



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Bhutan

June 2026

Context

Reporting Period: July 2025 – June 2026

Bhutan is currently midway through the term of its fourth democratically elected government, led by the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), which returned to power after previously governing from 2013–2018. Since the introduction of democracy in 2008, all national elections have been characterised by peaceful transfers of power and an absence of electoral violence. However, persistent regional voting patterns continue to raise concerns about potential social and political divisions along regional lines.

The [2008 Constitution](#) provides a broadly enabling framework for civil society through guarantees of fundamental rights and freedoms, democratic participation, good governance, accountability, and the rule of law. The CSO Act further recognises civil society organisations (CSOs) as important partners in national development and democratic governance, supported through measures such as tax exemptions and waivers on sustainable development fees for international expertise. Nevertheless, the sector continues to face significant challenges, including financial sustainability constraints, barriers to the establishment of new organisations, and increasing regulatory and reporting obligations.

During the reporting period, Bhutan’s civil society sector remained active and largely compliant despite a demanding regulatory environment. CSOs continued to strengthen engagement with key governance institutions through the implementation of the [CSO–Media Engagement Strategy](#) and [the Parliament–CSO Engagement Strategy](#), including stakeholder consultations, parliamentary engagements, and participation in public hearings on national initiatives such as the [Economic Stimulus Plan](#) (2025). The sector also continued to advance accountability and transparency, working with the [CSO Authority](#) producing the [Bhutan Civil Society Accountability Standards](#) (BCAS), with the average compliance score of registered CSOs increasing from 63 percent to 80 percent in 2026.

Despite government support, financial and operational pressures remain significant. By the end of 2025, four of Bhutan’s 54 registered CSOs had ceased operations due to sustainability challenges and compliance-related issues. Following the voluntary dissolution and subsequent re-registration of another organisation as a Religious Organisation in 2026, the total number of registered CSOs stood at 50. Looking ahead, local government [elections in Thimphu and Phuentsholing](#) municipalities are scheduled for July 2026. While women remain underrepresented in local electoral politics, the election features a female candidate contesting the mayoral post in Thimphu for only the second time.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Civic freedoms, including freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, are protected under Article 7(2), 7(5), and 7(12) [of the Constitution](#) and are generally respected in practice. Bhutan maintains a stable mid-range performance across all four pillars of the [Global State of Democracy framework](#) and is classified as “Free” by Freedom House, with a score of 69/100. However, civic space continues to face challenges, with the CIVICUS Monitor categorising the country’s civic space as “Obstructed.” The [dissolution](#) of the Bhutan Civil Society Network in 2023 represented a setback for collective civil society coordination and advocacy. Differences emerged between the State, which raised concerns over the network’s unregistered status, and members who feared that registration could compromise the

network's independence. Nevertheless, the CSO Authority has taken a more active role in [supporting collaboration and facilitating engagement](#) through eight thematic groups, regular CSO meet-ups, and dialogue between CSOs and government institutions.

The media sector continues to struggle with sustainability, reliance on state advertising, limited access to information, self-censorship, and perceived political interference. The country has witnessed a sharp decline in the Press Freedom Index ranking over the past few years, falling from 33rd place in 2022 to 152nd place in 2025, and showing a slight improvement in [2026 by climbing up to 150th place](#). This improvement is attributed mainly to political indicators, while strong state control, self-censorship by journalists, access to information and strong national security and defamation laws are attributed to constraining critical reporting. In [March 2026, Bhutan Today](#), a newspaper that was established as the country's first daily newspaper about 17 years ago, saw its licence cancelled by the Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) alongside 10 other businesses, including printing houses and an internet service provider.

Commissioned by the Department of Media, Creative Industry and Intellectual Property (DOMCIIP), the Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) undertook a [Media Perception Index study](#), that provides a glimpse into the media eco-system and public perception of the traditional media in light of emerging platforms on social media influencing public opinion and discourse on information, public policy and the national development agenda.

Bhutan is party to several important international treaties and conventions that seek to open up the civic space, including the UN Charter, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC), and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). While the National Assembly (NA) adopted the Amendment to the Reservation on the CRPD in 2025 and forwarded to the National Council (NC) for review prior to submission to the United Nations (UN), the [Amendments have recently not received support from the NC](#) citing ambiguity over legal interpretations and policy implications. This action has resulted in the issue being referred to a Joint Sitting of Parliament for final resolution, and therefore it is uncertain if the 2026 report submission dateline since ratification of the CRPD can be met. There are [growing calls](#) for Bhutan to ratify additional core human rights instruments, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as doing so could strengthen protections for fundamental freedoms and further enhance the legal and policy environment for civil society participation, advocacy, and accountability.

2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

Bhutan's CSO regulatory framework provides a comprehensive legal basis for the registration, operation, and protection of civil society organisations, while supporting accountability, transparency, and public trust within the sector. However, stricter financial thresholds, annual renewal requirements, and increased government influence within the regulatory authority have raised barriers to entry and sustainability, creating challenges for the growth, diversity, and long-term resilience of civil society.

The Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Act 2007, enacted before Bhutan's democratic transition in 2008, laid the foundation for the formal registration of CSOs through the establishment of the CSO Authority (CSOA) in 2009. Since then, CSOs have grown significantly in both number and areas of engagement. However, [amendments to the Act introduced in 2022](#) increased government representation within the CSOA from three to five

members, while CSO representation remained limited to two seats, raising concerns about reduced sectoral influence in the regulatory body.

The 2022 amendments also introduced stricter financial requirements for all registered CSOs. Public Benefit Organisations (PBOs) must maintain an endowment fund of Nu.3 million and operational reserves of Nu.1 million, while Mutual Benefit Organisations (MBOs) must secure Nu.1.5 million and Nu.0.5 million respectively. These requirements pose substantial challenges, particularly for smaller CSOs. Although the CSO Authority has granted extended timelines for compliance, the requirements are expected to discourage new registrations and affect annual assessments under the Bhutan CSO Accountability Standards (BCAS 2023). Clause 101 of the CSO Rules and Regulations 2017 requires annual renewal of CSO registration certificates. Although the process is straightforward, involving annual reports and fees, it places an administrative burden on CSOs with limited human resources.

The yearly renewal requirement also creates uncertainty around organisational continuity and may hinder access to long-term donor support. This amendment followed after CSOs had repeatedly and collectively raised concerns on the [complex registration requirements and its growth](#). However, the registration process for new CSOs now requires CSOs to come up with the endowment fund amount, which is seen as challenging for most new CSOs to operate formally. Informal groups and community groups, youth networks including [LGBT+ and Queer Groups](#) operate on a small scale, bridging critical gaps in community welfare and through written permission in certain areas and bound by specific regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency and accountability. As of 2025, the number of registered CSOs has declined to 50, four fewer than previously recorded.

The BCAS 2023 framework has positively contributed to strengthening CSO credibility, accountability, and public trust among government partners, donors, beneficiaries, and the wider public. The CSO Authority has also eased compliance processes by reducing repetitive documentation requirements for annual assessments, including acceptance of online submissions in 2026 which was not the case in the previous year. Efforts by CSOs to extend certificate validity to three years have so far been unsuccessful. The CSO Act 2007 (and Amendment 2022) oversees the sector as well as providing legal protection against arbitrary dissolution, provided CSOs remain free from political activities and illegal financial actions.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

CSOs in Bhutan can legally access funding from both domestic and international sources and generally operate in a low-risk regulatory environment for receiving foreign funds; however, the sector remains heavily dependent on a shrinking pool of international donors, raising significant concerns about long-term financial sustainability. Limited domestic philanthropy, underdeveloped corporate support, and emerging regulatory scrutiny of external funding continue to constrain the availability of diverse and sustainable resources, despite recent efforts to expand government support and enable social enterprise models.

The CSO Act (2007) allows CSOs to source funds through contributions, donations, grants, subsidies, financial assistance and transfers of funds or property, whether public or private, and dividends and investments from sale and lease of property; and it also requires CSOs

to make full disclosure of financial information, including sources of funding. The Royal Monetary Authority's (RMA) assessment on "[National Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism Risk](#)," of the Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) sector places CSOs in Bhutan under "low risk" considering that international financial flows are conducted through formal banking channels. CSOs have taken part in a training workshop organised by the RMA on [Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment of the Non-Profit Sector in Bhutan](#) to support collective efforts to safeguard the non-profit sector from potential misuse while protecting its legitimate charitable and developmental work.

CSOs in Bhutan remain heavily reliant on [international donor funding](#) for operations as well as programme implementation, underscoring persistent concerns about the sector's long-term financial sustainability. Following the phasing out of Danida in 2014, Helvetas has been a consistent donor, supporting democracy and decentralisation efforts and largely partnering with the Government and many international partners in many of these initiatives to promote civic engagement and strengthening CSOs and the Parliament ([Project Nyamdrel I](#)). However, Helvetas will cease its operations in June 2026 and International IDEA plans to close by early 2027. At present, the European Union continues to be a consistent donor, and has launched [a restricted CSO-call for proposal](#) of Euro 1.6 million under the multi-annual Action Plan. The indication is that this would be the last restricted grant for CSOs, following which support to CSOs will be through the Global Gateway priorities that EU has in Bhutan in support of Government plans and priorities. A CSO roadmap for Bhutan is currently being developed by the EU to guide its support to CSOs.

Domestic philanthropy and local fundraising opportunities remain limited, with most charitable giving traditionally directed towards religious institutions, community welfare activities, and medical crowdfunding rather than support for civil society organisations. Although Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has potential as a local funding source, it remains underutilised for supporting social and development initiatives led by CSOs. In 2024, the CSO A allowed CSOs to establish [social enterprises](#) as a potential avenue for generating sustainable resources. While this initiative offers an important opportunity to strengthen CSO sustainability, it also carries the risk of organisations gradually shifting focus from their core social and developmental mandates towards revenue generation, raising longer-term regulatory and institutional concerns. The overall impact of the initiative on the sustainability of the CSO sector remains to be seen.

In a surprising but welcome move, the government announced, in December 2024, an amount equivalent to EURO 3.37 million to support CSOs. Although the support is specifically for CSOs delivering social mandates, it is seen as potentially leading to greater [government-CSO support](#) and collaboration. Yet, in mid-2026 during the [first sitting of the Joint Sitting of Parliament](#), the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) recommended the need to "better regulate" external funding received by CSOs, NGOs, Religious Organisations (ROs), and other agencies, citing this as strengthening oversight of external funding mandatorily, and transparency and reporting structures in ensuring alignment of donor-support received to national priorities.

4. Open and responsive state

Engagement between the State and CSOs has historically been ad-hoc, selective, and marked by limited follow-up on feedback. While the engagement strategies with the Parliament and the media are in operation, the *CSO-Government Collaboration Guideline* is still in draft form and has been submitted to the CSO Authority through the two CSO Representatives. CSOs' operations therefore, are guided by the "[Guidelines for Civil Society Organisations](#)", overseen by the CSO Authority and reflect increasing recognition of CSOs as important partners in

national development. Government consultations with CSOs have become more structured, particularly on national policies and international commitments relating to women, persons with disabilities, the UPR national report (22 CSOs consulted), and media sector reviews (CSOs working in the media field consulted).

Since 2022, CSO-government engagement has become more regular and expanded to include Parliament and the media, creating greater opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. Nevertheless, there remains a need to ensure more equitable and meaningful participation through improved consultation formats, agenda-setting processes, and stronger feedback mechanisms. There is some effort in strengthening engagement and cooperation with policy makers, mainly the Parliament through policy advocacy and orientation of CSOs to the [parliamentary processes](#) as a platform for dialogue. However, collaboration with the executive branch of the government and the bureaucracy is still limited to ad hoc or project-based consultations.

CSOs have also strengthened internal coordination through eight thematic groups and regular engagement platforms, although [quarterly meetings were recently reduced to bi-annual engagements](#) following a decision by the CSO Authority. Efforts continue to improve coordination and representation of CSO concerns with the Authority, government, and Parliament to support more inclusive policymaking and create an enabling environment for CSOs to contribute effectively to national development and community outreach.

Bhutan does not have a comprehensive Access to Information law, which limits formal guarantees for public and CSO access to government-held information. Access to information therefore depends largely on administrative practice rather than a statutory right. Certain categories of information relating to national security, government deliberations, and other sensitive state matters remain effectively inaccessible to civil society.

Engagement between government, regulators, journalists, and media-focused CSOs has strengthened through stakeholder consultations aimed at addressing access to information, professional standards, and media sustainability. The [May 2026 dialogue](#) convened by the Journalists' Association of Bhutan and the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy reflected efforts to rebuild trust and promote constructive engagement between state actors and the media sector.

5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

Civil society in Bhutan is most widely recognised and publicly appreciated for its charitable and service-oriented role in complementing government efforts to support vulnerable communities, as reflected in public statements, reports, and recent funding allocations for CSOs with social mandates. In the past, there was a tendency towards self-censorship among CSOs on advocacy-related issues, compounded by public perceptions that some CSOs are self-serving, insufficiently transparent, donor-driven, or contributors to social disharmony, with concerns also raised about the increasing number of organisations. These perceptions risked undermining the legitimacy and public trust of CSOs within the communities they serve, while also contributing to policy and political discourse advocating for tighter regulation and oversight of the sector. However, this perception has improved, as reported in the media, with CSOs increasingly seen by the end of 2025 as [driving positive change](#) in society.

CSOs have consistently played an important role in advancing the rights and welfare of

vulnerable groups, including survivors of domestic violence, the [LGBT+](#) community, Persons with Disabilities, people living with HIV and AIDS, disadvantaged children and youth, and animal welfare. These contributions are widely recognised and commended. However, beyond social welfare issues, the space for CSOs and the media to engage in civic rights, policy discourse, and democratic governance remains limited. At the same time, there are growing efforts from the State to institutionalise and regulate these engagements through more structured consultation and collaboration mechanisms between the State, CSOs, and the media.

On gender, the country faces increasing levels of [gender-based violence](#) (Two in five women in Bhutan experience intimate partner violence, and 6.9% report childhood sexual abuse) and an overall low representation of women in decision-making (e.g. women's representation in Parliament has hit a record low at 6.9%). Other current challenges include the unprecedented rate of economic migration of Bhutan's skilled workforce, dubbed an existential threat by the Prime Minister, and the linked inability of the economy to create decent employment opportunities for youth.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

In Bhutan, CSOs, media, and citizens generally enjoy [relatively open access to the internet and social media](#), supported by growing digital transformation efforts led by the [Government Technology Agency \(GovTech Agency\)](#). These initiatives have strengthened efforts towards digital transformation, e-governance, and cybersecurity awareness, contributing to improved public service delivery, digital inclusion, and access to information, while online platforms provide a dynamic alternative to mainstream media and increasingly serve as spaces for public discussion, advocacy, and civic engagement.

However, challenges remain in ensuring a secure and inclusive digital environment. Concerns include misinformation, online harassment, limited digital literacy, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, uneven rural access, and the absence of comprehensive data protection and privacy frameworks. While there are no direct state restrictions on online expression or documented cases of systematic internet shutdowns or arrests of journalists, self-censorship persists, particularly on politically sensitive or socially divisive issues. These may be attributed to the legal ambiguity for advocacy functions within the CSO Act on one hand and the stringent regulatory compliance requirements, exacerbated by the dissolution of the Bhutan Civil Society Network in 2023.

Concerns related to fake accounts, phishing, spam, and disinformation are largely linked to non-state actors and anonymous social media users, alongside occasional public concerns about online surveillance. In response, the State, media, educational institutions, and CSOs increasingly promote digital and artificial intelligence (AI) literacy, cybersecurity awareness, fact-checking, and safer online engagement, in addition to the rolling out of the [National Cybersecurity Strategy](#) and decentralised [National Digital Identity \(NDI\) Act](#).

Mainstream media in Bhutan continues to face significant challenges in adapting to the rapidly evolving digital media landscape while striving to remain relevant, sustainable, and responsive to public expectations. Amid growing competition from social media and digital content platforms, media institutions are under increasing pressure to deliver timely, credible, and trusted news despite constraints related to financial sustainability, technological adaptation, professional capacity, and changing audience consumption patterns.

Challenges and opportunities

Civic space in Bhutan is rated as “Obstructed” by the CIVICUS Monitor, with a score of 51/100, reflecting concerns related to media independence, access to information, and self-censorship. Despite these challenges, there are growing efforts to institutionalise collaboration between the Government and CSOs. Although the Government-CSO Engagement Guideline is yet to be endorsed by the government, implementation of collaboration strategies has already begun through project-based state funding to 16 social-sector CSOs supporting national development objectives. Successful implementation could strengthen regular engagement and improve CSO sustainability, while ineffective outcomes may affect future government support and collaboration. CSOs align their programme interventions in areas and communities unreached by government programmes, thereby bridging the gap and contributing to both national and international commitments.

Concerns remain regarding the CSO (Amendment) Act 2022, particularly the increased government representation within the CSO Authority and the lack of opportunities for CSOs to assume its chairmanship, which may constrain balanced representation and civic space. Nevertheless, CSOs continue to strengthen coordination and networking through regular engagements supported by donor funding, enabling dialogue with the CSO Authority, Parliament, government agencies, and the media. These efforts aim to build trust, credibility, and more institutionalised engagement between state and non-state actors.

The National Assembly’s Good Governance Committee, in its 2024–2025 review of the Anti-Corruption Commission’s Annual Report, recommended strengthening CSO capacity and accountability under the Bhutan CSO Accountability Standards 2023, while noting no involvement of CSOs in corrupt practices. This reinforces the sector’s credibility and contribution to national development and support for marginalised communities.

International processes have also created opportunities for civic engagement. Bhutan’s recent Universal Periodic Review process has encouraged dialogue with civil society, while the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2024 and Parliament’s participation in the IPU campaign on “Achieving Gender Equality” have opened additional avenues for collaboration between the State and CSOs.

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