



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Gabon

May 2026

Context

Reporting period: October 2025-May 2026

Throughout the reporting period, Gabon experienced an exceptionally intense period of political and electoral activity, with a view to [adhering to the transition roadmap](#). Indeed, [the second round of parliamentary](#) and local elections, the senatorial elections, and the appointment of judges to the Constitutional Court and members of the [Economic, Social, Environmental and Cultural Council](#) (CESEC) constituted the final stages of the political transition process that began in August 2023.

However, even as the new authorities of the Fifth Republic expressed their commitment to restoring the rule of law, the return to constitutional order was marked by a resurgence of violations of fundamental freedoms: restrictions on access to the media and social media, and arbitrary arrests of opinion leaders, in breach of [the 2024 Constitution](#) and the regional and international human rights instruments ratified by Gabon, notably the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Articles 9 and 10) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 19 and 21), as well as the more general democratic principles enshrined in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

Consequently, from October 2025 to February 2026, the country experienced [a worrying wave of intimidation and arbitrary arrests](#), targeting trade union leaders, journalists and activists such as [Marcel Libama](#), [Simon Ndong Edzo](#), [Bob Mengome](#) and Harold Leekat. Added to these events were [the sudden suspension](#) of social media platforms on 17 February 2026 by the High Authority for Communication (HAC), without prior notice or any indication of when services would resume; [the refusal of the relevant authorities to rule on this flagrant violation](#) of several fundamental rights of the population, notably freedom of expression and access to information; not to mention the new [Ordinance](#) regulating social media, which runs counter to the protection of personal data, despite this being guaranteed by [Law No. 025/2023 of 9 July 2023](#) and international legislation.

Furthermore, on the social and economic front, soaring prices, youth unemployment and structural deficits in the health and housing sectors are fuelling growing dissent, which is being suppressed through arbitrary arrests and increased media control, in contravention of the constitutional guarantees of 2024.

The precarious human rights situation in Gabon calls for vigilance on the part of civil society organisations (CSOs), which must maintain constant civic monitoring and have access to relevant information on developments in the enabling environment in Gabon. They are also committed to raising public awareness of issues of general interest; to advocating for the improvement of the enabling environment, the easing of social tensions, and the strengthening of good governance; and to encouraging citizen participation in the consolidation of Gabonese democracy.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The establishment of the Fifth Republic in 2025 was presented as a major step towards institutional reorganisation and democratic openness in Gabon, fuelling hopes of transforming formal achievements into sustainable practices, restoring public confidence and establishing a genuine balance of power.

However, this process is being held back by persistent restrictions: limited access to the media and social media; arbitrary arrests of opinion leaders, [journalists](#), [activists](#) and [trade unionists](#); and the creation of a climate of constant fear. Cases of trade unionists and journalists being arrested illustrate this trend. We can cite the following cases in particular:

- Harold Leckat Igassela, Editor-in-Chief of the online media outlet Gabon Media Time, [arrested on 15 October 2025](#) by officers from the DGR (General Directorate of Investigations), also known as the General Directorate for Counter-Interference and Military Security or B2, on charges of “misappropriation of public funds” in connection with a communications contract concluded in September 2020 between his media outlet and the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (CDC), and released after 18 days in custody; the dispute fell within the jurisdiction of the civil or commercial courts;
- Roland Olouba Oyabi, Editor-in-Chief of the media outlet Gabon Mails Infos, [arrested](#) on 15 January 2026 by B2 officers; this arrest prompted the HAC to intervene to secure his release, pointing out that [press offences are no longer criminal offences in Gabon](#);
- Bob Mengome, an activist known by the pseudonym ‘Matricule 212’, [abducted](#) from his home on 15 January 2026 by unidentified individuals and now incarcerated at Libreville Central Prison in a state of health deemed to be a cause for concern; he is accused of “disturbing public order” and “defamation”;
- Marcel Libama and Simon Ndong Edzo, trade union leaders in the national education sector, were arrested on 19 and 20 January 2026 respectively and [placed under a remand order](#) on 21 January for “disturbing public order” and “obstructing the freedom to work”, then provisionally released five days later following pressure from public opinion;

Similarly, the international rankings by [Freedom House](#) (21/100, ‘not free’) and [CIVICUS Monitor](#) (54/100, ‘restricted’) confirm the picture of a limited enabling environment, where rights are tolerated but constantly threatened or even violated.

The Fifth Republic appears to face a twofold challenge: to respond swiftly to social expectations in order to preserve the regime’s legitimacy, whilst ensuring respect for fundamental rights and the consolidation of institutions. To meet this challenge, the authorities would be well advised to transform [the institutional openness trialed during the transition period](#) into a genuine social contract, based on justice, equity and citizen participation; this contract should take the form of respect for and protection of citizens’ fundamental rights, so as to constitute a genuine step forward in Gabon’s democratisation, rather than a missed opportunity to do better than previous governments.

2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

The legal framework governing CSOs in Gabon remains largely unchanged, revealing the outdated nature of the legislation in force. CSOs remain governed by [Law No. 35/62 of 10 December 1962](#), modelled on the [French legislation](#) of 1901, which makes no distinction between associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and foundations. This lack of reform perpetuates regulatory confusion and hinders the structuring of the voluntary sector.

On 27 September 2024, Geoffroy Fouboula Libeka Makosso, 4th Vice-President of the National Assembly during the transition period and current 2nd Vice-President of the CESEC,

took a decisive step by tabling two draft bills: one on [the protection of human rights defenders](#), and the other on [the establishment and organisation of NGOs](#), which were passed by the Senate on 26 November 2025 following their adoption by the Chamber of Deputies on 15 May 2025.

These two laws aim to fill a long-standing gap by re-establishing the institution of associations, clarifying the status of NGOs, strengthening the protection of civil society actors and bringing the national framework into line with international standards. They reflect a political commitment to consolidating the role of CSOs as pillars of democratic governance and development, whilst providing human rights defenders with a legal framework that guarantees their independence and safety.

However, despite these advances, and one year after their adoption, these laws have still not been officially enacted; this situation keeps civil society operating in an environment ill-suited to contemporary realities and hinders the professionalisation of many CSOs, as well as their effectiveness on the ground.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Between October 2025 and May 2026, the accessibility and sustainability of resources to CSOs emerged as a central issue in the democratic debate in Gabon. Despite growing civic mobilisation, CSOs continue to face very limited access to sufficient and sustainable resources. Funding remains particularly difficult to secure in an international context marked by several crises that have led to [the loss of US government funds managed by USAID](#), a reduction in grants from United Nations agencies, not to mention certain forms of discriminatory treatment between the vast majority of CSOs and [the foundations of Gabon's two First Ladies](#), recognised as being of public utility by decrees signed in August 2024, shortly after their creation. [These foundations are not affected by the austerity measures](#) imposed across several sectors of public governance, whilst older CSOs, which have a greater presence due to their consistent positive impact on the ground, are marginalised.

It is against this backdrop that Gabonese CSOs have had to rely on certain sources of European funding, notably from the European Union via [funds managed by the European Centre for Electoral Support](#) (CEAE) with the Consortium of Civil Society Organisations for Electoral Transparency and Democracy (COTED) as a local partner, [funds from the EU SEE Consortium programme managed by HIVOS](#); funds from the United Nations system in Gabon through [the Programme to Support the Electoral Cycle in Gabon](#), which supported around ten CSOs operating across the entire country to provide civic and electoral education to the population; and the OIF, which funded the Network of Citizen Observers (ROC). However, the bulk of this support was concentrated during the election period, which limits its scope and sustainability. Consequently, CSOs continue to face a lack of stable resources and increased dependence on external donors. Admittedly, the state has entered into a few partnerships in the health and justice sectors, but these fall far short of meeting the real needs of CSOs.

Thus, despite a few one-off initiatives, the funding framework for CSOs remains fragile. The absence of sustainable national mechanisms, combined with a lack of political will to support CSOs, continues to limit their role in democratic governance and civic participation. The issue of accessible and sustainable resources therefore remains a major obstacle to the emergence of an independent civil society that can play its full part in the country's democratisation process.

4. Open and responsive state

The 2024 Constitution explicitly recognises the right to information (Articles 94 to 102) and enshrines transparency as a principle of governance, with Articles 94 and 95 guaranteeing, respectively, the right to seek, receive and disseminate information, as well as the obligation of public institutions to provide access to administrative documents. However, they do not provide for any means of redress for citizens in the event of a refusal to grant access to public documents. Although the 2024 framework formally guarantees freedom of information, the absence of a dedicated organic law governing access—particularly with regard to procedures, timelines, and the scope of accessible information—significantly undermines the effectiveness and sustainability of this right.

In Article 7, the Constitution also recognises civil society as a fundamental component of pluralist and participatory democracy, noting that civil society contributes to the country's democratic, economic, social, cultural and environmental development. Some progress can be noted:

- SOS Prisonniers has launched [initiatives aimed at improving prison conditions and defending the rights of persons deprived of their liberty](#), with appreciable results, which demonstrates a relative openness and a clear willingness to engage in dialogue between the prison service – and, by extension, the [Ministry of Justice and Keeper of the Seals](#) – and civil society organisations.
- During the process of establishing the First Economic, Social, Environmental and Cultural Council (CESEC) of the Fifth Republic in December 2025, the Network of Independent Civil Society Organisations for Good Governance in Gabon (ROLBG) brought together nearly a hundred organisations, associations and networks around [three key recommendations from the 2025 Country Report \(CFR\)](#) (Strengthening their internal governance, diversifying their sources of funding and consolidating their collective resilience; Investing in strengthening their internal capacities, particularly in the areas of financial management, digital security and strategic communication; and Promoting civic engagement). [The coalition thus formed denounced the breach of regulatory provisions](#), lobbied officials at the Ministry of Institutional Reform and contributed to [the drafting of a bill and a draft decree, which were adopted by the Council of Ministers](#) on 4 December 2025: Draft Organic Act on the internal organisation and establishing the rules governing the functioning and appointment of members of the Economic, Social, Environmental and Cultural Council (CESEC); Draft Decree establishing the procedures for the appointment of members of the Economic, Social, Environmental and Cultural Council (CESEC).

However, the State's openness and responsiveness towards civil society have remained sporadic and focused on key moments, with no legal or institutional mechanism guaranteeing sustainable access to information or systematic collaboration. Whilst the period from October 2025 to May 2026 was marked by tangible progress, it also revealed that citizen participation is not yet firmly embedded in national governance.

5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

Political discourse in Gabon now places civil society at the heart of pluralist and participatory democracy. The openness demonstrated by the authorities has resulted in a proliferation of statements and symbolic gestures, highlighting the involvement of CSOs as a guarantee of the transparency and credibility of the democratic process:

- [On 6 October 2025, at the opening of the judicial year](#) in Gabon, the President of the Republic announced the modernisation of the judicial system and a move towards greater engagement with civil society, a message widely reported by the national media.
- [On 29 December 2025, the establishment of the first Economic, Social, Environmental and Cultural Council \(CESEC\)](#) of the Fifth Republic was presented as a major milestone, and the presence of CSOs was seen as a guarantee of transparency in the formulation of public policy, with some of their proposals on the representativeness and accessibility of institutions being taken up in the debates.
- In January 2026, the launch [of the National Development Consolidation Plan](#) (PNCD 2026–2030) marked a new phase: the government officially invited CSOs to contribute to the design, monitoring and evaluation of the plan, presenting this openness as an inclusive approach that incorporated citizens' proposals into a national strategic framework.
- Finally, in [his 2026 New Year's address](#), the Head of State acknowledged that CSOs' recommendations on electoral transparency and citizen mobilisation should be incorporated into future electoral reforms, thereby recognising civil society as a key pillar of democracy, beyond the electoral period.

In summary, civil society organisations are valued in public discourse, primarily as a means of institutional legitimisation, and their involvement remains fragile and dependent on political will, with no guarantee of a permanent role in the country's governance.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Gabon's digital landscape has been characterised by hyper-penetration dominated by mobile technology, confirming its role as the primary vehicle for access to information and citizen participation. The mobile penetration rate has remained exceptionally high, exceeding 120% of the population with over 3.2 million active lines.

At the same time, the country has [2.3 million active internet subscriptions](#) according to data published in November 2025 by the Market Observatory of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Postal Services (ARCEP). Nearly 72% of the population (1.87 million users) have access to the internet, whilst social media platforms have around 850,000 active accounts, representing nearly a third of the population. These figures reflect a connected society in which digital technology plays a central role in civic life.

However, this momentum is undermined by persistent structural constraints. [The chronic power cuts](#) by the Gabonese Energy and Water Company (SEEG) jeopardise service continuity, increase the burden on operators and widen the digital divide between urban and rural areas.

On the political front, whilst no blanket internet shutdown has been observed, [the suspension](#) of social media platforms by the High Authority for Communication (HAC) on 17 February 2026, along with the stance taken by the Constitutional Court and other courts—which

declared themselves without jurisdiction to rule on the matter—has revealed the fragility of digital freedoms. Officially justified as part of the fight against the dissemination of hateful and defamatory content on social media, this decision is reminiscent of the total internet blackout in August 2023 during the elections, confirming a recurring trend towards the use of digital restrictions as an instrument of political control; it is perceived as [a serious infringement of fundamental freedoms](#), and of the Gabonese Constitution of 2024 (Article 8 on freedom of expression and communication). The HAC, which is supposed to guarantee citizens' access to free and pluralistic communication, now exercises regulatory powers amounting to digital censorship.

[Law No. 001/2011](#), amended in 2023, and Law No. 025/2023, provide a framework for the protection of personal data and privacy; however, as part of their process of suspending social media platforms, the Gabonese authorities issued an order compelling users of digital platforms to [make their personal information public](#); Civil society has launched advocacy campaigns to bring the authorities to the negotiating table; some have responded favourably, whilst others have yet to react, but this work continues. In addition, the absence of specific organic laws regulating the internet leaves regulation dependent on [Law No. 014/2023 of 3 July 2023](#) and the Communications Code, which are used to legitimise suspensions that no longer affect journalists alone but extend to the entire population. Indeed, this regulatory vacuum paves the way for broad interpretations that undermine the protection of civic freedoms online.

Finally, several civil society organisations and media outlets have denounced breaches of cybersecurity and fundamental rights. [Journalists](#); [trade unionists](#) and activists have been arrested or harassed for their online publications. According to online media, [some](#) have been prosecuted for “[spreading false information](#)” or “undermining national security”, illustrating a form of censorship and the misuse of laws that restrict access to a secure digital environment.

Challenges and opportunities

The period from October 2025 to May 2026 saw some improvement in principles 4 (Openness and responsiveness of the state) and 5 (Public culture and discourse favourable to civil society) of the enabling environment for civil society in Gabon. Unfortunately, this progress has been accompanied by stagnation, or even regression, regarding the other principles, linked to political and structural factors. Among these are the slow pace of institutional reforms, violations of fundamental rights (intimidation and attempts to muzzle civil society by local authorities, sometimes exemplified by the arbitrary arrests of certain civil society actors), limited access to resources, and a lack of leadership renewal within civil society organisations. The suspension of several digital tools remains a major obstacle hindering the work of many organisations, particularly in terms of communication and the sharing of information with community representatives, CSOs in rural areas and international partners based outside Gabon.

Nevertheless, the presence of several civil society actors within certain institutions, notably Parliament and the CESEC, offers a significant opportunity for advocacy and monitoring of the official enactment of the laws on the protection of human rights defenders and the organisation of NGOs adopted by Parliament in 2025, as well as equitable access to public funding for CSOs. Furthermore, Gabonese civil society can count on renewed and multifaceted support from certain international partners, notably the European Union, which, through direct and indirect grants, remains its main donor.

This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

EU SEE

SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



Funded by
the European Union



DEMOCRACY
REPORTING
INTERNATIONAL



European
Partnership for
Democracy



forus
CONFLICT
SUPPORT
INFLUENCE



**TRANSPARENCY
INTERNATIONAL**
the global coalition against corruption