



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot 4

Trinidad and Tobago

July 2026

Summary

Between March and July 2026, civil society continued to operate in a formally open civic space, but the renewed State of Emergency increasingly shaped the practical exercise of fundamental freedoms. New protest exclusion zones, arrests linked to public demonstrations, extensive use of preventive detention orders, and concerns about unequal access to legal representation led to heightened scrutiny of emergency powers, due-process protections, and executive oversight. Public discourse also became more polarised, with sharper rhetoric around security, media legitimacy, LGBTQI+ rights and “far-left political terrorism.”

The legal and resource environment remained mixed. More than 3,000 NPOs faced possible suspension or cancellation over Form 6 compliance but coordinated CSO advocacy helped secure a postponement. The Escazú Agreement entered into force, though participation mechanisms remained unclear. New tax incentives and project-based grants created limited opportunities, while the EU’s planned withdrawal by September raised serious concerns about long-term funding for rights-based and governance work. State openness was further questioned by delayed environmental disclosure, contested development approvals, reduced media access and revelations of large-scale communications interception. Digital space remained accessible, but surveillance concerns and incomplete data-protection safeguards risked discouraging open civic communication, despite positive openings through regional cybersecurity cooperation and the Caribbean AI Forum.

Context

Period covered by this report: March 2026 – July 2026

March-July 2026 unfolded during the first full year of the United National Congress administration, against a backdrop dominated by violent crime, public anxiety and a more security-led approach to government. A new State of Emergency was declared in March 2026, a little more than a month after the previous state of emergency ended, meaning that Trinidad and Tobago had spent much of the preceding year under exceptional security measures. While the Government presented these measures as necessary to confront gang violence and threats against law-enforcement personnel, the detention of a prominent business family generated wider debate about whether emergency powers could be applied selectively or for political purposes.

The environment was also shaped by slow economic growth, declining energy production, persistent fiscal deficits and foreign-exchange shortages. Increasingly adversarial rhetoric between government, opposition and their supporters, particularly around security, media and foreign policy, also risked making public advocacy appear partisan and narrowing the space for independent voices.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Trinidad and Tobago generally respects constitutional freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and is [rated](#) “open” on the CIVICUS Monitor. NGOs, unions, and advocacy groups operate [without formal restrictions](#).

Between March and July 2026, however, the [renewed State of Emergency](#) became the central frame shaping the practical exercise of these freedoms. [Declared on 3 March 2026](#) and

[extended first in March](#) and [again on 11 June through mid-September](#), it expanded warrantless search and arrest powers and preserved preventive-detention mechanisms, even though it [did not impose a general prohibition on protest or a curfew](#), like the limited curfew imposed in the previous [State of Emergency](#) in 2011.

Public assembly remained legally possible, but the operating space narrowed. In late May, the Police Commissioner brought into effect [restrictions barring public protests](#) and demonstrations within 500 metres of 15 state institutions and facilities. [Trade unions condemned the measure](#) as unconstitutional and disproportionate, and [some publicly threatened court action](#). [Police also dispersed at least one public gathering](#) in May under the emergency regulations, and [arrested](#) the protest organiser and her mother.

Use of emergency arrest and preventative detention powers remained significant. By mid-April, 45 days into the 2026 State of Emergency, police [reported](#) 1,588 arrests, 355 charges and 258 approved detention orders, 170 of which had been executed. In July, the [detention](#) of a prominent businessman and his wife under emergency powers drew [renewed allegations](#) that preventive detention could be used in ways seen as politically or ethnically selective, although the state had not publicly accepted those claims at the time of writing.

Freedom of expression remained broadly protected in law, but media and rights debates stayed contentious. The Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago (MATT) [criticised](#) reduced formal press access to the Prime Minister and the exclusion of journalists from some state events.

LGBTQI+ rights also remained legally unsettled: the Court of Appeal's March 2025 [reinstatement](#) of criminal penalties for same-sex intimacy remained operative, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [urged alignment with international standards](#). The resulting [appeal](#) was heard by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council on 8 July 2026, with no reversal occurring during the reporting period.

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

Although Trinidad and Tobago has generally maintained a supportive legal environment for civil society, the non-profit organisations (NPO) regulatory framework continued to generate significant compliance strain in this reporting period. In March 2026, the Registrar General's Department (RGD) [issued a notice](#) indicating that more than 3,000 NPOs were at risk of suspension and cancellation for failure to submit the annual Form 6 return under the [Non-Profit Organisations Act \(2019\)](#) by 27 April. Civil society actors reported [widespread confusion](#) over the relationship between Form 6 and the previously familiar Form 29, limited notice, rejected filings, and unclear implementation guidance. Several <https://www.facebook.com/reel/2715846635438400> CSOs called publicly for greater transparency, clearer guidance and more time to comply. Subsequent to this, the RGD [postponed](#) the suspension and cancellation exercise until further notice. The RGD also announced that the legislation governing NPOs was under review, with the stated goal of simplifying processes and filing requirements. This reduced the immediate risk and demonstrated the value of coordinated civil-society advocacy, while creating a potential opportunity for broader regulatory reform; however, the underlying compliance uncertainty remained unresolved pending the outcome of the review.

Civil society organisations operate freely, without new legal restrictions on advocacy, formation, or foreign funding. However, compliance demands have risen due to global anti-money laundering norms. NGOs are expected to maintain clear financial records and may face audits. These measures, while well-intentioned, may burden smaller CSOs lacking technical capacity.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Trinidad and Tobago's civil society relies on a mix of limited state funding, corporate donations, international grants, and community fundraising. Government subventions exist but are modest and come with [specific conditions](#), which can pose challenges for smaller NGOs. With limited corporate philanthropy and most international grants being project-based and administratively demanding, sufficient and sustainable funding remains a challenge for civil society.

In line with these general resource conditions, opportunities that arose during the reporting period were largely project-based. In May 2026, the Digicel Foundation and Shell Trinidad and Tobago invited applications for the [2026 EPIC grant](#), offering TT\$100,000 each to ten registered NPO projects focused on environmental sustainability, resource-based livelihoods, and technology or digitalisation. Local philanthropic mobilisation also continued, including [FEEL's 2026 donor-engagement drive and fundraising activities](#), but such initiatives remain supplementary rather than a substitute for predictable core support.

At policy level, the Finance Act 2026 opened a potentially important [new channel](#) by allowing private donations into statutory funds established under section 43 of the Exchequer and Audit Act, with related tax deductions for individuals and companies. The measure was introduced in part to facilitate private contributions to the Women's Health Fund, a government-established fund intended to support initiatives addressing period poverty. While this may modestly widen incentivised giving, questions were [raised](#) during parliamentary consideration about independent oversight and accountability for such funds.

Following the European Union's August 2025 announcement of a [phasing down of EU operations](#), uncertainty deepened during March–July 2026 about the future of EU support to civil society. Existing EU-funded projects are required to conclude by the end of August, ahead of the EU's planned withdrawal by September. No new long-term funding has been announced beyond this period. As the EU has been a major donor for rights-based, governance and accountability-focused programming, its departure is likely to create a significant funding and advocacy gap for CSOs.

Unresolved donor transition pressures and the administrative burden associated with NPO compliance continue to affect organisational sustainability, especially for smaller groups with limited staff and legal capacity. Despite small gains, civil society's financial landscape remains fragile, as it is highly susceptible to funding cuts, regulatory burdens, and shifting international priorities.

4. State openness and responsiveness

State openness and responsiveness remain mixed. Formal access mechanisms, such as the [FOIA framework](#) and the Office of the Ombudsman of Trinidad and Tobago's role in complaints and review, remain in place, but the practical experience of access and consultation can vary across institutions and issue areas.

Environmental governance generated additional concern. The Government publicly disclosed an [offshore oil spill](#) in the Gulf of Paria on 10 May, nine days after the spill was detected on 1 May and only after Venezuelan authorities had first raised the issue publicly. The CSO Fishermen and Friends of the Sea [criticised](#) the delayed disclosure and sought fuller information on the spill's location, cause, and response. Also in May, the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) approved the Rocky Point, Tobago hotel project and [defended the process as transparent and science-based](#), despite environmental concerns having been communicated directly to the EMA during its review process by experts and civil-society stakeholders, including Save our Sea Turtles Tobago and the Rocky Point Foundation. These

include [concerns](#) about reef systems, turtle nesting beaches, runoff and cumulative ecological impacts that had not been adequately reflected in the final decision.

Openness toward scrutiny was also questioned in other sectors. MATT [publicly raised concerns](#) over reduced formal press access to the Prime Minister and the exclusion of journalists from some government events. State transparency and accountability were further questioned in July following [reports](#) that more than two million calls and electronic communications had been intercepted between 2018 and 2023, alongside the public circulation of a private conversation allegedly obtained through State interception. Data-protection and transparency specialist and civil society actor Rishi Maharaj [stressed](#) the need for intercepted information to be securely protected, and noted that any unauthorised disclosure could constitute an offence and should be investigated seriously. Concerns about State openness were compounded by [gaps and delays](#) in statutory reporting on interception activities, which limited timely public scrutiny of the use and oversight of these surveillance powers.

A more positive legal development was the [Escazú Agreement's entry into force](#) for Trinidad and Tobago on 27 April 2026, establishing important mechanisms for access to information and public participation in environmental decision-making. However, during a [meeting](#) hosted by an environmental CSO in May, participants raised concerns that civil society outreach to relevant authorities had reportedly gone unacknowledged, suggesting that clear channels for participation and engagement had not yet been established in practice.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Public discourse toward civil society remains mixed: civic voices continue to participate in national debate, but issues linked to security and foreign policy have generated sharper rhetoric and more polarised narratives in the reporting period. In July 2026, Trinidad and Tobago [participated](#) in a US-hosted ministerial conference on political terrorism and publicly endorsed concerns about an under-recognised threat from “[far-left political terrorism](#).” Although no domestic restrictions were announced, the failure to clearly distinguish terrorism from political dissent and peaceful advocacy raises concerns that this ideologically specific framing could stigmatise critical civil-society actors and restrict lawful expression, association and protest. International counterterrorism experts have similarly criticised the initiative as a politicisation of counterterrorism that selectively downplays other forms of extremist violence.

In the security domain, public discourse hardened further during the renewed State of Emergency. Government ministers [defended](#) the no-protest zones as lawful and necessary, and during the June extension debate the [Prime Minister argued in Parliament](#) that constitutional rights are not absolute. Trade unions and other civic actors [responded](#) that the restrictions undermined democratic expression and the practical exercise of peaceful assembly. The increasingly adversarial framing of protesters and critics risked portraying legitimate civic dissent as disruptive or politically motivated, potentially weakening recognition of civil society as an independent and legitimate participant in public debate.

Debates around media legitimacy also sharpened. MATT [linked](#) reduced access to the head of government with broader concern about attacks on press legitimacy, and later called on Guardian Media Limited to address [allegations of compromised editorial independence](#) after the resignation of a senior investigative journalist. The Prime Minister's [response](#) to Guardian Media used strongly adversarial language, adding to a more polarised media climate.

Discourses around sexuality and inclusion remained exclusionary in important respects. CAISO's launch of its “[Growing Spaces](#)” initiative foregrounded continuing marginalisation, housing insecurity and lack of legal and social protections for LGBTQI+ persons. According to information obtained, Government representatives were invited to the launch but were reportedly not permitted to attend, with concerns raised internally about whether engagement with LGBTQI+ issues aligned with government policy and domestic law. This suggests that

the prevailing policy environment may also constrain formal State engagement with LGBTQI+ civil society. The continuing defence of criminal penalties for same-sex intimacy before the Privy Council underscored the institutional barriers facing equality-focused advocacy.

The security-focused policy climate also raised concerns about uneven social impacts and access to justice. While the State of Emergency regulations did not formally suspend constitutional freedoms such as expression or peaceful assembly, the expansion of police powers, including warrantless searches, arrests and Preventive Detention Orders (PDOs), renewed debate about profiling, disproportionate enforcement and executive oversight. The [revocation](#) of certain high-profile PDOs prompted legal professionals and civil-society actors to [question](#) whether detainees without similar public visibility or financial resources receive the same level of scrutiny, legal representation and access to review mechanisms.

Civil society actors [called for greater legal support](#) for detainees from economically disadvantaged communities and [stronger independent oversight](#) of detention decisions. These disparities weaken confidence in due process and may discourage affected communities and civil-society organisations from challenging possible abuses. They therefore raise [broader concerns](#) for the enabling environment, particularly regarding equality before the law, access to justice and the ability of CSOs to monitor and advocate against the disproportionate use of emergency powers. Civil society observers and commentators noted that such measures historically affect some groups more than others, including Afro-Trinidadian youth in urban communities, Venezuelan migrants, and lower-income households. These impacts can deepen existing social and economic inequalities, making it harder for affected communities to access legal support, engage with public institutions and participate fully in civic life.

Regarding migrants and refugees, public attitudes remain mixed and at times exclusionary. A [March 2026 study](#) of Venezuelan migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Trinidad and Tobago found that legal precarity, alongside racial, ethnic and sociocultural factors, contributed to xenophobic attitudes and barriers to integration. Civil society organisations continued to advocate for migrant rights and inclusion, with [La Casita Hispanic Cultural Centre seeking government engagement](#) over registration failures, lack of official responses and barriers affecting migrants' ability to regularise their status.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Online platforms remained central to civil-society advocacy during March–July 2026. However, [official warnings in March about social-media commentary](#) during the State of Emergency, including warnings about enforcement against online statements viewed as threats, prompted legal civil-society actors to [stress the need to distinguish genuine threats from protected political criticism and dissent](#). They warned that an overly broad approach could deter lawful online expression and encourage self-censorship.

The [phone surveillance controversy](#) also raised concerns about digital privacy and the security of communications used by civil society. With the [Data Protection Act](#) remaining only partially proclaimed, [uncertainty](#) about how intercepted information is stored, accessed and disclosed may weaken trust in digital communications and discourage journalists, activists and human-rights defenders from communicating openly on sensitive issues.

Trinidad and Tobago also strengthened cybersecurity engagement through reported [discussions](#) with the United States and by [becoming the twentieth member of the Latin American and Caribbean Cyber Competence Centre](#). Membership provides access to regional expertise and cooperation on cybercrime and critical-infrastructure protection. This may eventually strengthen the digital security of CSOs and the wider public; however, no specific consultation process or direct support for CSOs has been announced. At the same time, closer cybersecurity and information-sharing cooperation should be monitored in light of broader counterterrorism and law-enforcement cooperation with the United States. In the context of

recent concerns about State surveillance, expanded technical capacity could pose risks to civil society if used to monitor lawful advocacy or political dissent without clear safeguards and independent oversight.

In July, the [Caribbean Artificial Intelligence \(AI\) Forum](#), hosted by the Caribbean Telecommunications Union, brought together government, business, academia and civil society to discuss responsible AI. CSO participation created an opportunity to raise concerns about transparency, data protection, equality and human rights. Its value for the enabling environment will depend on whether this engagement continues and meaningfully influences digital-governance policy.

Overall, the digital environment remained open but increasingly contested. While stronger cybersecurity cooperation and emerging AI dialogue created opportunities for more inclusive digital governance, unresolved concerns around surveillance, privacy and consultation continued to threaten trust, free expression and meaningful CSO participation.

Challenges and Opportunities

Over the next four months, civil society will likely continue to face pressure from a security driven governance climate, including the risk of renewed emergency-style measures if violence escalates (a possibility [publicly signalled](#) as the State of Emergency ended). Implementation and possible litigation around post-State of Emergency security legislation, especially bail reform, may also heighten polarisation around due process and judicial oversight. Continued public mobilisation around police accountability (and official responses to protests) is likely to remain a flashpoint, while online monitoring and enforcement rhetoric describing “destabilising” speech may amplify concerns for activists and citizen commentators.

Over the rest of 2026, civil society will likely continue to operate within a political context that is becoming even more partisan and influenced by increasingly incendiary political rhetoric. This has the possibility of further politicising civic space-led advocacy by members of the general public as well as by the government and opposition parties. The continued grey areas of alleged State-led communications interception and the [branding of persons](#) concerned with this alleged interception by the Prime Minister as “involved in criminal activity and those suffering from derangement and paranoia,” can contribute to a greater reluctance by activists to speak out on issues such as freedom of expression.

The ongoing review of NPO legislation will therefore be important to monitor: if accompanied by meaningful CSO consultation, it could provide an opportunity to simplify filing requirements and reduce regulatory burdens, while continued uncertainty or new requirements could further strain smaller organisations.

Opportunities have arisen due to an increased interest in issues around data centres and technology, for civic actors to expand conversations on technology and data security as components of a well-functioning civic space, as well as an underpinning element of human rights within the country. Also, the high-profile case involving PDO and the subsequent release of a prominent family has stimulated wider public interest in the alleged abuses of the State of Emergency and its impacts on persons being held without charge, and without the financial capacity to advocate for themselves.

Opportunities include Escazú accession, with entry into force for Trinidad and Tobago on 27 April 2026, and a near-term regional COP process that may catalyse domestic implementation discourse on access to information, participation and justice in environmental matters. The February 2026 EU tax-list delisting and clarified NPO oversight approach (risk-based, FATF-aligned) may also modestly reduce reputational and compliance friction for cross-border partnerships.

To address risks and utilise openings, civil society will need coordinated legislative advocacy, stronger legal capacity (including strategic litigation readiness), and strengthened digital safety and documentation practices, while sustaining engagement in available consultation spaces.

External actors, including development partners and donors, can support this through flexible funding, legal and digital-security assistance, and continued support for independent civic-space monitoring. The EU SEE initiative has provided the impetus and data to support a new civil society-led monitoring and reporting system for Trinidad and Tobago ([SCOPE-TT](#)), which is currently mobilising a cohort of civil society champions to utilise this and new data to undertake advocacy and engagement around the role of civic space – between and among CSOs, the State, and other relevant publics.

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