



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# Enabling Environment Snapshot

**Jamaica**

**May 2026**

## Context

Reporting period: August 2025 to May 2026

Jamaica's enabling environment for civil society is supported by a democratic framework and protected by the [2011 Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms](#). The country held [general elections](#) on 3 September 2025, with the incumbent Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) securing a third term under Prime Minister Andrew Holness (approximately 35 seats vs. 28 for the PNP).

According to the UNDP's recently launched Democracy and [Development Report](#) 2026, Jamaica maintains its position as the [top-ranked country](#) in the Caribbean for electoral democracy. The report highlights the region as the most democratic among developing areas, while noting growing pressures on democratic institutions.

Political tensions have eased somewhat after the election, but risks of intimidation, disinformation, and reputational attacks remain for advocacy-focused groups.

A Joint Select Committee was convened pre-general election, focused on reviewing constitutional amendments (including republic-related reforms), with Civil Society Organisation (CSO) input limited to written submissions. Efforts are being made from civil society, including the media, to encourage the government to resume the [constitutional reform process](#) given its importance to areas such as citizen participation, press freedom, broad governance, and fundamental rights and freedoms.

## 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Jamaica's [Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, 2011](#) guarantees freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. During the reporting period (August 2025 – May 2026), these rights continued to be generally respected in law and practice, with no major legislative regression. However, CSOs and journalists experienced notable constraints, primarily through official rhetoric, online harassment, and economic pressures that, in some cases, amount to indirect violations or negative effects on the full enjoyment of these rights.

The right to freedom of expression remains robust overall. According to [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)](#), Jamaica ranked 26th out of 180 on the 2026 World Press Freedom Index (score 75.87). This position is stable compared to 2025 (also 26th) but represents a slight decline from 24th place in 2024. Despite this strong overall ranking, challenges persist in the economic sphere. Media houses face significant funding difficulties, heavy reliance on government and private advertising, and high staff attrition rates, which [threaten the long-term sustainability](#) of legacy media outlets and press freedom.

Nevertheless, CSOs reported significant constraints. In early 2026, Minister of National Security Dr. Horace Chang accused Jamaicans for Justice (JFJ) of ["living off blood money"](#) in the context of their advocacy on police accountability and fatal shootings. JFJ sought legal advice and stated it would not be intimidated. This high-level stigmatisation, which was not retracted despite repeated calls from [civil society organisations](#) and the church, constitutes a clear deterrent effect on freedom of expression.

Earlier patterns of labelling CSOs as “criminal enablers” or “political” (notably in 2024–2025) have continued in [targeted rhetoric](#), especially around security and governance issues, sometimes triggering online harassment. Organisations, such as [Jamaica Accountability Meter Portal](#), have indicated that their public statements have been misrepresented by the media, which has resulted in public backlash and negative commentary. In April 2026, debates around the National Reconstruction and Resilience Act (NaRRA) Bill saw CSOs (including JFJ and the Jamaica Environment Trust) criticised, with some public discourse questioning whether certain groups act as “[political proxies](#).” This undermines freedom of expression by creating a climate of fear and self-censorship.

There were no reported restrictions or prohibitions on peaceful assemblies or protests by CSOs during the reporting period. Freedom of assembly was upheld in practice, with public demonstrations and civil society gatherings (including those related to constitutional reform and environmental issues) proceeding without state interference.

The right to freedom of association is legally protected and generally exercised without direct state obstruction. CSOs continued to operate openly, form coalitions, and engage in joint advocacy. However, the pattern of senior government officials publicly stigmatising specific organisations (particularly those receiving international funding) has undermined the enabling environment for association. The “blood money” accusation and repeated framing of watchdog CSOs as politically aligned or adversarial created reputational risks that indirectly constrain organisational legitimacy, membership recruitment, and partnerships.

While there has been no regression in the legal framework protecting these three fundamental freedoms, stagnation with targeted setbacks occurred in practice. The most serious challenges relate to freedom of expression, where rhetorical attacks by high-level officials and resulting online harassment have created a hostile environment for critical CSOs and journalists. Economic vulnerabilities in the media sector further threaten the sustainability of independent journalism. In contrast, freedom of assembly remained stable and unrestricted.

## 2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

Jamaica’s legal framework supports civil society through the 2011 Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms and the [Charities Act](#), which governs CSO registration with clear but sometimes cumbersome requirements. The Charities Act’s [regulations](#) were updated in 2022. The framework is conducive, allowing CSOs to operate freely, with no significant restrictive legislation introduced in 2024–2025.

The framework generally protects operational independence. However, Section 15 of the Charities Act 2013 requires applicants to demonstrate that their objectives align strictly with the predefined charitable purposes in the First Schedule (such as relief of poverty, advancement of education, religion, health, or human rights), which can limit registration for purely advocacy-oriented or non-traditional CSOs. While there are no prohibitive barriers to formation, Section 15 can still pose challenges for groups whose objectives do not fit neatly within the prescribed categories.

There is no mandatory registration for all CSOs. Unregistered and grassroots groups, including those led by marginalised communities and LGBTQI+ organisations, are legally allowed to operate freely.

Compliance with the U.S. Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA) — incorporated into Jamaican law through the [Revenue Administration \(Amendment\) Act 2015](#) and reflected in the Charities Regulations 2022 (particularly Part III on enhanced due diligence and donor verification requirements) — imposes significant administrative burdens. Smaller CSOs must meet complex due diligence, reporting, and beneficial ownership disclosure requirements (aligned with AML/CFT standards under the Proceeds of Crime Act). These obligations strain limited resources and can indirectly constrain autonomy, particularly for grassroots and advocacy-focused groups. Streamlining registration processes and reducing compliance burdens would strengthen the enabling environment for civil society, particularly for grassroots groups advocating for marginalised communities.

In April 2026, [civil society urged broad consultation](#) on a proposed new Non-Profit Organisations (NPO) Act expected in October 2026, aimed at modernising the regulatory framework for thousands of organisations. This could introduce updated governance, transparency, and compliance standards. Streamlining and risk-based approaches (vs. overly burdensome ones) remain priorities for grassroots groups.

### 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for Jamaican CSOs is moderately accessible, primarily through international donors like USAID, the European Union, and private foundations, with limited local contributions. The absence of restrictions on foreign funding supports operations, but smaller CSOs face sustainability challenges due to reliance on external sources. The reduction in funding from the United States continues to impact Jamaican CSOs, [leading to the closure](#) of some smaller NGOs and financial struggles for other [CSOs that continue to face sustainability issues](#). For example, [JFJ reported](#) a notable reduction in financial support in 2025 during its annual general meeting held in April 2026.

Registered charities under the Charities Act 2013 benefit from tax exemptions on income, tax-deductible donations, and relief from General Consumption Tax (GCT) and customs duties. However, many CSOs are registered as companies but not as charities and therefore do not benefit from these tax exemptions. Registration as a charity also provides access to reduced fees from platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft. While registration certificates (as companies) are generally required by commercial banks to open accounts and by many international donors to disburse funds, this creates practical barriers for unregistered and grassroots organisations, particularly those led by marginalised groups.

Broader discussions on CSO financial resilience occurred at the [Inaugural Caribbean CSO Conference](#) (24-27 February 2026, hosted in Jamaica), convened by the Canadian-funded Local Engagement and Action Fund (LEAF) and the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) Basic Needs Trust Fund. The conference focused on funding and sustainability, technology/AI, operational excellence, and advocacy, highlighting the need for long-term institutional support, domestic resource mobilisation, and reduced reliance on short-term project grants. The discussions among CSOs indicated that funding remains predominantly short-term and project-based, with limited flexible or core support. This restricts CSOs' ability to cover overhead costs, retain skilled staff, and pursue long-term strategic objectives, while also limiting their flexibility to respond to emergencies. Access to funding is not fully equitable as larger and more established CSOs tend to secure most grants, while organisations led by or serving marginalised populations, including women, youth, and rural communities face greater barriers due to limited capacity and stricter compliance requirements.

Minister Chang's "[blood money](#)" accusations explicitly link foreign/international funding of watchdog CSOs to undermining police/government efforts, framing it negatively and suggesting implicit competition for resources. This rhetoric has drawn criticism for potentially delegitimising legitimate donor-supported work (noting irony, as some donors also fund government programmes).

There are some positive notes, which include [new climate/resilience opportunities](#), such as the EFJ-UNDP MOU (March 2026) for scaled CSO financing in ecosystem restoration, and events like the inaugural Caribbean CSO Conference in Jamaica (Feb 2026) focusing on financial resilience, domestic resource mobilisation, and long-term sustainability. In his 12 May 2026 Sectoral Debate presentation, Minister of Health and Wellness Dr. Christopher Tufton announced a J\$500 million CARE Fund over the next two years to support community-based organisations, faith-based groups, and CSOs working on non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention, family health, and community resilience. A call for proposals is scheduled for 15 June 2026 ([JIS Announcement](#)).

Local/private sector support remains supplementary for civil society. Several CSOs have indicated that they are struggling with efforts at fundraising given no dedicated team members for this role. Additionally, more advocacy focused organisations have greater difficulty in fundraising.

## 4. Open and responsive state

Government-civil society interaction in Jamaica is limited and often lacks depth. The [Open Government Partnership \(2024–2026\)](#) includes commitments to justice and human rights, but actual implementation on agreed priorities is slow. The 2002 [Access to Information Act \(ATI Act\)](#) enables CSOs to request government data, but delays in responses and exemptions for security-related information hinder transparency. The [Data Protection Act](#) in Jamaica aims to safeguard personal information. However, there have been reports that some state agencies have used the Data Protection Act to [circumvent](#) the ATI Act, hindering public access to information, potentially undermining transparency and accountability.

A January 2026 [Jamaicans for Justice report](#) on 111 ATI requests (Feb–Nov 2025) found 37.8% received no response and only 30.6% fulfilled the requests within the statutory 30 days. Government has acknowledged the review is advanced and plans an ATI Act Advisory Committee (with stakeholder input), operational improvements, a new ATI website, and training. [Cabinet will decide](#) on the reform approach, with a [draft amendment bill targeted for mid-2026](#).

CSOs' input is invited by the State but is sometimes tokenistic. For example, on 30 March, Jamaicans for Justice and Jamaica Environment Trust (JET) made written submission to the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the Leader of the Opposition regarding the National Reconstruction and Resilience Authority Bill. However, [no acknowledgement](#) was provided by the OPM. Following consistent media coverage around the lack of response and consultation, the Prime Minister acknowledged the contributions of both organisations during the debate of the Bill in the House of Parliament.

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

Jamaica's free press, supported by the 2013 [decriminalisation of defamation](#), amplifies CSO contributions, such as campaigns for women's rights and environmental protection.

However, senior officials have labelled critical human rights CSOs (e.g., Jamaicans for Justice) with terms such as "living off blood money" in early 2026, particularly regarding police accountability advocacy. This echoes earlier "criminal enablers" or "political" accusations and contributes to online hostility and a chilling effect. [Government Senator Abka Fitz-Henley](#) has chided some CSOs for "selective outrage," accusing a vocal minority of pursuing a partisan political agenda and appearing to side with the Opposition on some matters.

Media reporting on civil society is generally objective, though accusations of bias on governance and national security issues arise during opinion journalism and editorials of select media houses. The Deputy Editor of Nationwide News Network and a former Press Association of Jamaica President has engaged in these debates, noting that strident criticism from civil society and the media is a feature of democracy and that [such critics should expect to receive criticism in return](#). In recent commentary, the Deputy Editor described certain actors as "masquerading as civil society" while being "uncivil to the society." In this on-air commentary, he accused some of these groups of plotting, scheming, and trying "to create ways to destabilize [and] to unbalance the whole administration," calling them hypocrites who seek to run the country by committee and undermine the elected government, framing some advocacy as politically motivated rather than purely civic (aired on [Nationwide News Network](#) on 7 May 2026).

In February 2026, the Jamaica Observer published an editorial titled "[A time of reckoning for civil society organisations](#)." While welcoming the upcoming Caribbean CSO Conference, it questioned CSOs' relevance, public image, governance standards, and suggested that some advocacy positions (e.g., on extrajudicial killings) are driven more by funding needs and a desire to stay relevant than by evidence. JFJ and other groups have accused the Jamaica Observer of sensationalised and biased framing in its coverage of accountability issues.

Political tribalism and clientelism remain features of the broader political culture. Freedom of assembly is respected, but official pronouncements can polarise public debate. Countering divisive rhetoric and promoting inclusive narratives remain important for strengthening CSO legitimacy and civic participation. Civic education is formally incorporated into the Jamaican school curriculum through Social Studies at the primary and secondary levels, and the Ministry of Education has been re-introducing dedicated Civics modules since 2023 (see Ministry of Education Civics Curriculum: [Grades 7-9](#)). However, its implementation remains inconsistent and insufficiently prioritised. The limited depth and reach of civic education contribute to low levels of public awareness and engagement with civil society issues, weakening the broader enabling environment for informed citizen participation and democratic oversight.

Inclusion of marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ communities, remains limited both in law and practice. The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms 2011 does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity (Section 13), and consensual same-sex relations continue to be criminalised under the Offences Against the Person Act. While LGBTQI+ organisations can legally operate as CSOs, they face significant

societal hostility, stigma, and inconsistent state protection, which restricts their full participation in public discourse and civic life.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

Jamaica's digital environment remains open, with no reported internet shutdowns or state censorship. Internet penetration in Jamaica reached approximately 89–90% by the end of 2025, according to [DataReportal's Digital 2026: Jamaica](#) report. However, affordability remains a significant barrier, with mobile data costs still consuming a notable share of income for lower-income households. Notable urban–rural disparities persist, with urban areas enjoying better connectivity and reliability than rural communities. Hurricane Melissa (October 2025) caused widespread disruption, with the Government of Jamaica reporting that 77% of the island lost power and internet access due to extensive network damage (see [Emergency Telecommunications Cluster Situation Report](#)). This highlighted the vulnerability of digital infrastructure, especially in marginalised and rural areas.

[Cyber-attack attempts](#) are rising (e.g., 46.7 million recorded in 2025 per threat reports). The [Data Protection Act of 2020 \(DPA\)](#) and Office of the Information Commissioner promote privacy, with ongoing efforts on compliance, [breach notification](#), and public education (e.g., Data Privacy Month 2026). Data breaches and enforcement gaps persist, prompting calls for stronger [organisational accountability](#).

[The Cybercrimes \(Amendment\) Act 2026](#) passed the Senate in early May 2026, introducing harsher penalties (up to 20 years for child-targeted offences), better investigative tools, protections against revenge porn, and measures against enabling infrastructure for cybercrimes. While welcomed for addressing real threats, CSOs and media ought to monitor for potential impacts on expression.

The government has emphasised combating misinformation and disinformation. In January 2026, the [Minister of Information announced plans to use “receipts”](#) (official evidence/facts) to counter false narratives in the public domain. Former [Minister of Legal and Constitutional Affairs Marlene Malahoo Forte](#) has previously commented on the need to address misinformation, including calls related to updating laws on defamation or false statements. Media practitioners, including through the [Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica \(BCJ\)](#) and Press Association, have stressed the importance of digital literacy, AI education, and balanced regulation to combat disinformation without unduly restricting press freedom or dissent. Emphasis is placed on public education, fact-checking, and media literacy campaigns rather than solely punitive measures.

Online harassment of human rights defenders by non-state actors persists, though there has been no state-sponsored cyberattacks targeting CSOs in the past year.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Jamaican CSOs continue to operate in a complex environment.

Key challenges include persistent rhetoric and reputational attacks from senior officials and media commentators, which contribute to a chilling effect and online harassment. Smaller human rights organisations face acute sustainability pressures due to declining international funding and negative framing of donor-supported work. Perceived bias in some mainstream

media coverage, slow implementation of OGP commitments and ATI reforms, and tokenistic government engagement further constrain their effectiveness. The upcoming NPO Act and potential overreach in cyber-related legislation also require careful monitoring.

On the other hand, several opportunities exist to strengthen the enabling environment. These include the momentum generated by the advocacy on access to information reform, which has secured government commitments; the networks and strategies emerging from the Inaugural Caribbean CSO Conference; new funding windows such as the EFJ-UNDP climate partnership and the Ministry of Health's J\$500 million CARE Fund; the ongoing constitutional reform process; and the OGP Action Plan milestones. Jamaica's strong regional standing in the UNDP Democracy Report 2026 also provides a positive foundation for broader civic engagement.

CSOs would benefit from sustained advocacy training, stronger domestic resource mobilisation strategies, and more consistent, meaningful dialogue with the State.



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