



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# Enabling Environment

## Snapshot

El Salvador

May 2026

## Context

Period covered by the report: September 2025-May 2026

The environment for civil society in El Salvador has remained unchanged since [the baseline snapshot](#), continuing on a downward trajectory, marked by the consolidation of executive power and the expansion of legal and administrative restrictions on civic activity. This period follows [the re-election of President Nayib Bukele](#) in February 2024, which was made possible by a controversial [ruling by the Constitutional Chamber in 2021 \(1-2021\)](#) allowing immediate re-election, and by [the constitutional reforms of July–August 2025](#) which formally abolished presidential term limits and permitted indefinite re-election.

International monitoring bodies have documented a marked democratic and civic backsliding. In its [Freedom in the World 2026 report](#), Freedom House identified El Salvador as one of the countries with the greatest global decline in civil liberties in 2025, with a five-point drop, attributed to the erosion of checks and balances, restrictions on association and expression, and the entrenchment of the state of emergency. Meanwhile, the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) downgraded El Salvador’s civic space from ‘Obstructed’ to ‘Repressed’ in December 2025—the lowest rating the country has ever received—citing the systematic persecution of journalists, human rights defenders and civil society organisations. For example, the selective arrests of human rights defenders, the forced exile of at least 53 journalists and the closure of long-standing organisations demonstrate that, although some spaces formally persist, their exercise is limited by fear of economic, administrative or judicial reprisals.

A key factor in this regression has been the [state of emergency](#), first declared in March 2022 and continuously renewed for over four years, still in force in 2026. Whilst the government attributes [historically low homicide rates](#) to the measure, it suspends fundamental constitutional guarantees, such as due process, freedom of association and the privacy of communications, thereby significantly limiting civic mobilisation and protest.

In June 2025, the government enacted the Foreign Agents Act (LAEX), which requires organisations and individuals receiving foreign funding to register, and imposes a 30% tax on foreign transfers. Widely [criticised](#) by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and [by international civil society groups](#), the law is seen as a tool for financial strangulation, surveillance and the selective sanctioning of critical organisations. Other regulatory reforms, including [amendments to the Municipal Code](#), have extended similar registration and oversight requirements to Community Development Associations (ADESCOS), further reducing civic space at the community level.

As a result, although some formal channels for civil society participation remain, exercising these rights in practice has become increasingly risky. [CIVICUS](#) and [press freedom organisations](#) have denounced the selective detention of activists, the forced exile of dozens of journalists, the closure of organisations, and widespread self-censorship driven by fear of economic, administrative or judicial reprisals. Overall, these developments illustrate a civic environment that exists in name only but is severely restricted in practice, with significantly higher costs of participation for independent civil society actors.

## 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Over the past 12 months, respect for fundamental freedoms in El Salvador has continued to deteriorate, and the freedoms of association, [expression](#) and peaceful assembly are increasingly restricted in practice, despite remaining [constitutionally protected](#) under Articles 6 and 7. The overall trend reflects the consolidation of legal, financial and coercive measures that make civic participation more costly and normalise surveillance, self-censorship and the criminalisation of dissent as reported in the [previous assessment](#). The [state of emergency](#), first declared in March 2022 and renewed monthly, remains in force, suspending due process and freedom of assembly. Human Rights Watch [documented](#) arbitrary detentions, intimidation of demonstrators and surveillance of community leaders under this regime.

The [deployment of police or military forces at peaceful demonstrations](#) — alongside the recording of attendees' names and faces — has become standard practice, indicating state surveillance of public activity; during this period, Human Rights Watch [reported an increase](#) in government attacks against journalists, human rights defenders, activists and trade union leaders in El Salvador. Key developments during the reporting period included:

- Between 2025 and 2026, high-profile cases of political persecution continued despite numerous statements on the matter. In the case of Ruth López, an anti-corruption lawyer and director of Cristosal's Anti-Corruption Unit, on 5 December 2025, at the request of the Public Prosecutor's Office, [the court extended the preliminary investigation period](#) by a further six months, prolonging her pre-trial detention for the same period. The same occurred in the case of [Enrique Anaya](#), who [was arrested](#) after publicly [criticising the government](#) and López's detention.
- In December 2025, community leader José Ángel Pérez and environmental lawyer Alejandro Henríquez [were released](#) after spending seven months in pre-trial detention and being forced to accept charges of public disorder in summary proceedings proposed by the Public Prosecutor's Office, a strategy that has been used in other cases of political persecution. The sentence imposes a ban on participating in protests or demonstrations for a period of three years.
- In March 2026, a Group of Independent Experts [concluded](#) that there are reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity may be occurring in the context of the prolonged state of emergency, including the politically motivated persecution of members of civil society organisations.
- In 2025–2026, three cases of transnational persecution were documented in which the Salvadoran government and judicial authorities [turned to Interpol](#) to pursue political targets abroad; in all cases, the judicial authorities of the host countries [dismissed the cases](#) and released the individuals due to the clearly political nature of the charges.
- In 2025, the Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES) [documented 57 attacks](#) against journalists, including surveillance, harassment, judicial intimidation and the forced exile of at least 53 journalists, whilst several community radio stations cancelled call-in or complaints programmes to reduce the risk.
- In December 2025, the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) downgraded El Salvador's civic space rating from 'Obstructed' to 'Repressed', citing systematic harassment, the detention of activists and journalists, and restrictive laws targeting civil society.
- In January 2026, in the [community of Francisco Ángulo](#), residents protesting against the installation of an unauthorised landfill site clashed with prosecutors, police and armed security forces; community members reported intimidation and coercion to facilitate the project's progress.
- In February 2026, the Citizens' Group for the Decriminalisation of Abortion [announced its dissolution](#), citing constant intimidation, fear of prosecution and an unworkable operating environment for the defence of feminist rights. This followed a wave of closures or suspensions of CSOs, such as [the forced closure](#) and exile of [APES](#) in September 2025, [Cristosal](#), [the](#)

[Foundation for Studies on the Application of Law](#) (FESPAD), the Foundation for the Development of Social Sciences ([FUDECSO](#)) and [the Böll Foundation](#).

- In March 2026, Communities of Faith and Action (COFOA) [announced its closure](#) after government officials reportedly recommended to the Apostolic Nunciature that the organisation cease its activities, raising concerns about possible violations of religious freedom and freedom of association.

Taken together, these events point to a systemic narrowing of civic space rather than isolated violations, suggesting that civic space in El Salvador has shifted from restriction to repression. Civil society organisations face increased financial, legal and physical risks, leading to closures, [exile](#) and widespread [self-censorship](#). Surveillance and law enforcement responses to peaceful dissent have drastically reduced safe participation in public life, particularly for [journalists](#), [feminists](#), community movements and human rights defenders. Whilst formal rights remain intact on paper, exercising them has become increasingly unsafe and unpredictable in practice.

## 2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

Although Article 7 of the Constitution and the 1996 Law on Non-Profit Associations and Foundations (LASFL) remain formally enabling and continue to guarantee freedom of association and historically facilitate registration, recent practices show delays in procedures, the revocation of public benefit status and growing administrative barriers. As reported in the [2025 snapshot](#), the legal framework for civil society has shifted from being formally enabling to becoming increasingly restrictive and dissuasive. New provisions—particularly under the [Foreign Agents Act](#) (Foreign Agents Act – LAEX) and the reforms to the Municipal Code—introduce parallel registration regimes, punitive financial controls and broad discretionary powers. These discourage registration, limit operations and expose CSOs to arbitrary interference, restrict access to funding and undermine the independence of civil society organisations.

The LAEX introduces a parallel and coercive registration regime, as Articles 3 and 8 require all organisations receiving foreign funding to register with the Register of Foreign Agents (RAEX) under a special regime as ‘foreign agents’, a designation that stigmatises civil society organisations and subjects them to more intense state oversight, thereby undermining their independence. The authorities retain the power to refuse, refuse to renew or revoke registration, which, in practice, subjects the legal status of CSOs to discretionary control. By requiring registration and granting the authorities [broad discretionary powers](#) to sanction or suspend organisations, the law consolidates state control over civil society. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has [expressed concern](#) that these measures risk stigmatising and, in practice, stifling civil society, whilst violating the right to freedom of association.

The law also increases restrictions on activities that directly limit civic action, as Article 9 prohibits vaguely defined ‘political or other purposes’, allowing the authorities to classify advocacy, accountability or rights-based work as illegal, thereby reducing the scope of permitted civil society participation.

Furthermore, the financial provisions of the LAEX significantly undermine sustainability, as Article 11 imposes a 30% tax on foreign funding, which reduces operational resources, deters donors and creates uncertainty due to the possibility of selective or inconsistent enforcement.

The LAEX, in Articles 8 and 9, as well as its implementing regulations in Article 9, also introduce strict disclosure obligations regarding funding sources, activities and financial flows, which increases the administrative burden (particularly for small organisations) and allows for intrusive state oversight of CSO operations, with implications for operational confidentiality and autonomy. The sanctions regime under the LAEX increases the risk of arbitrary enforcement, as Article 19 imposes heavy fines (between \$150,000 and \$200,000), whilst Article 7 (j) allows for the suspension or revocation of legal personality without clear procedural safeguards, thereby undermining legal certainty. This increases the scope for arbitrary enforcement and the deterrence of civic action.

Reforms were also introduced to the Municipal Code to establish a register similar to that of the LAEX, aimed at local community development organisations; their implementation has reduced the enabling environment for civil society by centralising authority, increasing compliance burdens and restricting grassroots participation. Transferring the registration of community organisations (ADESCOS) to the National Registry Centre reduces local flexibility and undermines community-led organisation, whilst strict requirements—such as formal accounting, audited financial statements and fees—place a disproportionate burden on small organisations with limited capacity. At the same time, Article 9(a) of the LAEX imposes restrictions on unregistered groups that effectively exclude informal actors, thereby limiting entry points for participation and diminishing the diversity and vitality of civil society. As [Cristosal](#) pointed out, without registration an association cannot operate, and the restrictive framework governing permitted activities could be used to penalise advocacy work, leading to self-censorship.

There remains no protection for CSOs against interference, as there is no specific legal mechanism to protect them from arbitrary intervention, whilst the state of emergency continues to permit surveillance and restrict constitutional guarantees, thereby exacerbating vulnerability. The interaction between the LAEX and the general regulatory frameworks for CSOs creates a regulatory burden at various levels, in which compliance with both registration and financial disclosure regimes leads to over-regulation and administrative duplication, further limiting the functioning of CSOs.

Key developments relating to the legal and regulatory framework during the reporting period were as follows:

- During 2025, several long-standing organisations — including the Foundation for Studies on the Application of Law (FESPAD) and FUDECOS — had, [according to reports, scaled back or ceased their operations](#), citing the impossibility of complying with the requirements of the LAEX and mounting financial pressures. This followed [Cristosal's announcement in July](#) of its departure from the country due to increased harassment and legal threats.
- In December 2025, the Municipal Code was amended to establish a centralised register within the Ministry of the Interior for Community Development Associations (ADESCO), which had previously been registered at municipal level; this increases the administrative burden and hinders the functioning of these organisations, which are characterised by their small size and limited territorial scope.
- In March 2026, the organisation [Comunidades de Fe en Acción](#), with almost two decades of community work in El Salvador, ceased operations, denouncing undue pressure from the Salvadoran government on the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, suggesting that the closure of this organisation was linked to the implementation of the LAEX.

In general, these events highlight a progressive shift in regulation towards control, in which legal provisions function less as facilitators and more as instruments of restriction. Although registration remains technically possible, the combination of redundant procedures, fines,

vague restrictions on activities and unchecked sanctioning powers creates a framework that is both dissuasive and selectively enforced. This disproportionately affects cause-oriented, independent and smaller organisations, forcing some to close, scale back their activities or operate informally. The result is an enabling environment which, whilst formally intact, is substantially restrictive, undermining pluralism, weakening the independence of civil society and reducing the space for accountability and participation.

### 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Civil society organisations have faced a financial stranglehold, resulting from a combination of [restrictive laws](#), [stigmatisation campaigns](#) and the withdrawal of [US cooperation](#), which directly affects the sustainability of organisations that depend on these funds. Access to resources has become increasingly limited and politicised, and legal, fiscal and political developments combine to undermine financial sustainability, deter donors and deepen dependence on state-controlled processes. Furthermore, the LAEX, through the 30% tax, drastically reduces the resources available for projects and creates legal uncertainty that increases the risk of funds being taxed or frozen. It also imposes new requirements for accessing cooperation funds; some donors [require proof of exemption from the 30% tax](#) in order to apply for funding, which increases dependence on the state's deadlines and goodwill. As a result, the law has [diminished the interest of many donors](#) in funding projects by organisations in El Salvador.

The [authorities routinely discredit](#) civil society organisations, particularly those receiving international funding, which severely restricts their financial sustainability and limits the work of those who conduct audits and demand accountability.

These developments create a financial environment that is both restrictive and exclusionary, in which access to resources is heavily conditioned by state control, legal uncertainty and political rhetoric. The combined effect of taxation, donor withdrawal and reduced public funding disproportionately affects smaller, grassroots and advocacy-oriented organisations, whilst larger or less critical entities are able to adapt. This results in an increasingly narrow and unequal civic space, in which financial constraints not only limit operations but also discourage independent advocacy and weaken accountability functions, thereby undermining the sustainability and diversity of civil society.

### 4. Open and responsive state

The state's openness towards civil society is extremely limited and increasingly exclusionary, characterised by systematic marginalisation, hostility towards critical voices and entrenched opacity, leaving little room for meaningful participation or accountability.

Relations between the state and civil society are virtually non-existent, as the government adopts a strategy centred on the exclusion, surveillance and criminalisation of critical organisations, whilst selectively reserving spaces and resources for actors aligned with official positions. The press and human rights organisations have been the hardest hit, as highlighted by the [Chapultepec Index](#) and [Reporters Without Borders](#), in addition to the numerous cases of [political persecution](#) carried out against critical voices. [Mass redundancies in the public sector](#) and the weakening of community networks also reduce the capacity for mobilisation and the reporting of human rights violations.

Access to information remains severely restricted, with an increasingly co-opted Institute for Access to Public Information (IAIP), [a decline in transparency on public websites](#) and an increase in public information [classified as confidential](#) without justification, the closure of organisations that monitored access to information, and new administrative barriers that discourage public oversight.

These dynamics point to a closed and unresponsive state environment, in which formal mechanisms for dialogue and transparency exist but are undermined in practice by political control and institutional weakening. The result is a civic space in which accountability mechanisms are eroded, participation is discouraged, and critical civil society actors are systematically excluded, significantly weakening democratic governance.

## 5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

Public discourse on civil society is highly polarised and increasingly hostile, with [systematic stigmatisation driven by the state](#) that shapes public perceptions, legitimises repression and undermines the legitimacy of civic actors. These practices have detrimental effects, create a hostile environment and expose human rights defenders to additional risks. Official narratives constantly delegitimise civil society, describing organisations as politically biased or destabilising actors, accused of having links to opposition political parties, of receiving foreign funding for [destabilising purposes](#), and of operating as coup plotters or [‘thugs disguised as NGOs’](#). This reinforces narratives that frame CSOs as threats rather than legitimate stakeholders. High-level officials, including the president, actively amplify this stigmatisation, using public statements and social media to discredit CSOs and human rights defenders.

This stigmatising rhetoric escalates to the point of criminalisation, in which the defence of human rights [is portrayed as ‘defending criminals’](#) or gang members, particularly in the context of the state of emergency. This normalisation, [repeated by government officials](#), seeks to instil the idea that those who denounce rights violations are, in some way, on the side of criminals, thereby discrediting them in the eyes of the public. Key events during the reporting period were:

- In March 2026, during [the IACHR hearings](#) in Guatemala, the government rejected allegations of rights violations, and the president [publicly accused CSOs](#) of defending criminals.
- In April 2026, following testimony by CSOs and media representatives before [the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission](#) of the United States Congress, officials, including the president, and [like-minded media outlets](#) responded with coordinated attacks and accusations against the participating civil society representatives and media, accusing them of defending gang members, without addressing the allegations of serious human rights violations that occurred under the state of emergency.

This sustained pattern of delegitimation has created a hostile political culture that normalises attacks on civil society and undermines its public credibility. The result is an environment conducive to increased self-censorship, heightened risks for defenders, and eroded public trust in independent civic actors, which ultimately weakens civic participation and accountability.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

The digital environment is becoming increasingly unsafe and is being used as a weapon against civil society, characterised by systematic online harassment, coordinated smear campaigns and digital gender-based violence, with limited protection mechanisms. Public officials and sympathetic media outlets actively use digital platforms to discredit civil society organisations, contributing to a climate of online hostility and attacks on reputation. Coordinated online harassment campaigns suggest the possible involvement of organised actors, including pro-government networks or groups linked to the state. In particular:

- According to data from [DataReportal](#), there are over 11 million active mobile connections, equivalent to 174% of the population; however, internet users number approximately 4.90 million, meaning internet penetration stands at 76.8% and 23.2% of the population remains “offline”.
- During the period under review, no internet shutdowns or similar measures were reported.
- Between 2020 and October 2025, [more than 2,000 digital attacks against](#) women human rights defenders were documented, representing 62% of the total attacks documented by IM-Defensoras, which points to the possible use of state-funded trolls and/or anti-rights groups. The majority of these digital attacks (85%) involve messages containing gender-based violence.
- Journalists, activists and critics face constant digital stigmatisation, and documented cases highlight social media as the primary tool for harassment and delegitimisation. A report by Cristosal describes [20 emblematic cases](#), showing that the majority involve verbal attacks via social media.

Community radio stations report digital and reputational attacks, aimed at deterring news coverage and instilling fear among journalists. [APES states](#) that community radio stations have recorded a persistent pattern of attacks aimed at limiting their news coverage and instilling fear among their teams. This pattern includes [harassment and defamation](#) by social media users as a form of symbolic violence, which undermines individuals’ credibility within their communities and discourages public participation.

These trends contribute to a digitally hostile civic environment, in which online spaces are used as tools of intimidation and control rather than participation. The result is increased self-censorship, greater risks—especially for women defenders—and a reduced capacity for civil society to engage safely in digital advocacy and discourse.

## Challenges and Opportunities

The outlook for civic space is increasingly restrictive, with shrinking space and growing risks, although continuous monitoring and adaptation offer limited opportunities to sustain civic participation.

- The prolonged state of emergency, in place for four years, continues to facilitate [arbitrary detentions](#), [the criminalisation of protests](#) and a general climate of fear.
- The implementation of the LAEX is still at an early stage, requiring close monitoring of the outcomes of registration, refusals, exemptions, sanctions and cases of organisation closure. More importantly, attention must be paid to measures of persecution and surveillance that may arise from the implementation of this law.
- The emerging risks of increased surveillance and persecution linked to the application of the LAEX may further limit the operations and independence of civil society.

- It is likely that 2026 will see an increase in censorship and self-censorship, particularly in relation to sensitive issues such as corruption, state violence and emergency measures.
- Trends in protest participation and public engagement are expected to decline, reflecting heightened risks and reduced civic trust.
- Projections for 2026 indicate a further narrowing of civic space, including an increase in the exile of defenders and journalists, the closure of organisations due to financial pressure, and a greater institutionalisation of repression.

These trends point to a continuing deterioration of the enabling environment, with civic space becoming increasingly closed, securitised and subject to financial constraints. Whilst civil society may continue to adapt and operate under pressure, the trajectory suggests lower participation, greater risk and further erosion of pluralism and accountability, limiting the prospects for an open and inclusive civic sphere.

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