



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot Panama June 2026

Context

Reporting period: January - June 2026

Panama has maintained a relatively stable regulatory environment for civil society over the last decade. However, significant [challenges](#) remain, such as low levels of organisational participation and funding difficulties, which weaken the sector. The current context is characterised by growing hostility towards social leaders, which has led to a deterioration in public dialogue. At the same time, the business sector continues to exert a strong influence on government decisions without facing any restrictions that affect its activities. The climate of confrontation that emerged in 2025 has not ended, and tensions are expected to continue in the coming months of 2026 as the underlying causes remain, leaving civic space in a state of extreme ‘fragility’ and polarisation.

The country is preparing for the possible reopening of First Quantum’s copper mine, located in Donoso, Colón province, and the continuation of plans to [build a reservoir in the Indio River basin](#), which aims to guarantee water supply for the interoceanic highway but would affect more than 2,000 people who would need to be relocated. The construction of the reservoir on the Indio River, which directly affects rural and indigenous communities, has sparked organised resistance and warnings of protests. At the same time, the threat of the Donoso mine reopening has reignited public opposition to metal mining, which is seen as a risk to the environment and public health. These factors point to further protests and tensions between the government, local communities and civil society organisations, against a backdrop characterised by the defence of local territory and demands for transparency in public decision-making.

1. Respect for and protection of fundamental freedoms

In Panama, the freedoms of expression, association and assembly are enshrined in the constitution and are underpinned by ratified international conventions that form part of the constitutional framework, with no regulations formally contradicting these rights. This legal commitment is reinforced by the [State’s adherence](#) to regional standards such as the Declarations of [Chapultepec](#) and [Salta II](#). However, there is a critical gap between this legal theory and recent institutional practice.

Although no physical attacks or murders of journalists were recorded in the country during the first four months of 2026, the [Inter-American Press Association](#) (IAPA) and [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)](#) warn of a serious deterioration in freedom of expression. This warning stems from the fact that hostility has shifted towards the instrumentalisation of laws and the preventive seizure of assets as sophisticated tools to silence public scrutiny and encourage self-censorship. RSF warns that Panamanian journalism is “succumbing, suffocated” by a hostile political discourse.

Self-censorship has increased and the independence of some media outlets has been curtailed, according to the 2026 report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) published on 3 May 2026. The report notes that Panama suffered a significant [drop](#) in the World Press Freedom Index, falling from 53rd to 65th place.

The case against journalist Sabrina Bacal and media professionals Mauricio Valenzuela and Daniel Lopera represented a [critical milestone](#) for press freedom in Panama, being described by journalists’ associations as an “unprecedented threat”

and an attempt at prior censorship. Although the protection order was issued on 6 November 2025, the matter came to public attention on 6 March 2026, when Bacal denounced the restriction.

The most controversial aspect of the case was that the Public Prosecutor's Office used Law 38 of 2001 and Law 31 of 1998 – legislation designed to protect victims of physical violence and serious crimes – as a mechanism to silence journalistic investigations. The Journalists' Forum and the National Journalism Council [warned](#) that this undermined the spirit of these laws, using them as a tool for judicial harassment to shield figures close to those in power from public scrutiny.

Another alarming development is the proposed reform to the law on the right of reply, [which was approved at first reading](#) without consultation on 11 March 2026 by the National Assembly's Government Committee. This bill seeks to transform ethical self-regulation into a coercive mechanism subject to judicial sanctions. Professional bodies such as the National Journalism Council and the Journalists' Forum [warn](#) that the bill upsets the balance of news coverage by imposing deadlines of just 48 hours and the obligation to set aside permanent slots for right of reply, which directly interferes with editorial autonomy and the internal management of the media.

Furthermore, this initiative introduces 'diffuse liability' by extending sanctions to administrative structures not involved in content creation, which the [Inter-American Press Association \(IAPA\)](#) describes as pressure that encourages self-censorship and undermines the sustainability of journalism. Finally, the fact that this reform has been pushed through without consulting the sectors affected is denounced as an act of [legislating behind the backs of journalists](#) and the public, representing a systemic threat to freedom of expression in Panama.

With regard to freedom of association and civic space, [the CIVICUS monitor](#) classifies Panama as a country with limited civic space, giving it a score of 73. This rating has remained unchanged since 2018. Although Panama maintains one of the most favourable ratings in the region, the report warns of isolated acts of repression against protesters and human rights defenders.

In the first four months of 2026, organisations focusing on issues of transparency, institutional governance and human rights have been able to carry out their activities without facing direct questioning or harassment. Similarly, no legal reforms have been proposed that would affect freedom of association or the right to demonstrate.

However, in January 2026, a landmark case of strategic litigation against public participation took place. On 22 January 2026, the Fifth Civil Liquidation Court ordered the [preventive seizure](#) of the bank accounts of the organisation Centro de Incidencia Ambiental (CIAM) and of properties belonging to the organisation Adopta Bosque Panamá. This measure followed the filing in 2025 of a criminal complaint and a claim for damages by the developers of the Puerto Barú project against the environmental NGOs, whom they accused of spreading false information about the project.

This decision represents a systemic setback in relation to the obligations set out in Article 9 of the Escazú Agreement, which commits the Panamanian State to guaranteeing a safe and enabling environment for environmental defenders, protecting them from threats, harassment and reprisals.

In April 2026, Alexandra Brenes, a Member of Parliament from the independent group, tabled an [anti-SLAPP bill](#) in the National Assembly, which was referred to the Committee on Government and Constitutional Affairs, meaning it formally entered the legislative process. This paves the way for its first reading and sets an important precedent.

The trade unions and teachers' associations that led the protests and strikes in 2025 [remain](#) active, but face legal proceedings, administrative sanctions and [the withholding of funds](#), which have weakened their capacity for organisation and mobilisation. May 2026 marks one year since the start of investigations into trade union leaders, with no indictment having been issued; on the contrary, an [extension of](#) the investigation period has been requested. Furthermore, the Ministry of Labour's request to [dissolve](#) the Single Union of Organised Workers (SUNTRACS), which is accused of vandalism and misuse of resources, remains in force.

In light of this situation, the [Committee on Freedom of Association of the International Labour Organisation](#), in its review of the Panama case, has expressed deep concern over what it considers to be significant and growing restrictions against SUNTRACS and its leaders. According to the Committee, the simultaneous nature of the financial, legal, administrative and leadership attacks points to a coordinated effort by the State to dismantle the organisation, rather than to address specific legal violations.

2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

Panama has a regulatory framework applicable to civil society organisations that is spread across various legal instruments. The main piece of legislation is [Executive Decree No. 62 of 30 March 2017](#), which regulates non-profit associations and foundations and sets out a list of requirements for establishing a non-profit organisation. In Panama, it is easier to set up a [public limited company](#) than a non-profit organisation.

The legislation governing civil society organisations requires an application for legal personality to be made through a lawyer. The costs of lawyers, the notary and registration with the Public Registry are burdensome for small organisations. Furthermore, the procedure for obtaining legal personality is centralised in Panama City. These obstacles limit the capacity of civil society organisations to act and advocate, in a context that calls for greater openness and equity to strengthen citizen participation.

Since 2003, following the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), non-profit organisations in Panama have been required to keep accounting records of financial operations, transactions or donations that account for their origin. This is set out [in Law 50 of 2 July 2003](#), which adds provisions on the prevention of terrorism to the Criminal Code. All civil society organisations must include in their statutes this obligation to keep records that account for the origin and nature of their funds.

Article 20 of [Decree 62 of March 2017](#) stipulates that funds derived from self-management or any other source may be subject to inspections, audits and supervision by the Ministry of the Interior. This discretionary power is set out in the executive decree, but to date no Panamanian organisation has been subjected to such inspections.

Events in 2025, particularly in recent months, highlight the failure of Panama's legal framework to safeguard the freedoms of association and expression. Critical cases such as the economic stranglehold and legal actions aimed at dissolving the SUNTRACS trade union (reported since August 2025), together with the use of SLAPP-style lawsuits to intimidate the Centre for Environmental Advocacy (CIAM) following its opposition to port projects, show how the legal system is being exploited to silence critical voices.

These events reveal deep-seated structural vulnerabilities: the lack of anti-SLAPP legislation that serves as an effective procedural tool, and the absence of state protection protocols for defenders, which leave CSOs defenceless, allowing judicial and financial harassment to be used with impunity to silence public scrutiny and erode democratic space.

Over the past six years, there has been no debate on reforms to the regulations governing non-profit organisations in Panama, nor have civil society organisations proposed or debated any such reforms.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

[The National Office for the Administration of State Grants](#), attached to the Ministry of Social Development, is responsible for awarding state grants, aimed particularly at organisations providing welfare services. Most non-governmental organisations do not have access to state grants, and there is no accountability regarding the criteria for their allocation. There are no state subsidies or support for organisations working on human rights, transparency, democracy and state reform.

Organisations may receive funding from international cooperation, private donations and self-financing. In the case of funding from international cooperation, there are no restrictions or specific legislation governing this. Donations to non-profit organisations are tax-deductible, once authorised by the [Directorate-General for Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance](#).

However, non-governmental organisations in Panama face difficulties in securing funding from international cooperation, as the country is regarded as having [strong macroeconomic indicators](#) and is therefore not a priority for cooperation agencies.

Limited sources of funding and the difficulty organisations face in meeting the minimum resource management requirements set by donors act as a barrier to the work and strengthening of civil society. A large number of organisations lack legal personality, which reduces their ability to represent and defend rights.

4. Open and responsive state

In general, Panama has [regulations that promote transparency](#), citizen participation and formal mechanisms for public consultation, although since July 2024 the current government has shown no interest in listening to the views and comments of all sectors of civil society.

The [National Dialogue for Development](#), conceived as a pluralistic forum for dialogue and consensus-building, was last convened on [6 August 2024](#) at the request of President José Raúl Mulino. It has not met since then. This prolonged silence reflects the government's deliberate disregard for the National Dialogue and for the State Commission for Justice, thereby weakening the institutional channels for public participation. The absence of meetings since August 2024 symbolises the closure of spaces for dialogue and the erosion of democratic trust, leaving social sectors without effective mechanisms to influence national decisions.

Another aspect reflecting the government's level of openness and its interaction with civil society was the process for electing the Ombudsman of the Republic of Panama, held in April 2026. Various sectors described it as a "government-imposed appointment", highlighting a pattern of "political capture" of institutions that should be independent. The handling of public objections was characterised by a [lack of transparency](#), and public consultation was reduced to a mere formality.

However, there are other forums for dialogue between civil society and state institutions on specific issues; one of these is the monitoring of the Roadmap for the Implementation of the Escazú Agreement. In January 2026, *through* [Resolution No. DM-0037-2026](#) of 27 January 2026 (Official Gazette No. 30466), Panama adopted the Roadmap for the implementation of the Escazú Agreement. Civil society organisations were explicitly taken into account, as the very structure of the [Roadmap](#) is underpinned by a cross-cutting strategy for public information and participation. Face-to-face and online workshops were held, along with a public consultation, with the support of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

Although in 2026 such explicit statements as those made in 2025 – when the Executive labelled SUNTRACS '[mafiosi and terrorists](#)' – have not been repeated with the same frequency, official discourse has evolved towards a narrative of judicial criminalisation and technical discrediting. An environment persists in which dissent by trade unions and teachers is subject to judicial proceedings, with criminal cases still pending following the strikes of the previous year.

Far from ceasing, the rhetoric against other sectors of civil society has taken on new forms:

- Attacks on environmental defenders: As part of the judicial harassment against CIAM and Adopta Bosque Panamá, orchestrated [campaigns](#) have been identified on social media that label activists as "thugs" and maliciously question their international funding in order to undermine their credibility in the eyes of the public.
- Delegitimisation of journalism: The [IAPA](#) report notes that coordinated smear campaigns persist on social media and digital platforms, many of them driven by sites of uncertain origin and with a lack of transparency regarding their funding, which amplifies content intended to discredit journalistic work.

Apart from these two trends, there have been no other recorded comments to date from government officials against civil society in 2026.

6. Access to a safe digital environment

Panamanian civil society operates in a country where, according to data from the 2024 National Human Development Report (INDH), 80 per cent of Panamanian households in urban areas have [internet access](#). In rural areas, access drops sharply to 50 per cent of households. According to the most recent estimates from ASEP in January 2025, [78 per cent of the population](#) has internet access.

Panama has a [National Cybersecurity Strategy](#) in which public sector bodies, the private sector and civil society must participate, discuss cybercrime and cybersecurity, and promote a national culture of cybersecurity. Given the sophistication of the threats, recent cyber-attacks on state institutions, the rise of artificial intelligence and the recent passing of [Law 478 of 2025](#) – which criminalises new cyber-offences – this national strategy has taken on a sense of institutional urgency.

At the same time, the [Internet Governance Forum \(IGF\)](#) is establishing itself as the platform for addressing challenges such as the [country's lag](#) in artificial intelligence, an area that still suffers from the lack of an independent regulator with real enforcement powers. These dynamics have a dual impact on civil society: whilst they open up channels for defending digital rights, they also raise alarm bells regarding the risk of excessive state controls.

Digital freedom plays a key role in creating an enabling environment, as the [preferred](#) news sources [for the population](#) of Panama in 2024/25 are digital platforms (social media and video services), in line with global trends. In January 2025, Panama had 2.85 million social media users, equivalent to [62.7 per cent of the population](#). There is a significant potential for disinformation on social media from a range of actors, who communicate without any apparent use of fact-checking methods. The use of social media is one of the main channels used for attacks and smear campaigns against political and civil society figures, and, at present, there is no legislation in place to guarantee a safe digital environment.

Challenges and opportunities

In 2026, Panama will face a scenario of growing social unrest stemming from opposition to extractive and infrastructure projects.

These tensions could push other priorities on the human rights and transparency agenda into the background, and could also exacerbate the polarisation affecting Panamanian society as a whole. The criminal complaints and civil injunctions brought against the Centre for Environmental Advocacy (CIAM) and Adopta Bosque in 2026 have highlighted how abusive lawsuits can be used to intimidate and wear down organisations that defend the environment and collective rights. This precedent highlights the urgent need for anti-SLAPP legislation to protect journalists, activists and defenders from strategic litigation designed to silence them.

The adoption of the anti-SLAPP bill tabled by MP Alexandra Brenes represents an opportunity. Civil society can use the commitments made by the State in the Escazú Agreement – which mandates the effective protection of environmental defenders – as leverage for advocacy.

Civil society organisations are preparing to act as a technical bloc that will not only call for the law but also monitor its content to ensure it offers real protection against the powers that be who use the legal system to silence critical voices. Over the coming months, roundtable discussions and meetings with MPs will be held to contribute to the parliamentary debate.

At the same time, this presents an opportunity for civil society to recognise the need to strengthen its support and coordination networks, bringing together trade unions, teachers' unions, environmental organisations and independent media in a broad coalition that guarantees the defence of civic and democratic space in Panama.

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