



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Botswana

June 2026

Context

The reporting period covered in this report is: January 2026 – June 2026

Following Botswana's 2024 general elections, the country entered a new political era with its first change of government since independence, raising expectations for stronger democratic governance, greater accountability, constitutional reform, and institutional renewal. Botswana's civic space remained generally open but became increasingly contested as constitutional reform and broader governance issues dominated public discourse. Civil society organisations (CSOs) continued to exercise their constitutional rights to participate in public affairs and contributed actively to debates on constitutional reform, legislative processes, and national development.

Following sustained advocacy by CSOs, the Government expanded [nationwide consultations](#) on the Constitution (Amendment) Bill, demonstrating a willingness to enhance public participation. However, differing perspectives on constitutional reform exposed growing tensions between some government officials and advocacy-oriented CSOs. The operating environment was further shaped by significant legislative developments, including the review of the Societies (Amendment) Act, the draft Media Bill, and the Public Service Bill, all of which have implications for civic participation, freedom of expression, and media independence.

Economically, the new administration inherited significant challenges, including heavy dependence on diamond exports, slowing economic growth, fiscal pressures, high youth unemployment, and the urgent need to diversify the economy. Socially, Botswana continues to face persistent income inequality, uneven access to quality public services such as healthcare and education, and growing public expectations for improved living standards, employment opportunities, and more effective service delivery. At the same time, the withdrawal of government funding for the Botswana Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (BOCONGO), coupled with declining donor support, placed additional financial pressure on the civil society sector and raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of CSOs, particularly those working on governance, accountability, and human rights. While digital civic space remained largely open, concerns regarding media independence and the limited institutionalisation of dialogue between government and civil society underscored the need to strengthen protections for civic freedoms and establish more regular, constructive engagement between the state and civil society.

Together, these political, economic, and social dynamics continue to shape Botswana's post-election development trajectory, presenting both opportunities and challenges for inclusive democratic governance and sustainable development.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Botswana's [Constitution](#) guarantees freedoms of association, expression, and assembly. However, these rights are regulated under the [Public Order Act](#), which requires permits for assemblies, including peaceful marches. While intended to maintain public order, the permit system can restrict civil society's ability to mobilise freely, as permits may be denied for administrative reasons, limiting effective advocacy and public engagement.

As the country anticipates the [Constitutional Amendment Bill](#) referendum, CSOs have continued to advocate for a more comprehensive and inclusive constitutional reform process that addresses broader governance, human rights, and institutional issues, including previously identified gaps in the protection of fundamental freedoms, such as the right to

collective bargaining and strike action. However, current developments suggest that the Government intends to proceed with the Constitutional Court Bill as the primary focus of the reform agenda, in preparation for the anticipated referendum. While this approach may advance the immediate legislative process, it falls short of the broader constitutional review that many stakeholders have consistently called for through inclusive national dialogue and public consultation.

At the same time, concerns have emerged regarding the broader environment for freedom of expression. [Public statements](#) by President Duma Boko questioning the credibility of the media, reports of restrictive engagements between government leaders and journalists, and allegations of efforts to manage public discussion around constitutional reform have raised concerns about [increasing pressure on independent journalism](#). The [temporary removal](#) of journalist Letumile Montsosa from a radio programme, reportedly linked to coverage of the constitutional review process, further heightened concerns about media independence and the ability of citizens to freely engage in public debate.

The [Public Service Bill, 2026](#) (Bill No. 5 of 2026), emerged as an important legislative development with implications for civic space and public participation. While the Bill seeks to modernise public service administration and strengthen accountability within government institutions, civil society actors have expressed interest in its potential impact on the rights of public servants to exercise freedoms of expression, association, and participation in civic affairs. Particular attention has been paid to provisions governing employee conduct, engagement in public discourse, and disciplinary measures, given their potential implications for civic engagement and public sector accountability. Continued monitoring will be necessary to assess whether the Bill strengthens democratic governance while adequately safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms.

The draft [Media Bill, 2025](#), gazetted in December 2025, represents a significant legislative development with implications for freedom of expression and media independence. The Bill aims to modernise the media regulatory framework and promote professionalism within the media sector. However, concerns have been raised by media stakeholders and civil society organisations that certain provisions may increase state oversight of the media, undermine editorial independence, and potentially restrict press freedom. Civil society actors have therefore [advocated](#) for a regulatory framework that is consistent with democratic principles, international human rights standards, and constitutional protections for freedom of expression, access to information, and independent journalism.

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

In Botswana, the [2022 Societies Act](#) governs the registration of societies, including NGOs, requiring them to register and obtain a registration certificate annually. Other types of civil society organisations, such as trusts, are recognised and their registration is governed and facilitated under the [Trust Property Control Act of 2022](#). In practice, civil society organisations continue to encounter difficulties with registration, such as inefficient processes and the requirement to submit documents physically, posing particular challenges for organisations based outside Gaborone.

The [Public Order Act](#) also continues to restrict civic space. Its requirement for police permits for peaceful assemblies and the possibility of having permits denied hinders CSOs' ability to mobilise, hold events, and advocate, and conflicts with international standards, including the [Amnesty International Guidelines](#).

In March 2026, following sustained advocacy by stakeholders, the government [announced a review](#) of key provisions of the Societies (Amendment) Act. As part of the review, the requirement for spiritual leaders to hold accredited theology qualifications was withdrawn. The government also replaced 'security clearance' with 'security vetting', adopted the requirement universally for all types of societies, rather than only religious societies, and reduced the minimum membership threshold required for the registration of religious societies, making registration more accessible for smaller congregations, particularly those operating in rural and sparsely populated communities. The changes to the Societies (Amendment) Act are done as part of Botswana's preparation for the 2027 evaluation under the Framework against the Financing of Terrorism (FATF). It remains to be seen how these changes, particularly the now universally required security vetting process, will impact the overall regulatory framework for civil society.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Sustainability remained a significant challenge for civil society organisations in 2026. Funding continues to be largely short-term and project-based, limiting institutional stability, staff retention, and long-term planning. The situation was exacerbated by the withdrawal of US funding in 2025, which had [severe impacts](#) across multiple sectors, thereby adding to an already limited funding environment and further constraining the ability of CSOs to plan sustainably.

In the context of declining donor support and funding withdrawals, the government has increasingly [encouraged](#) CSOs to reduce their dependence on foreign donors and adopt more sustainable, locally driven financing models to support their operations and long-term viability. Despite this position, government funding and partnerships are often directed toward organisations whose work aligns closely with national priorities, particularly in areas such as Gender-Based Violence (GBV) prevention and youth development. As a result, CSOs engaged in governance, accountability, and advocacy work have generally had fewer opportunities to access comparable forms of support.

A major development was the decision that the Botswana Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (BOCONGO) would [receive no government funding](#) for the current financial year, creating concerns about the weakening of the main coordination platform for CSOs. These funding pressures are occurring amid a shrinking civic space and broader national challenges including economic decline, unemployment, poverty, GBV, and public health vulnerabilities, increasing demand for CSO services while reducing their capacity to respond.

4. State openness and responsiveness

The government of Botswana provides civil society organisations with opportunities to engage in policy processes, including through representation in technical working groups (TWGs), such as the TWG on the development of the National Health Insurance Policy, among others. These engagements demonstrate that collaboration is possible, allowing civil society to contribute expertise and ensure that policies reflect community needs.

However, such engagement is often selective, and the relationship between civil society and government in Botswana has become increasingly complex over the past few months. While the government continues to provide CSOs with opportunities to participate in selected working groups, thematic forums, and consultation processes, including engagement on the [Constitutional Court Bill](#), demonstrating some recognition of civil society's role in national development and policy discussions, challenges remain in sustaining meaningful strategic engagement. Despite ongoing efforts by civil society to engage key government leaders, it has been difficult to secure high-level meetings with relevant authorities, including the responsible Minister, the Office of the President, and leadership structures such as the Members Assembly. The absence of regular, institutionalised dialogue has raised concerns about the strength and depth of the government–civil society partnership, particularly at a time when CSOs are facing significant funding constraints and an increasingly challenging operating environment.

Over the past few months, civic engagement and public expression have been particularly visible in debates surrounding constitutional reform. Following criticism from civil society organisations (CSOs) over the lack of meaningful public participation in the proposed Constitution (Amendment) Bill, 2025, the government responded by initiating nationwide consultations involving Ntlo ya Dikgosi, local government structures, and members of the public through kgotla meetings. These consultations provided an important opportunity for citizens and civil society actors to express their views and participate in governance processes. While many citizens supported the establishment of a Constitutional Court, concerns were [raised](#) about the timing of the reform amid economic challenges and pressures on public services. The subsequent passage of the Bill and preparations for a national referendum demonstrated both increased public engagement and the continuing importance of ensuring inclusive and transparent constitutional reform processes.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

In terms of political culture and public discourse, perceptions of civil society in Botswana remain mixed. Political leaders often [emphasize](#) the importance of collaboration between government and civil society organisations (CSOs) in strengthening democratic institutions and promoting citizen participation. At the same time, relations between government and some CSOs have become increasingly strained, particularly regarding the proposed Constitutional Court Bill and the constitutional review process. In these debates, some government officials have publicly criticised positions taken by CSOs, characterising them as politically motivated or oppositional rather than recognising them as independent civic actors contributing to democratic dialogue, public accountability, and constitutional governance. These tensions have reinforced perceptions of a contested civic space, especially for organisations engaged in policy advocacy and governance-related issues.

The media, however, has generally acknowledged and highlighted the valuable role played by civil society in advancing the public interest. Coverage frequently emphasises the contributions of CSOs to civic education, public awareness of rights and governance processes, institutional accountability, and service delivery. Media narratives often recognise CSOs as important watchdogs and partners in development, particularly in reaching communities with limited access to information and support services. Similarly, other segments of society, including ordinary citizens, view civil society as rational and legitimate

actors that play a critical role in promoting accountability, safeguarding democratic values, and representing public interests. This perspective reflects a level of trust in civil society as an essential pillar of democracy.

While the new government has positioned itself as human rights-oriented, it has yet to adopt explicit policies or commitments that substantively advance the rights of marginalised groups in Botswana, including women and LGBTQI+ persons. Civil society organisations remain at the forefront of advocating for inclusivity and human rights.

Overall, civil society continues to shape public discourse and advance democratic accountability, even as contested perceptions and uneven government engagement persist. These dynamics underscore the ongoing need for sustained public discourse and civic education on the role of civil society organisations and their contributions to national development in Botswana.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Civil society in Botswana largely enjoys free access to the internet and online information, with no reported cases of internet shutdowns or systematic censorship of online content. Internet use is generally unrestricted, enabling CSOs to communicate, share information, mobilise, and advocate through digital platforms without interference. Government-led initiatives, including the [provision of free public Wi-Fi](#) in government buildings and selected public spaces, have further expanded digital access and supported online civic engagement.

The digital environment is relatively secure, with no documented incidents of cyberattacks, spyware deployment, hacking, or coordinated online harassment targeting civil society by either state or non-state actors.

Despite these positive conditions, concerns about surveillance persist. Civil society actors, particularly those working on sensitive issues such as human rights and governance, have reported perceptions of monitoring for intelligence purposes. While no official content takedowns or direct online censorship have been recorded, the possibility of surveillance has contributed to apprehension among activists and may discourage open digital expression.

Botswana's digital accessibility is relatively high, especially in urban and peri-urban areas, supported by satisfactory internet availability and affordability. However, a digital divide remains, with rural communities experiencing limited access and connectivity. Additionally, while basic ICT skills are widespread, CSOs face capacity constraints including limited training opportunities, outdated equipment, and restricted access to advanced digital tools.

Botswana's evolving digital governance framework has the potential to further strengthen the enabling environment for civil society. The full operationalisation of the [Digital Services Act](#), currently in its 24 months grace period for transition, will provide [greater regulatory clarity](#) for digital platforms, while [enhanced enforcement](#) of the [Data Protection Act](#) by the Information and Data Protection Commission—including stricter penalties for institutional data breaches and stronger compliance requirements—reinforces the protection of personal and organisational data. In addition, the proposed [Cybersecurity Bill](#) aims to establish a more comprehensive framework for addressing online security risks. If implemented in accordance with human rights standards, these measures could enhance the security of CSOs' digital communications and platforms, reduce vulnerabilities to cyber threats, and strengthen confidence in digital engagement. Collectively, these reforms have the potential to create a

safer, more predictable, and rights-respecting digital environment that enables civil society organisations to communicate, organise, and advocate more effectively while safeguarding fundamental freedoms.

Challenges and Opportunities

Over the next four months, CSOs in Botswana are expected to face significant challenges related to funding, civic space, and engagement with government. The continued decline in donor support, coupled with the withdrawal of government funding for BOCONGO, has increased concerns about the sustainability of CSOs, particularly those working on governance, accountability, and advocacy issues. At the same time, difficulties in securing regular high-level engagement with government officials may limit opportunities for meaningful participation in policy processes and weaken collaboration between government and civil society.

The operating environment is also likely to be shaped by ongoing debates around constitutional reform, the Constitutional Court Bill, and other legislative developments, including the Public Service Bill and the draft Media Bill. While these processes have generated greater public interest and participation, they have also contributed to tensions between government and some CSOs, particularly where civil society positions have been viewed as politically oppositional. Concerns regarding media independence and freedom of expression may further affect civic participation and public accountability.

Despite these challenges, important opportunities exist to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society. Recent nationwide consultations on constitutional reform demonstrated growing public engagement and provided opportunities for citizens and CSOs to contribute to governance discussions. The government's review of key provisions of the Societies (Amendment) Act also reflected a willingness to respond to stakeholder concerns and improve aspects of the regulatory framework. In addition, continued inclusion of CSOs in selected working groups and consultation forums offers a foundation for stronger collaboration.

To address challenges and take advantage of emerging opportunities, civil society will require more sustainable and diversified funding sources, stronger coordination and coalition-building, and regular institutionalized dialogue with government. Protecting fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, association, and media independence, will remain essential for ensuring meaningful civic participation and enabling CSOs to continue contributing to democratic governance, accountability, and national development.

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