digital rights, and freedom

- of assembly can help counter fragmentation and reduce the vulnerability of individual organisations.
- Strategic litigation and legal advocacy, while slow, continue to provide an important check on executive overreach and can serve as a deterrent against the normalisation of restrictive practices.
 - There are also opportunities to leverage institutional entry points, including oversight bodies and formal engagement platforms, even where responsiveness is limited. Engagement with bodies such as the Human Rights Commission, parliamentary committees, and electoral stakeholders can support evidence-based advocacy and documentation of rights violations.
 - Similarly, while constrained, frameworks such as the Open Government Partnership still offer a basis for demanding transparency, public participation, and accountability against stated government commitments.
 - The digital space, though increasingly surveilled, remains a critical arena for civic engagement and innovation. With appropriate investment in digital security, literacy, and adaptive communication strategies, CSOs can continue to reach citizens, counter misinformation, and promote voter education, particularly among youth and urban populations. Creative, arts-based, and community-driven approaches also offer alternative avenues for civic engagement where traditional mobilisation is restricted.

Going forward, civil society advocacy in Zambia will need to be proactive, deliberate, strategic, coordinated, and adaptive, balancing engagement with principled resistance. Priorities include sustained monitoring and documentation of developments in electoral and civic space, proactive legal preparedness, donor engagement to mitigate funding risks, and deliberate efforts to protect vulnerable activists and organisations. How effectively CSOs navigate this complex environment in 2026 will not only shape the credibility of the elections but will also influence the longer-term resilience of Zambia's democratic and civic ecosystem beyond the electoral cycle.

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