

Bangladesh

Country Focus Report

2026



Credit: Tanvir Malek



TABLE OF CONTENTS

A. An Introduction to the Enabling Environment

B. Assessment of the Enabling Environment

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms
2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework
3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources
4. Open and Responsive State
5. Supportive Public Culture on Discourses on Civil Society
6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

C. Recommendations

D. Research Process



A) An Introduction to the Enabling Environment

What we understand by an Enabling Environment is the combination of laws, rules and social attitudes that support and promote the work of civil society. Within such an environment, civil society can engage in political and public life without fear of reprisals, openly express its views, and actively participate in shaping its context. This includes a supportive legal and regulatory framework for civil society, ensuring access to information and resources that are sustainable and flexible to pursue their goals unhindered, in safe physical and digital spaces. In an enabling environment, the state demonstrates openness and responsiveness in governance, promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. Positive values, norms, attitudes, and practices towards civil society from state and non-state actors further underscore the supportive environment.

To capture the state of the Enabling Environment, we use the following six principles:

SIX ENABLING PRINCIPLES



Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms



Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework



Accessible and Sustainable Resources



Open and Responsive State



Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society



Access to a Secure Digital Environment

In this Country Focus Report, each enabling principle is assessed with a quantitative score and complemented by an analysis and recommendations written by our Network Members. Rather than offering a singular index to rank countries, the report aims to measure the enabling environment for civil society across the 6 principles, discerning dimensions of strength and those requiring attention.

The findings presented in this report are grounded in the insights and diverse perspectives of civil society actors who came together in a dedicated panel with representatives from civil society to discuss and evaluate the state of the Enabling Environment. Their collective input enriches the report with a grounded, participatory assessment. This primary input is further supported by secondary sources of information, which provide additional context and strengthen the analysis.

Reporting period covered: May 2025 – May 2026

Brief Overview of the Country Context

Bangladesh entered 2026 after a decisive political reconfiguration. The [mass uprising of July–August 2024](#) ended the tenure of Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and was followed by an interim administration led by Professor Muhammad Yunus. On 12 February 2026, Bangladesh held its 13th parliamentary election alongside a national referendum on proposed constitutional and institutional reforms, returning the country to elected rule. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) [secured](#) a parliamentary majority and formed the government. Election observers such as Transparency International Bangladesh [assessed](#) the election as having been held at an acceptable level of fairness, participation, competitiveness and inclusivity, while also documenting violations of the electoral code of conduct, violence, irregularities and unequal participation for some groups.

The new government took office amid lofty public expectations that it would deliver meaningful reforms while addressing economic challenges. Public interest and discourse focused on whether constitutional and institutional reforms initiated during the interim period would continue under the elected government, whether oversight institutions would have resources and capacity to function independently, and whether earlier reforms would be maintained, revised or reversed. The review of the government's [first 100 days](#) acknowledged several early governance measures implemented, but raised concerns about the absence of a clear roadmap for completing key reform and accountability commitments. Questions on reform and accountability remain central as Bangladesh moves from an interim administration to an elected government.

Bangladesh's economic and social context remains challenging. Growth slowed following the July 2024 political upheaval, while elevated inflation continued to erode household purchasing power and intensify cost-of-living pressures. The International Monetary Fund projected real GDP growth of 4.7 per cent and average consumer-price inflation of 9.2 per cent [for financial year 2025/26](#). These pressures intersect with rapid urbanisation, uneven access to quality public services and employment, and persistent disparities based on geography, income, gender, disability, ethnicity and religion. Although Bangladesh has made substantial progress in poverty reduction, the [World Bank's Poverty and Equity Assessment](#) notes that sustaining inclusive gains will require more productive employment, stronger human capital, more responsive social protection and greater resilience to economic and climate-related shocks.

Floods, cyclones, river erosion, salinity intrusion and heat stress remain recurring pressures on livelihoods, public infrastructure and local economies. In June 2026, the World Bank [approved a USD 1.1 billion](#) financing for two projects to mitigate price and supply volatility in global fertiliser and fuel markets, sustain food security and enable rapid crisis response.

Bangladesh also continues to host one of the world's largest refugee populations. Around [1.2 million Rohingya](#) refugees live in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char, while the protracted crisis in Myanmar, constrained humanitarian resources and limited prospects for durable solutions continue to affect both refugee and host communities. These humanitarian pressures intersect with broader national concerns around employment, service delivery, local development and climate resilience.

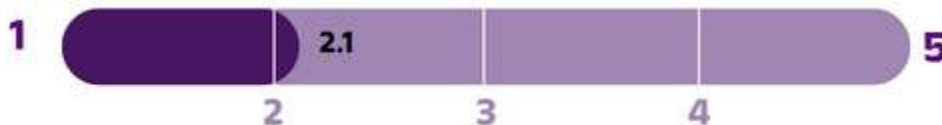
Taken together, these political, economic, and social developments form the context in which public institutions, communities, and civil society actors operate during the period covered by this report.

B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

PRINCIPLE SCORE

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score: ¹



Bangladesh's Constitution protects freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression under [Articles 37, 38 and 39](#). However, the exercise of these rights remains uneven in practice. During the reporting period, civic actors, journalists, online critics, human rights defenders and political activists continued to face arbitrary detention, extrajudicial criminal proceedings, administrative restriction, coercive intimidation and, in some cases, inadequate protection from attacks by non-state actors.

The constraints do not amount to a blanket prohibition on civic action. Civil society organisations, professional groups, cultural platforms, media outlets and community actors continue to organise, publish, advocate and participate in public debate. Yet their ability to act safely and predictably often depends on the political sensitivity of the issue, their perceived affiliation, and whether an activity concerns accountability, minority rights, cultural pluralism, religion or criticism of state institutions.

Recent monitoring by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) documented restrictions affecting journalists, online critics, human rights defenders, lawyers and political activists, including arrests, prosecution, travel restrictions and pressure on peaceful gatherings. These developments indicate that constitutional guarantees are not consistently protected through law-enforcement practice, administrative decision-making or effective accountability for violations.

¹This is a rebased score derived from the [CIVICUS Monitor rating](#) published in December 2025.

The score of 2 reflects an environment in which fundamental freedoms remain formally recognised and are exercised by many actors, but where legal uncertainty, selective enforcement, physical and digital intimidation, and weak protection against reprisals continue to create serious risks for civic participation.

1.1 Freedom of Association

Article 38 of the [Constitution](#) of Bangladesh guarantees every citizen the right to form associations or unions, subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of morality or public order. Bangladesh retains a diverse associational landscape, including non-governmental organisations, professional bodies, cultural groups, labour unions, community-based organisations and informal civic platforms. Following the political changes of August 2024, civil society actors and interest groups that were hitherto stymied, were able to resume advocacy, public engagement and policy dialogue with greater latitude than in the preceding period, according to the [BTI 2026 country report](#).

However, this opening has remained vulnerable to legislative and administrative pressure, particularly where civic activity was perceived as politically sensitive or linked to accountability, historical narratives, Indigenous rights or opposition politics. In May 2025, the government amended Section 18 of the [2009 Anti-Terrorism Act](#) into the [Anti-Terrorism \(Amendment\) Ordinance, 2025](#), authorising it to prohibit not only an entity but also all its activities. Parliament retained this power in the [Anti-Terrorism \(Amendment\) Act, 2026](#). Although these amendments were introduced in a specific political context, they broadened the state's legislative powers to restrict the activities of organisations. Human rights organisations warned that such powers require clear safeguards, due process, and independent review to prevent their misuse against peaceful association.

Security-related enforcement has also affected Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In December 2025, [Amnesty International reported](#) that 59 Indigenous Bawm people including three children, were detained without trial following arrests linked to alleged support for the Kuki-Chin National Front. Amnesty [raised concerns](#) about prolonged detention, inadequate legal representation, three deaths in custody and the apparent indiscriminate targeting of Bawm people without establishing individual criminal responsibility. The case illustrates how broad security-related enforcement can affect associational rights, due process and the civic security of an Indigenous community.

In the context of the May 2025 prohibition of Bangladesh Awami League's activities under the Anti-Terrorism Act, professional associations have also faced exclusionary pressure. Since January 2026, around 200 lawyers were [reportedly barred or prevented](#) from contesting elections in at least 13 bar associations because of alleged Awami League affiliation. Reports indicated that some were unable to collect or submit nomination papers, while others had their nominations cancelled. In the [Supreme Court Bar Association](#) election held on 13-14 May, the exclusion was reportedly justified by reference to the ban on Awami League activities. Given the role of bar associations in representation, access to justice and legal accountability, such restrictions based on alleged political affiliation, without transparent and individualised due process, raise concerns about pluralism and equal participation within professional civic bodies.

Labour organising continues to face separate but persistent challenges. The ILO Committee on Freedom of Association continued its examination of Bangladesh in [Case No. 3263](#), covering allegations of anti-union violence, barriers to trade-union registration and inadequate protection and remedies against anti-union discrimination, while Bangladesh's ILO Roadmap

retained these issues among its priority reform areas. The [Bangladesh Labour \(Amendment\) Act, 2026](#) introduced potentially enabling changes, replacing the previous percentage-based threshold for union formation with graduated numerical requirements beginning at 20 workers and reducing documentation requirements for registration. However, restrictions on the number of unions within some establishments, implementation gaps, anti-union discrimination and limited access to effective remedies remain continuing concerns.

Overall, freedom of association is not subject to a blanket prohibition in Bangladesh, as civil society actors continue to establish and operate organisations. Yet, broad security-related legal powers, selective administrative pressure, exclusionary practices affecting professional associations, inadequate protection from mob intimidation and unresolved barriers to labour organising mean that the right is not consistently secure or predictable in practice.

1.2 Freedom of Assembly

[Article 37](#) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh guarantees citizens the right to assemble and participate peacefully and without arms in public meetings and processions, subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of public order or public health. During the reporting period, public meetings, human chains, marches, and demonstrations continued to take place on a range of social, political, and cultural issues. For example, in February 2026, [Bangladesh Mahila Parishad](#) held a human chain and march in Dhaka protesting violence against minority communities and derogatory remarks about women.

In August 2025, a discussion organised by Mancha 71 at the Dhaka Reporters Unity was disrupted after a [mob surrounded and heckled participants](#). Police then [detained 16 participants](#), including journalists and academics, and later brought Anti-Terrorism Act charges against several of them; witnesses disputed the allegation that the meeting had incited violence. The incident—documented by [Human Rights Watch](#)—illustrates how civic platforms and their participants may face both hostile non-state pressure and criminalisation rather than effective protection.

However, the ability to assemble safely and predictably remained uneven, particularly where gatherings involved cultural pluralism, religious sensitivity, gender equality, or dissenting narratives. On 23 November 2025, supporters of Baul singer Abul Sarkar were preparing to hold a peaceful human chain in Manikganj demanding his release when counter-protesters identifying themselves as [Tawhidi Janata attacked them](#). Several artists and supporters were injured. According to an EU SEE alert, police officers present appeared reluctant to intervene until the violence had escalated. The incident demonstrated that the right to assemble can be undermined not only through formal restriction, but also through inadequate protection from violence by non-state actors.

Similar concerns arose in May and June 2026, when planned public screenings of the government-certified Bangladeshi film [Bonolota Express](#) were halted in Brahmanbaria after objections and online mobilisation by local religious student groups. Organisers reported that venue permission was withdrawn and that they received insufficient administrative support; a second attempted screening was also stopped. The incident prompted a [public human chain](#) and protest by cultural actors and local representatives. Rather than ensuring that a lawful cultural event could proceed safely, local authorities referred to social-media criticism, sensitivity and law-and-order concerns to withhold their support, as documented in an [EU SEE alert](#).

Related concerns arose around religious and cultural gatherings. On 11 April 2026, [spiritual leader Shamim Reza was killed](#) in Daulatpur, Kushtia after an old video allegedly containing religiously offensive remarks from him was recirculated online; his shrine was subsequently vandalised and set on fire. On 15 May 2026, a group of men reportedly [attacked devotees](#) during the weekly Urs at the Shah Ali shrine in Mirpur, Dhaka, injuring several people. Taken together, the incidents show how online allegations and organised violence can endanger pluralistic religious-cultural practices, while prevention, protection and accountability remain insufficient.

These cases do not indicate a blanket prohibition on peaceful assembly. Rather, they show that protection is contingent: gatherings that are considered socially or politically sensitive may face organised disruption, cancellation or pressure to scale down, while the state response may prioritise the avoidance of tension or succumb to radical elements' demands over safeguarding the organisers' rights. Freedom of peaceful assembly therefore remains formally protected but insufficiently secured in practice, especially for cultural, minority and rights-based groups.

1.3 Freedom of Expression

[Article 39](#) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh guarantees freedom of thought and conscience. It also guarantees citizen's freedom of speech, expression and the press, subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law on the grounds specified in [Article 39\(2\)](#). Media outlets, journalists, commentators, cultural practitioners, and online users continue to participate actively in public debate. However, the practical exercise of expression remains vulnerable to criminal proceedings, intimidation, opaque administrative action, and inadequate protection from both state and non-state pressure.

Administrative pressure also affected Indigenous rights advocacy. In April 2026, the Rangamati District Deputy Commissioner and District Magistrate issued a [cautionary letter](#) to Indigenous human rights defender Rani Yan Yan, accusing her of spreading false and misleading information about the government and military in international forums. The letter also referred to alleged efforts to bring together members of Indigenous organisations, but did not identify a specific charge or activity that justified the warning. The incident raised concern about administrative pressure on Indigenous rights advocacy and its potential chilling effect on collective organising in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The absence of a specific charge or clearly stated legal basis raised concerns about administrative pressure on Indigenous rights advocacy and its potential chilling effect on engagement with international human rights mechanisms.

Journalists continue to face the risk that professional reporting or public commentary may lead to detention or prosecution under serious criminal laws. In December 2025, veteran journalist [Anis Alamgir](#) was arrested and charged under the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Act following public commentary that authorities alleged was linked to destabilising the country and reviving banned organisations. Journalists' associations and rights groups criticised the use of counterterrorism provisions in the case, arguing that the allegations concerned expression rather than violence.

Pressure on newsrooms has also taken direct forms. On 8 February 2026, army personnel entered the Dhaka office of online outlet Bangladesh Times and [detained 21 staff members](#) after the outlet published a video showing criticism of the army during a protest. The editor-in-chief stated that he had received a warning against publishing the material; a military official later dismissed the incident as a minor matter without providing a detailed justification. The

EU SEE alert documented concern that the incident could create pressure on journalists reporting on protests and security-related issues.

Restrictions have also affected journalists beyond the newsroom. On 3 May 2026, immigration authorities stopped and questioned [Nazrul Islam Mithu](#), the Dhaka correspondent of Deutsche Presse-Agentur and president of the Overseas Correspondents Association Bangladesh, and prevented him from boarding a flight to China. No written reason or clear legal basis was disclosed; media reporting cited objections from intelligence officials. The incident raised concern about opaque restrictions that may deter journalists from engaging with international media and professional networks.

Online expression also remained exposed to punitive reaction. In April 2026, police arrested at least [four individuals](#) over Facebook posts, satire or online criticism of public officials, including a content creator detained after sharing a cartoon. These cases raised concerns about the legality and proportionality of criminal action against protected expression; the wider legal and institutional framework governing digital expression is discussed under Principle 6.

Media regulation was also under review. In January 2026, the interim government published draft ordinances proposing a National Media Commission and a Broadcasting Commission. Although the proposals were presented as measures to improve media standards and accountability, [the Editors' Council](#), [TI Bangladesh](#) and freedom-of-expression safeguarding organisations raised concerns about the rushed consultation process, executive influence over the proposed bodies and provisions that could undermine editorial independence. The proposals had not been enacted by the end of the reporting period.

Freedom of expression in Bangladesh is therefore neither uniformly suppressed nor reliably protected. Journalists and citizens retain space to report, comment and debate, but the use of criminal law, informal pressure, opaque restrictions and weak safeguards against intimidation creates a continuing chilling effect, particularly around political accountability, security institutions and criticism of public officials.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score:



Bangladesh has a legal framework that permits civil society organisations (CSO) to register, operate and receive foreign donations. During the reporting period, the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation \(Amendment\) Act, 2026](#) introduced procedural changes intended to make the registration and renewal process for CSOs more predictable.

The amended framework also removed the former speech-related ground in Section 14 concerning malicious or indecent comments about the Constitution or constitutional institutions. It further facilitated procedural easing for sanctioning certain lower-value foreign donations and funding for emergency or post-disaster activities. These changes provide a clearer and more workable legal basis for civil society activity.

However, the overall regulatory framework remains only partially enabling. Registration, project approval, foreign-donation access, monitoring, reporting, renewal, inspection and sanctions remain concentrated within the NGO Affairs Bureau and contingent upon review by state authorities. The system continues to rely heavily on documentation, approvals and administrative discretion, particularly for organisations working with foreign funding or on sensitive rights-based issues.

This assessment reflects a mixed picture. Bangladesh's framework provides lawful avenues for civil society to establish and operate organisations, and the 2026 amendment introduced meaningful procedural improvements. Yet those gains have not removed the centralised and control-oriented character of the regulatory system, nor ensured that all organisations can access its protections and procedures equally in practice.

2.1 Registration

Bangladesh permits CSOs to establish statutory identity through several legal methods of formation. For organisations seeking to receive foreign donations for voluntary activities, the principal guidance framework is the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation Act, 2016 \(FDRA\)](#), as amended by the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation \(Amendment\) Act, 2026 \(FDRA\)](#). Section 3 of the FDRA requires an organisation to obtain registration from the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) before undertaking voluntary activities with foreign donations. The law also defines an “organisation” as a non-political, non-profit voluntary body already registered under existing laws of Bangladesh, implying that NGOAB registration is auxiliary to an earlier domestic incorporation process.

The 2026 amendment introduced clearer procedural safeguards. Under amended Section 4, registration and renewal certificates are valid for ten years; an organisation must apply for renewal six months before expiry and may continue its voluntary activities while a renewal application remains pending. The amended provision also retains inter-agency review involving the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Financial Institutions Division, while allowing the Director General to proceed where the required opinions are not received within the prescribed period. These provisions reduce the risk that an application remains unresolved solely because another authority has not responded.

However, the process remains centralised, documentation-intensive and approval-based. Current [NGOAB registration](#) instructions require domestic organisations to submit an [FD-1 form](#), proof of prior registration, approved constitution, executive-committee information, activity reports, a plan of operation, donor commitment documentation, meeting records and member details. The published fee for domestic registration is BDT 50,000, in addition to applicable VAT; renewal costs BDT 30,000 plus VAT. These formal requirements may be manageable for larger, established NGOs, but pose a substantial administrative and financial burden for newer, small or community-based organisations.

The FDRA provides a statutory appeal route. Under Section 17, an organisation or individual aggrieved by an order of the NGOAB may appeal to the Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Office within 30 working days; the appeal is mandated to be resolved within 45 working days, and the appellate authority may uphold, amend or cancel the Bureau’s decision. However, the appeal remains within the government’s executive structure. Publicly available data on registration refusals, appeal filings, outcomes or compliance with these timeframes could not be identified, making it difficult to assess how transparent and effective this remedy is in practice.

The registration environment is therefore assessed as partially enabling. Bangladesh has a defined legal route for formal registration, and the 2026 amendment introduced longer registration validity and procedural safeguards against some forms of delay. Yet the system remains dependent on layered incorporation, substantial documentation, fees, inter-agency review and executive discretion. The absence of transparent public data on refusals and appeal outcomes further limits confidence that registration procedures are equally accessible and predictable for all civil society actors.

2.2 Operational Environment

Registered CSOs in Bangladesh are legally permitted to implement projects and receive foreign donations. However, operational autonomy remains shaped by approval requirements, reporting obligations and administrative oversight under the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act, 2016, as amended by the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation \(Amendment\) Act, 2026](#). Organisations seeking to implement foreign-funded voluntary activities are generally required to submit project information to the NGO Affairs

Bureau, including the proposed activity, geographic area and intended use of funds. For foreign donations above the BDT 50 lakh annual exemption, Bureau project approval remains a legal prerequisite. The Bureau therefore determines whether the proposed project may proceed, after reviewing compliance with applicable laws, rules, government orders and instructions and, where relevant, seeking opinions from ministries or divisions.

The 2026 amendment introduced several practical improvements. Organisations receiving foreign donations of up to BDT 50 lakh annually no longer require prior project approval for those donations, although they must inform the NGO Affairs Bureau in advance about their activities and project areas and submit an audit report after completion. The amendment also provides an accelerated clearance route for emergency or post-disaster relief activities, allowing approval and foreign-donation release within 72 hours where the stipulated documentation is properly submitted. These changes reduce some procedural barriers, particularly for smaller grants and urgent humanitarian responses.

However, public data on the frequency of project refusals, conditional approvals, delayed fund release or prolonged compliance reviews remains limited. Expert-panel discussion and implementation experience indicate that processes can still be time-consuming and require repeated follow-up. For example, in TI Bangladesh's implementation of the EU SEE project, clearance of the project audit report took around two months. This experience does not demonstrate systematic refusal or obstruction, but it illustrates how procedural requirements can create operational delays even for an established organisation.

The official regulatory easing introduced by the amendment also does not eliminate uncertainty in day-to-day implementation. Panel participants observed that organisations may still encounter expectations for formal clearance, additional documentation or repeated follow-up from central and local authorities, including in circumstances where the amended law appears to reduce prior-approval requirements.

The broader regulatory framework continues to govern project approval, foreign-donation release, monitoring, reporting, administrative-cost limits and the appointment or extension of foreign advisers, specialists and staff through security-clearance procedures. These controls do not preclude civil society organisations from operating, but they limit flexibility and can make implementation dependent on administrative interpretation and response times.

The operational environment is therefore assessed as partially enabling: CSOs can implement projects and the 2026 amendment has reduced some procedural burdens, particularly for smaller donations and emergency activities. Yet operational autonomy remains constrained by project-related approvals, reporting requirements, foreign-donation controls and continuing administrative discretion.

2.3 Protection from Interference

The registration safeguards described in Section 2.1 provide some protection against uncertainty and delay, particularly where inter-agency opinions are not received within the prescribed period.

The amendment also removed the former speech-related ground in Section 14 concerning malicious or indecent comments about the Constitution or constitutional institutions. Its removal reduces one of the law's more subjective grounds for sanctioning civil society organisations engaged in peaceful advocacy, criticism or public-interest work.

But these safeguards are limited. The NGO Affairs Bureau continues to hold broad authority over registration, renewal, project approval, foreign-donation release, monitoring, inspection, reporting, sanctions and security clearance for foreign advisers, specialists and staff. The law

therefore provides an official route for civil society activity, but leaves substantial scope for administrative intervention throughout an organisation's life cycle. The framework does not establish an independent body specifically mandated to review complaints of arbitrary regulatory interference or to provide rapid protection against excessive scrutiny, delayed approvals or burdensome compliance demands.

Publicly available consolidated data on the frequency, grounds and outcomes of inspections, suspensions, registration cancellations or other sanctions against CSOs could not be identified. This makes it difficult to assess whether oversight powers are applied consistently, proportionately and without discrimination across sectors or types of organisations.

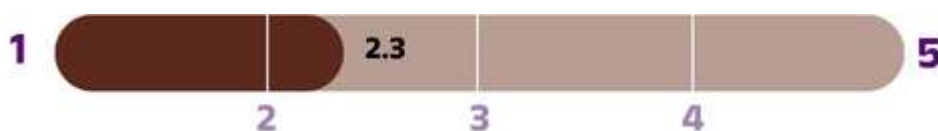
Expert-panel participants considered that formal registration provides an important baseline safeguard against arbitrary dissolution. At the same time, they noted that organisations working on governance, human rights, gender and sexuality, Indigenous rights, labour, agriculture, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other sensitive issues may remain more exposed to scrutiny, delay, disrespect or administrative pressure.

The amended 2026 framework introduces clearer procedures, longer registration validity and some protection against authorisation delays and speech-related sanction. Yet the same framework preserves extensive executive control over approval, monitoring, inspection, reporting and fund release, without strong independent safeguards against selective or disproportionate interference.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Score:



Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Bangladesh continue to access foreign donor funding, humanitarian support and selected institutional funding opportunities. However, the overall resource environment is constrained by donor contraction, project-based financing, tightened regulatory controls over foreign donations, limited domestic philanthropy and sharp inequalities in organisational capacity.

The US Government's suspension of most USAID-supported programmes in 2025 created an unprecedented funding shock, exposing the vulnerability of CSOs dependent on a narrow range of external donors.

Access to resources is not equally distributed. Larger and more established organisations are generally better positioned to identify donor opportunities, meet proposal and compliance requirements, manage reporting obligations and absorb delays in fund release. Smaller, grassroots, regional and rights-based organisations often have fewer reserves, less dedicated fundraising capacity and less access to donor information, flexible funding or long-term institutional support.

At the same time, the funding environment is not entirely closed. Bangladesh-based CSOs continue to receive support through international donors, humanitarian mechanisms and thematic funding windows, including funding for women's rights, community resilience, climate response and civic participation. Yet these opportunities are often time-bound, restricted to specific themes and accompanied by extensive compliance, reporting and due-diligence requirements.

The score reflects this mixed but difficult reality. Resources remain available, and some funding mechanisms allow civil society actors to implement activities and retain a degree of organisational autonomy. However, access is uneven, flexibility is limited and sustainability is weak. The combined impact of aid contraction, approval-based fund release, short project cycles, limited core funding and weak domestic resource mobilisation is that the capacity of

many CSOs to plan, retain staff and respond adequately to emerging civic-space needs remains restricted.

3.1 Accessibility of Resources

Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Bangladesh continue to access international grants, humanitarian support and thematic funding opportunities. However, the resource environment became markedly more difficult during the reporting period as external assistance contracted, project funding was disrupted and access remained uneven across the sector.

The suspension of USAID-supported activities in January 2025 created one of the most significant funding shocks for Bangladesh's development sector and civil society actions in recent years. A platform representing affected development professionals reported that 55 of 59 USAID-funded projects were shut down, affecting approximately [USD 700 million](#) in assistance, and estimated that more than 50,000 people working across the projects and linked organisations lost their jobs. Caritas separately reported that more than 100 development projects worth an estimated [USD 550 million](#) were suspended, affecting health, clean water, education, disaster response and livelihoods. These disruptions affected not only direct funding recipients but also a cascaded network of local implementing partners, community organisations and service providers connected to larger programmes.

Foreign funding remains available, but access is regulated through the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act, 2016, as amended in 2026. The amendment eased prior approval requirements for annual foreign donations of up to BDT 50 lakh. But organisations must still inform the NGO Affairs Bureau about project activities and locations, comply with audit requirements and navigate broader documentation, reporting and fund-release processes as before. For organisations without dedicated financial-management and compliance capacity, these requirements can make access to funding slower and more difficult, thereby not improving the enabling environment.

The effects are not distributed evenly. Larger and established organisations are generally better able to maintain donor relationships, identify funding opportunities, prepare proposals, meet due-diligence standards and absorb delays in approval or disbursement. Smaller, grassroots and regional CSOs often operate with limited reserves and only nominal staff dedicated to fundraising, financial compliance or English-language proposal development. As a result, funding opportunities that are officially open may remain practically inaccessible for organisations working at community level or on less donor-prioritised issues.

Domestic resource mobilisation has not filled this gap. Government support for civil society remains concentrated in selective service-delivery and welfare areas, while broad-based incentives for domestic philanthropy remain limited. Bangladesh provides [tax-rebate facilities](#) for donations to specified categories of institutions and organisations formally approved by the relevant authorities. In June 2026, the government extended this facility to [11 designated public-welfare organisations](#). However, such incentives remain limited to specified or approved beneficiaries and do not constitute a broad-based, reliable financing mechanism for the wider civil society landscape. Expert-panel participants also noted that corporate and individual giving remains too limited and unpredictable to provide stable alternative funding, particularly for CSOs working on rights, governance, media freedom and minority issues.

Banking and financial compliance requirements add another layer of complexity. Publicly available evidence does not indicate routine freezing of CSO bank accounts or blanket restrictions on access to financial services. However, organisations receiving foreign funds

must meet extensive documentation, audit, approval, and reporting requirements before resources can be accessed and used. Expert-panel participants and implementation practitioners reported that related clearance processes can require repeated follow-up and may delay programme implementation, including for established organisations. The frequency and prevalence of such delays could not be independently verified through consolidated public data.

The availability of resources therefore depends heavily on organisational size, donor networks, thematic focus, and the ability to navigate a complex approval and compliance environment. While funding opportunities continue to exist, the contraction of foreign assistance, limited domestic financing and unequal institutional capacity have deteriorated the enabling environment by making it difficult for many civil society actors to secure and use resources consistently.

3.2 Effectiveness of Resources

Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Bangladesh continue to access funding that enables them to implement programmes in areas of humanitarian response, women's rights, climate resilience, community development and civic participation. Some funding mechanisms are designed to support local actors more directly. In 2025, the [Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund](#) opened a Bangladesh funding window for women-led, women's rights, feminist, youth-led and grassroots organisations working on climate security and climate justice. The call for applications invited submissions for both programme grants and institutional funding, recognising that organisations require support not only for project activities but also for strengthening organisational capacity.

Humanitarian funding also includes locally managed mechanisms. [Start Fund Bangladesh](#) is a civil-society-managed pooled fund that supports rapid responses to under-funded or emerging crises. It is accessible to eligible local, national and international member organisations and is designed to release funding within 72 hours of a crisis alert. Such mechanisms provide a degree of flexibility that is particularly important for organisations responding to sudden floods, displacement, public health risks and other local emergencies.

These examples indicate that some resources are available in forms that allow Bangladeshi organisations to respond to identified needs and, in limited cases, strengthen their own institutional capacity. However, these opportunities remain concentrated in particular sectors, thematic areas and eligibility categories. They do not reflect the funding experience of all civil society actors, especially groups working on governance, accountability, media freedom, Indigenous rights, labour rights or other politically sensitive issues.

Across the wider sector, external funding is still commonly structured around donor-defined priorities, short implementation periods, restricted budget lines and detailed reporting, due-diligence and risk-management requirements. [OECD guidance](#) on locally led development notes that these arrangements often limit access to predictable, flexible and core funding for local actors, while compliance requirements can place a disproportionate burden on smaller and community-based organisations. Although this evidence is global rather than Bangladesh-specific, it generally illustrates the constraints faced by Bangladeshi CSOs operating in donor-funded systems.

In Bangladesh, larger and more established organisations are generally better able to meet donor requirements, negotiate programme adjustments and absorb compliance costs. Smaller organisations may have less capacity to manage complex reporting, safeguarding, financial-management and due-diligence processes, even where funding opportunities are formally open to them. Expert-panel participants also noted that the ability to adapt activities or use

funds flexibly can vary substantially by organisational size, donor relationship and thematic area of operation.

Resources available to civil society are therefore capable of supporting important work, but their impact remains uneven. Funding mechanisms can enable programme delivery and, in selected cases, institutional strengthening; yet the predominance of short-term, project-based and compliance-heavy funding continues to limit the autonomy, adaptability and long-term organisational development of many civil society actors.

3.3 Sustainability of Resources

The sustainability of civil society financing in Bangladesh is constrained, being closely tied to external, project-based support. For many organisations, particularly those working on rights, accountability, minority inclusion and local advocacy, grants are time-bound and restricted to specific activities. Predictable core funding that could support staff retention, organisational systems, strategic planning and independent priority-setting remains limited.

This vulnerability became more visible during the reporting period, impacting the enabling environment significantly. Official development assistance from the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members and associates declined by 23.1 per cent globally in 2025—the largest annual contraction on record—and [the OECD projected](#) a further 5.8 per cent decline in 2026. This wider contraction was compounded by the disruption to USAID-supported programmes described in Section 3.1. Expert-panel participants noted that project closures and budget reductions affected programme continuity and staff retention, illustrating the exposure of organisations with limited financial reserves or alternative funding sources.

At the same time, the resource environment cannot be marked as a complete collapse. NGO Affairs Bureau data reported that foreign donations to NGOs reached Tk 9,220 crore in fiscal year 2024-25, a [21 per cent](#) increase from the previous year. However, the volume of new foreign-aid pledges for NGOs declined during the same period. This distinction matters: a rise in current disbursements does not necessarily correlate with a stable future funding pipeline, particularly where inflows are concentrated in humanitarian, service-delivery or large-scale programme sectors rather than flexible support for rights-based and community-led organisations.

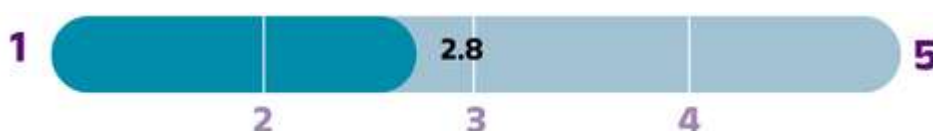
The ability to absorb funding shocks is also uneven. Larger organisations with diversified donor networks, programmes or income sources are generally better positioned to sustain their work during periods of contraction. Smaller, local and rights-focused organisations often lack comparable reserves, while domestic donations and income-generating opportunities do not provide a reliable substitute for multi-year grant funding for them.

The present availability of financial resources continues to support important civil society work, but their long-term sustainability remains fragile. The sector's reliance on external project funding leaves many organisations exposed to shifts in donor priorities, global aid reductions and sudden interruptions in funding. This particularly affects organisations whose work is less likely to attract domestic support or generate a commercially viable income, even where their role in accountability, inclusion and rights protection remains essential.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

4. Open and Responsive State

Score:



Bangladesh has formal legal and institutional channels through which citizens and civil society organisations can seek information, participate in policy discussion and raise concerns about public decision-making. [The Right to Information \(RTI\) Act, 2009](#) provides a statutory basis for civic access to public information, while the reform agenda that followed the 2024 political transition created several visible consultation spaces with the government, involving civil society actors, experts, community representatives and development partners.

During the reporting period, the political reform process created wide-ranging opportunities for civil society participation, including consultations around the reform of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Such endeavours demonstrated a willingness on the part of the interim administration to engage a broader range of voices than had been possible in previous years.

However, access to information, participation and accountability have not been consistently institutionalised. The prolonged vacancy in the Information Commission—that is responsible for implementing the RTI Act—weakened the practical enforcement of the right to information and corresponding avenues for appeal, while TI Bangladesh identified broader gaps between consultation and transparent follow-through in reform-related ordinance-making, as discussed in Section 4.3.

The relationship between the state and civil society is therefore characterised by partial openness rather than predictable responsiveness. Consultation and formal rights-based mechanisms exist, and some reform processes have involved broad participation. The government practises selective transparency and allows participation depending on the issue and process. Existing accountability mechanisms do not consistently allow civil society actors to understand, monitor or challenge how public institutions respond to their input.

4.1 Transparency

The [Right to Information \(RTI\) Act](#), 2009 provides citizens and civil society organisations with a legal mechanism to request information from public authorities. The framework requires public bodies to designate information officers, receive requests, provide information within specified timeframes and maintain appeal mechanisms. Government agencies therefore maintain RTI-related portals and designated-officer systems, giving citizens a formal channel through which to seek information about public decisions, services and administration.

However, the practical operation of this framework has been severely weakened by the prolonged absence of an [effective Information Commission](#). The posts of Chief Information Commissioner and the two Information Commissioners became vacant following the political changes of 2024. Until 15 July 2026, all three posts remained vacant, although the government had reconstituted a five-member selection committee on 9 July to recommend candidates for appointment. Until those appointments are completed, citizens and organisations whose requests are ignored, delayed or even denied, remain without access to the statutory body responsible for receiving complaints, conducting inquiries and enforcing compliance with the Act.

This institutional gap has direct implications for civil society actors seeking information relevant to public accountability. Requests concerning budgets, procurement, regulatory decisions, law-enforcement activity, public contracts, environmental impacts or policy formulation may require sustained follow-up, while the absence of an effective appeals body weakens incentives for authorities to provide timely and complete responses. In August 2025, [the High Court issued a rule](#) asking the authorities to explain why appointments had not been made in accordance with the law, following repeatedly expressed concerns that complaints before the Commission could not be resolved during the vacancy.

Public transparency has also been constrained by limited proactive disclosure around significant legal and institutional reforms. Wider concerns regarding the publication of draft instruments and explanations of how stakeholder input was treated are discussed in Section 4.3.

[The Right to Information \(Amendment\) Ordinance, 2026](#), issued in February 2026, contain potentially enabling provisions. These included more robust proactive-disclosure duties covering decisions, audit reports, contracts and expenditure; requirements to publish important policies and, where necessary, explain their reasoning and consultation processes; and increased financial penalties for non-compliance. However, the ordinance lapsed in April 2026 as it was not enacted within the constitutionally prescribed period. Its improvements therefore did not become part of the continuing legal framework and did not address the institutional vacancy or restore an effective enforcement mechanism.

Expert-panel participants also noted that access to information can be particularly difficult in critical areas such as law enforcement, national security and human rights. Publicly available data do not provide a sufficiently disaggregated picture of RTI requests, refusals and appeals across these sectors.

Bangladesh retains a statutory right-to-information framework and formal administrative channels through which citizens can request public information. Yet the continued absence of appointed Information Commissioners, despite the initiation of a new selection process, uneven proactive disclosure and limited transparency around high-level policy and legal reform processes have significantly reduced the practical value of those mechanisms for civil society oversight.

4.2 Participation

During the reporting period, civil society actors were able to participate in several public consultations and reform processes. [The reform of the National Human Rights Commission \(NHRC\)](#) was one of the most significant examples: between August and October 2025, the Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), organised [five regional consultations](#) in Sylhet, Khulna, Cox's Bazar, Rajshahi and Rangpur, followed by a national consultation in Dhaka. The process included human rights defenders, victims and families of enforced disappearance, women's rights groups, Indigenous and disability-rights organisations, youth representatives, journalists, legal professionals and other civil society actors. [UNDP reported](#) that more than 600 stakeholders took part in the consultation process.

The NHRC reform process demonstrated that the state could create broad and visible opportunities for participation, including for groups that are often absent from formal policy discussions. Draft texts were publicly discussed, comments were invited, and the consultation process included both regional and national platforms. Similar public discussions, seminars and consultation spaces emerged around topics including wide-ranging institutional reform, governance, constitutional questions and public accountability following the political transition.

Notably, participation was not consistently institutionalised across policy areas or stages of decision-making. The quality of engagement varied depending on the thematic issue, the responsible institution and the degree of political or administrative sensitivity. Similar weaknesses across other reform-related processes, and the subsequent handling of the NHRC reform, are discussed under accountability in Section 4.3.

Expert-panel participants similarly noted that some consultation processes were hurried, with draft documents circulated at short notice and limited time available for organisations to provide substantive feedback. This observation reflects a recurring concern regarding being perfunctorily invited to a consultation as opposed to being allowed a meaningful opportunity to influence the final outcome.

Civil society participation in public policy and governance in Bangladesh is therefore visible but uneven across policy areas, institutions and stages of decision-making. Reform processes have created important openings for dialogue, particularly around nationally significant institutional questions. Yet the quality of participation varies depending on whether civil society is engaged early, given sufficient time and access to draft texts, and provided with feedback about how its recommendations are reflected in the final decisions. These opportunities remain dependent on the discretion of individual processes rather than on consistent avenues for meaningful participation.

4.3 Accountability

Civil society organisations have continued to engage with public institutions through consultations, written submissions, advocacy meetings and public commentary. However, opportunities to participate do not consistently provide a clear way to track how civil society input is considered, incorporated or rejected once a policy or legal process moves into final decision-making.

The NHRC reform process described in Section 4.2 illustrates this gap. Following the broad consultation process, the National Human Rights Commission Ordinance, 2025 was amended in December 2025 to include the Cabinet Secretary on the Selection Committee. However, many national and international stakeholders involved in the earlier process [were not informed](#) before this substantive change was made.

The uncertainty continued in April 2026, when Parliament repealed the National Human Rights Commission Ordinance, 2025 and restored the National Human Rights Commission Act, 2009. The government subsequently published a draft National Human Rights Commission Act, 2026 on 17 May for public comment. While the draft included some potentially enabling provisions, significant concerns were [identified](#) regarding the proposed Commission's independence, selection process, authority over violations involving disciplined forces and institutional autonomy, and insisted upon meaningful stakeholder engagement before finalisation.

There are similar concerns across the broader reform agenda. A 2026 [review](#) of reform-related ordinance-making found that, with limited exceptions, important recommendations from reform commissions and stakeholders had been ignored during the formulation of key laws. The review noted that some draft ordinances had been uploaded online only briefly, suggested revisions were not reflected in final texts without offering any explanation, and new provisions were introduced without adequately informing stakeholders. These findings point to a wider gap between consultations and accountable follow-through.

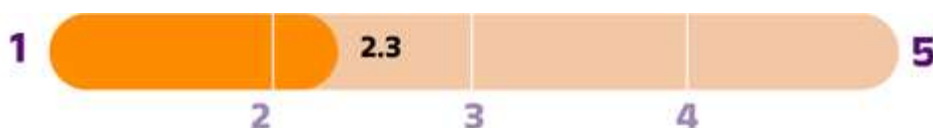
Available public information also does not show a consistent practice across ministries of publishing consultation summaries, response matrices or explanations setting out how civil society recommendations shaped final decisions. This makes it challenging for CSOs to monitor whether their input influenced a policy outcome, to challenge changes made after consultation, or to seek a timely response when commitments are not carried forward.

Accountability is therefore undermined less by the complete absence of engagement than by the absence of reliable feedback loops. Civil society actors can raise concerns publicly and may be invited to contribute to reform discussions, but they do not have consistent access to transparency mechanisms through which they can follow decisions, obtain reasons for rejected recommendations or hold institutions responsible for how consultation commitments are implemented.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score:



Civil society is a visible construct in Bangladesh's public life. Organisations working on women's rights, youth engagement, community development, humanitarian response, environmental protection, disability inclusion, labour rights, culture and public accountability continue to contribute to national and local policy discourses. Following the [political changes of 2024](#), public discussions, seminars, reform dialogues and media debates created greater space for civil society actors, academics, professional groups and community representatives to voice concerns and advance reform proposals.

However, public recognition of civil society is uneven and often depends on the issue, the constituency and the language of advocacy. Organisations working on service delivery or non-contentious community issues generally face less resistance than those engaging with more sensitive topics like gender equality, cultural pluralism, Indigenous rights, minority protection, political accountability or actions of state institutions. In these areas, public debate can quickly become polarised, with rights-based demands framed as threats to religion, tradition, national interest or social stability.

The vehement backlash against the Women's Affairs Reform Commission in 2025 illustrated how rights-based reform proposals can be reframed as threats to religion, tradition and social values; the episode is discussed further in Section 5.1.

Public participation also remains constrained by low confidence that citizens can ultimately influence political decisions, balance the uneven civic education and address the limited opportunities for sustained engagement beyond major political moments. Community organisations, youth initiatives and local advocacy groups remain active, but their visibility, capacity and influence vary sharply between urban and rural areas and across different social groups.

Civic equality is further limited by structural barriers related to gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, geography and economic status. Women, Indigenous peoples, religious minorities, Dalits, persons with disabilities, gender-diverse people and other marginalised groups continue to organise and advocate for their rights through civil society platforms. Yet their participation is often shaped by social stigma, unequal access to resources, insecurity and limited representation in public decision-making.

Bangladesh therefore retains an active and socially relevant civil society culture, but the state institution is not consistently supportive of it. Public dialogue remains vulnerable to polarisation, ideological hostility and unequal recognition, while the civic participation of marginalised groups continues to face barriers that limit their ability to participate on equal terms.

5.1 Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

Public discussion in Bangladesh remains active. Civil society organisations, academics, journalists, professional associations, cultural groups and community representatives continue to contribute to debates on governance, reform, rights, development and public accountability. Since the political transition of 2024, public forums, television discussions, seminars and reform consultations have created greater space for civic actors and their ideas.

However, the space for constructive dialogue is uneven. Civil society initiatives that engage with gender equality, minority rights, Indigenous identity, cultural pluralism, secular traditions or institutional accountability are more likely to face ideological hostility and public delegitimisation than organisations working primarily on service delivery or non-contentious development issues.

The [backlash against](#) the Women's Affairs Reform Commission in 2025 was a clear example. The Commission's recommendations included proposals on equal rights, inheritance, marital rape, representation and protection from gender-based violence. Rather than generating effective discussion on the substance of these proposals, influential religious actors framed the reforms as anti-Islamic and contrary to family and social values. In May 2025, Hefazat-e-Islam [organised a large rally](#) in Dhaka demanding an end to activities it considered "anti-Islamic" and calling for the dissolution of the Commission. That episode illustrated how reform proposals supported by civil society can be shifted from evidence-based debate into ideological confrontation.

Independent media and cultural institutions have also faced hostile public sentiment. In December 2025, [mobs attacked and set fire](#) to the offices of the dailies Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, as well as cultural institutions including Chhayanaut and Udichi Shilpigosthi. The attacks followed [the assassination](#) of youth activist and mobiliser Sharif Osman Hadi and were accompanied by [accusations](#) that the targeted newspapers were aligned with India and the former Awami League government. By late April 2026, investigators had arrested a number of alleged participants and instigators but had not publicly identified those who planned or coordinated the attacks. Reporting by The Daily Star and Dismislab found that months of [online threats and incitement](#) had preceded the attacks. The events demonstrated how disagreements can move beyond hostile narratives and create conditions in which media and cultural institutions become targets of intimidation and violence.

Similar dynamics were visible around pluralistic cultural and Indigenous-rights expression. The arrest of Baul singer Abul Sarkar and the [attack on supporters](#) seeking his release, discussed in Section 1.2, showed how Baul cultural expression could be framed as a threat to religious

sentiment. The cautionary letter issued to Indigenous rights defender [Rani Yan Yan](#), discussed in Section 1.1, similarly framed rights advocacy as misinformation or disloyalty.

These examples do not imply that public discourse is entirely closed to civil society. Civil society actors remain active and visible, mainstream media continues to host important rights and reform debates, and many CSOs retain public legitimacy. Yet the public sphere is not consistently supportive of constructive civic dialogue. On sensitive issues, influential religious, political and social actors have the means to frame rights-based advocacy as a threat to religious values, tradition, national interest or social stability. This risk limits the ability of civil society organisations to participate in public debate without expecting stigma, intimidation or organised hostility.

5.2 Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Civil society remains an important feature of Bangladesh's social and public life. Community organisations, youth groups, women's rights advocates, humanitarian actors, environmental initiatives, professional associations and service-delivery NGOs continue to engage citizens on local development, public services, rights awareness and governance concerns. Following the political transition, civil society actors and interest groups were able to participate more visibly in public discussions, policy debates and reform-related forums, creating renewed opportunities for civic engagement.

This engagement, however, does not always translate into confidence that citizens can influence public decision-making. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' final [Citizen Perception Survey 2025](#) found that only 27.24 per cent of respondents believed they could influence government decisions at any level, 21.99 per cent believed they could influence political decision-making, and 24.62 per cent considered national political decision-making inclusive and responsive.

Civic participation is also characterised by unequal access to information, networks, education and safe public spaces. Urban and better-connected groups are generally more likely to engage through media platforms, public forums, professional networks and organised civic initiatives. In contrast, people in rural areas, marginalised communities and groups with limited access to institutional support may depend more heavily on local organisations, informal networks or issue-based mobilisation.

There are also signs of active efforts to widen civic participation. Ahead of the 2026 election, the [Bangladesh Society for the Change and Advocacy Nexus \(B-SCAN\)](#), with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, organised an accessible mock polling station led by persons with disabilities. The exercise demonstrated how practical and relatively low-cost measures can make electoral participation more inclusive.

Expert-panel participants noted that structured civic learning remains uneven and that opportunities for sustained civic discussion often depend on extracurricular initiatives, local organisations' actions or issue-based campaigns rather than consistent formal education. This observation underscores a broader concern that participation is often episodic rather than embedded in everyday democratic practice.

Public perception of civil society is therefore mixed: neither uniformly negative nor fully supportive. Civil society actors remain active, visible and socially relevant, and many citizens continue to engage through local initiatives, advocacy platforms and community organisations. Yet low confidence in political responsiveness, uneven civic learning and persistent barriers to participation limit the extent to which citizens view civic engagement as an effective and inclusive route to influence public decision-making.

5.3 Civic Equality and Inclusion

Bangladesh's Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds including religion, race, caste and sex under [Articles 27 and 28](#). It also affirms equal rights for women in all spheres of state and public life. Sector-specific laws, including the [Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013](#), provide additional recognition of the rights of marginalised groups. Women, persons with disabilities, religious minorities, Indigenous peoples, workers, Dalits and gender-diverse people continue to organise through civil society platforms, community groups and issue-based networks.

However, formal recognition has not ensured equal civic participation. Women remain active in public life and civil society, but gendered social norms, gender-based violence, unequal burden of household responsibilities and hostile reactions to gender-equality advocacy continue to affect their ability to participate safely and visibly, particularly outside urban centres. The backlash against the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, discussed in Section 5.1, demonstrates how advocacy for legal and social equality can expose women's rights advocates to ideological hostility and personal attacks.

Indigenous peoples continue to face particular barriers to equal civic standing. In January 2026, Transparency International Bangladesh reported that Indigenous communities were [not adequately included](#) in the design, planning, budgeting or implementation of social-security programmes at either national or local level. The study identified weak representation, language and communication barriers, limited access to grievance mechanisms, and the absence of specific measures responsive to the differing realities of Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the plains. These exclusionary conditions affect not only access to public services but also the ability of Indigenous organisations and representatives to participate on equal terms in public decision-making.

Persons with disabilities face additional obstacles, especially where disability intersects with minority identity, indigeneity, gender, poverty or geographic isolation. [A Minority Rights Group report](#) published in 2025, based primarily on fieldwork conducted in March and April 2021, found that many persons with disabilities from minority and Indigenous communities were either unaware of, or felt excluded from, state support systems.

Religious minorities and gender-diverse people also remain vulnerable to social stigma, harassment and unequal protection. On 10 April 2026, [several individuals were assaulted](#) near the National Museum gate in Shahbagh, Dhaka, after being targeted over their perceived sexual orientation. Available reporting indicated that verbal targeting by a coordinated group preceded the violence. The incident illustrates the risks faced by people [perceived as LGBTQIA+](#) when accessing public spaces and participating visibly in civic life. [Freedom House's 2026 assessment](#) noted continued extra-legal violence against Hindus and other religious minorities, as well as intimidation that restricted women's participation in public life. Gender-diverse people and their advocates remain particularly exposed: [Section 377 of the Penal Code](#) can be used to criminalise consensual same-sex sexual conduct, contributing to legal insecurity and social stigma for LGBTQIA+ people, while Bangladesh lacks comprehensive protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

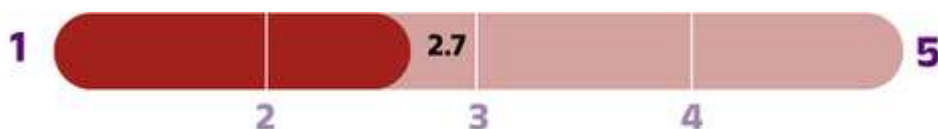
Civic equality in Bangladesh is therefore uneven. Marginalised groups are present in civil society and continue to advance rights claims, provide services and build community networks. Yet structural discrimination, unequal access to public institutions, social hostility

and inadequate protection from exclusion continue to limit their ability to participate, organise and influence public life on equal terms.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score:



Digital space has become central to how civil society organisations (CSOs) in Bangladesh communicate, organise, deliver services, document abuses and engage with public debate. Citizens' access to the internet has expanded rapidly, particularly through mobile connectivity, enabling many organisations to reach wider audiences and coordinate across geographic distance. The reporting period also saw important legislative developments, including the adoption of the [Cyber Protection Act, 2026](#), the [Personal Data Protection Act, 2026](#) and the [National Data Management Act, 2026](#), creating a new statutory framework for cybercrime, personal-data protection and national data governance.

These developments followed a period in which internet freedom improved after the political transition. [Freedom House reported that Bangladesh's internet-freedom score rose to 45 out of 100 in 2025](#), while still classifying the country as "Partly Free." The improvement reflected a reduction in some earlier repressive practices, including the absence of repeated nationwide internet shutdowns during the reporting period.

However, the digital environment remains uneven and insecure for many civic actors. Broad legal powers with respect to online expression, content removal and surveillance continue to create uncertainty for journalists, activists, online commentators and organisations working on politically sensitive issues. The new data-protection framework also remains untested in practice, particularly in relation to the independence of oversight, the scope of state exemptions and accessible remedies for privacy violations.

Digital insecurity is not limited to state action. Women journalists, human rights defenders, activists and members of marginalised communities continue to face cyberbullying, gendered harassment, doxxing, hate speech and other forms of online intimidation. These risks can restrict participation in digital public spaces and encourage self-censorship, especially for

those speaking on gender equality, minority rights, Indigenous issues, accountability or political violence.

Access also remains unequal. Digital connectivity is widespread but not universal, and the benefits of online civic participation remain concentrated among urban, younger and better-resourced groups. Rural communities, low-income households, older people, persons with disabilities and groups with limited digital literacy continue to face barriers to meaningful and safe use of digital tools.

Bangladesh's digital environment therefore combines important gains in access and legal development with continuing concerns around digital rights, privacy, online safety and unequal connectivity. Civil society actors can increasingly use digital platforms for advocacy and coordination, but their ability to do so securely, freely and on equal terms remains constrained.

6.1 Digital Rights and Freedoms

Bangladesh's online environment became less restrictive in some respects following the political changes of 2024. In its [Freedom on the Net 2025 assessment](#), Freedom House raised Bangladesh's score from 40 to 45 out of 100 while retaining the country's "Partly Free" classification. The assessment noted that the interim administration ended some earlier repressive practices, and that the new chair of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) pursued policy changes intended to prevent future internet shutdowns and framed internet access as a human-rights concern.

[The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation \(Amendment\) Act, 2026](#) also introduced a significant legal safeguard by prohibiting the intentional or bad-faith shutdown of telecommunications connections, related services or internet access. This represents an important formal change from the previous framework, although its effectiveness will depend on implementation, independent oversight and access to remedies.

At the same time, [TI Bangladesh raised concern](#) that the amended framework's extension to OTT services and content could create new risks of regulatory control over online platforms and lawful expression. The reform therefore combines an important safeguard against internet shutdowns with continuing questions about the scope and application of content-related regulatory powers.

The legal framework governing online expression also changed during the reporting period. The controversial [Cyber Security Act, 2023 was repealed in May 2025](#) and replaced by the [Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025](#). In April 2026, Parliament enacted the [Cyber Protection Act, 2026](#), repealing and re-enacting the ordinance as statutory law. The new framework removed some of the most widely criticised elements of the previous law and introduced provisions addressing online sexual harassment and exploitation. However, content-blocking powers, criminal penalties for certain forms of online speech and surveillance-related [concerns remained](#).

Political expression online has also remained vulnerable to restrictive measures. As mentioned in Section 1.3, a December 2024 order of the International Crimes Tribunal [prohibited the online dissemination](#) of alleged hate speech by former prime minister Sheikh Hasina. In May 2025, restrictions imposed under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009 on activities supporting the Awami League extended to publications and online activity. These measures were politically specific and discriminatory rather than a general prohibition on online commentary, but they established broad limits on digital political expression and demonstrated how judicial and security-related justifications may be used to [restrict speech online](#).

The continuing risk of criminal action over online criticism was illustrated in April 2026. Several individuals were [arrested or detained](#) in connection with Facebook posts, satire and online commentary involving public officials. Among them was college student Nishad Islam, who was [arrested in Panchagarh](#) after a Facebook post allegedly containing derogatory remarks about a state minister; college student Shakil Ahmed was arrested over an edited Facebook image involving the prime minister's daughter. An [EU SEE alert](#) also documented the detention of content creator A.M. Hasan Nasim after he allegedly shared a cartoon on Facebook. These cases raised concerns about the legality and proportionality of arrests in response to online criticism, satire and commentary.

The use of security and cyber-related provisions to justify apprehending people has particular implications for journalists, activists and civic actors working on politically sensitive issues. Legal ambiguity can discourage online reporting, public-interest commentary and digital mobilisation, especially where users cannot easily predict whether political critique will be treated as protected expression, defamation, a cyber offence or a threat to public order.

Expert-panel participants also noted that connectivity restrictions may still occur in sensitive areas, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts, during periods of political tension. This observation reflects concern that digital access and online expression may remain more contingent for communities already facing heightened political or security scrutiny.

The absence of repeated nationwide internet shutdowns represents an important change from the preceding period. Yet digital rights remain subject to broad legal powers, the interpretation of cyber and security laws, and the willingness of authorities to protect criticism, satire and political expression. These conditions continue to limit the predictability and safety of online civic participation.

6.2 Digital Security and Privacy

Bangladesh strengthened its formal digital-governance framework during the reporting period. The [Cyber Protection Act, 2026](#), [Personal Data Protection Act, 2026](#) and [National Data Management Act, 2026](#) created a more comprehensive statutory basis for cyber offences, personal-data protection, state data governance and online harms. However, because the laws are new, their practical effectiveness, the independence of oversight arrangements and the accessibility of complaints and remedies remain largely untested. [Freedom House's 2025 assessment](#)—which examined the preceding Cyber Security Ordinance rather than the final 2026 laws—identified continuing concerns around provisions for content removal, criminal penalties for online speech and surveillance. Following enactment of the new laws, TI Bangladesh similarly warned that broad state access to personal devices and surveillance-enabling powers remained.

Privacy concerns are reinforced by the continued operation of state surveillance capacity. Although the telecommunications reform process envisaged replacing the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre with a Centre for Information Support, the [Home Ministry allowed the NTMC](#) to continue operating for another year while implementing rules were prepared. In May 2026, the government further approved the procurement of new monitoring equipment for the organisation. Expert-panel participants additionally referred to alleged leaks of private phone records and WhatsApp communications, as evidence of weak safeguards around confidential exchanges; these specific allegations could not be independently verified.

At the same time, the sources reviewed did not identify a pattern of publicly reported cyberattacks targeting civil society organisations. Freedom House reported that there were [no public reports of cyberattacks](#) against media outlets or civil society organisations during its

2024–25 coverage period. Available evidence also does not establish a consistent pattern of government-linked bot operations directed at discrediting civil society actors. [Freedom House found](#) that the interim government did not appear to have conducted any domestic influence operations during its reporting period, although politically affiliated networks remained active in manipulating online information.

Digital insecurity is nevertheless a significant concern for women and marginalised civic actors. [BBS–UNFPA report published in May 2026 stated](#), that nearly 89 per cent of women social-media users had experienced online violence at least once, while 75 per cent of victims did not report incidents because of fear of social stigma and discrimination. Reported forms of abuse included cyberstalking, cyberbullying, doxxing, hacking, online harassment, image-based abuse and gender-based hate speech. These risks are especially relevant for women journalists, activists, human rights defenders and public-facing advocates, for whom online intimidation can lead to self-censorship or withdrawal from public debate.

Bangladesh's digital-security environment therefore combines new legal protections and an absence of publicly documented systematic cyberattacks against CSOs, with persistent concerns around surveillance, weak accountability, online harassment and the practical accessibility of remedies. Civil society actors can use digital platforms extensively, but many continue to do so without full confidence that their communications, personal data and public participation are adequately protected.

6.3 Digital Accessibility

Digital connectivity in Bangladesh has expanded substantially and provides important opportunities for civil society organisations to communicate, organise, deliver services and engage with communities. According to the [Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission](#) (BTRC), the country had 134.07 million internet subscriptions in May 2026, including 119.12 million mobile-internet subscriptions and 14.95 million ISP and PSTN subscriptions. These figures reflect a large mobile-led connectivity base, although they represent subscriptions rather than individual users.

The expansion of mobile access has enabled many civil society organisations to use social media, messaging applications, online meetings and digital campaigns to reach audiences beyond major cities. It has also supported rapid communication during emergencies, fundraising, public-interest reporting and the dissemination of information on public services, rights and local concerns.

However, widespread subscriptions do not mean universal or meaningful access. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' ICT Access and Use by Households and Individuals [Survey 2024–25 found that](#) 53.4 per cent of individuals used the internet. Internet use was substantially lower in rural areas, at 43.6 per cent, compared with 75.7 per cent in urban areas. The survey also showed that while 98.9 per cent of households had access to at least one mobile phone, only 72.7 per cent owned a smartphone and just 9 per cent had a computer.

These gaps affect the ability of civil society organisations to engage communities through digital platforms. Rural communities, low-income households, older people, persons with disabilities and people with limited digital literacy may be less able to access online information, participate in virtual consultations or benefit from digital public services. Dependence on smartphones also limits the kinds of activities that can be carried out effectively online, particularly where access to computers, stable broadband connections, assistive technologies or digital-skills training is limited.

The urban-rural divide is particularly pronounced for organisations working with geographically marginalised communities. Digital tools can widen the reach of civic initiatives, but they can also reproduce existing inequalities when those most affected by exclusion have limited connectivity, inadequate devices or insufficient confidence to use online platforms safely and effectively.

Bangladesh has therefore established a substantial foundation for digital civic engagement, particularly through mobile connectivity. Yet access remains uneven in quality, affordability, location and capacity, limiting the ability of all civil society actors and their constituencies to participate equally in digital spaces.

C) Recommendations

1. To the Government of Bangladesh

- **Protect peaceful civic action and expression.** Ensure that the Anti-Terrorism Act, cyber laws and other security-related provisions are not used against peaceful speech, satire, journalism, association or assembly. Require clear legal grounds, judicial oversight and due-process safeguards before detention, content restriction or organisational prohibition.
- **Ensure protection from attacks by non-state actors.** Establish clear operational instructions, designated focal points and accessible channels for reporting attacks, threats or intimidation targeting journalists, cultural practitioners, human rights defenders, Indigenous representatives, women's rights actors and organisers of peaceful assemblies. Provide relevant law-enforcement agencies with the training and resources necessary to respond effectively, and establish internal oversight to ensure that protection instructions are followed. Investigate infringement incidents promptly and impartially and publish progress on accountability measures.
- **Reform NGO regulation to protect organisational autonomy.** Review and amend the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act to replace prior project-approval and fund-release requirements with notification, reporting and proportionate risk-based oversight. Pending legislative reform, publish clear standard operating procedures and decision timelines for registration, renewal, project approval, fund release, inspections and sanctions, require written reasons for all decisions, and make anonymised data on applications, delays, refusals, appeals and outcomes publicly available.
- **Operationalise the 2026 foreign-donations amendment in a facilitative manner.** Ensure that the procedural easing for lower-value donations and emergency activities is applied consistently by national and local authorities, and issue clear guidance that national and local authorities must not impose additional informal clearance requirements that are not authorised by the law.
- **Restore the right-to-information system.** Complete without delay the transparent appointment of independent and competent Information Commissioners, restore accessible complaint and appeal mechanisms, and strengthen proactive disclosure by ministries and public bodies.
- **Institutionalise meaningful public participation.** Adopt minimum standards for consultation on laws, policies and reform proposals, including early publication of draft texts, adequate time for comment, accessible consultation formats, public consultation summaries and response matrices explaining how stakeholder recommendations were incorporated.

- **Strengthen equality and inclusion.** Ensure that Indigenous peoples, religious minorities, persons with disabilities, women, Dalits, gender-diverse people, workers and geographically marginalised communities can participate safely and meaningfully in public decision-making. This should include accessible formats, local-language communication, targeted outreach and accessible grievance and referral mechanisms within relevant public institutions, adapted to the affected community and issue.
- **Safeguard digital rights and privacy.** Establish independent oversight and accessible remedies under the cyber and personal-data-protection framework; require legal necessity, proportionality and judicial authorisation for interception or surveillance; publish transparency reports on content restrictions and surveillance requests; and maintain the commitment against nationwide internet shutdowns.

2. To Civil Society Actors

- **Build broader civic alliances.** Strengthen cooperation among rights-based organisations, service-delivery NGOs, professional bodies, cultural groups, labour organisations, youth platforms and community-based actors to respond collectively to threats against civic freedoms and inclusion.
- **Document restrictions systematically.** Develop shared, secure and low-cost systems for recording attacks, intimidation, administrative delays, restrictions on assembly, online harassment and barriers affecting marginalised constituencies, with clear arrangements for maintaining the systems and sharing verified information among organisations. Where evidence cannot be independently verified, clearly distinguish expert observations from documented incidents.
- **Strengthen local participation and civic learning.** Invest in community-based civic education, local leadership, youth engagement and inclusive public dialogue, particularly outside Dhaka and among groups that face barriers to participation.
- **Diversify and strengthen organisational resilience.** Pursue ethical domestic fundraising, membership models, community support, partnerships and shared services, while continuing collective advocacy and search for flexible, multi-year and core funding. Larger organisations and civil-society networks should help smaller CSOs strengthen proposal development, financial compliance and donor-engagement capacity.
- **Improve digital safety and inclusion.** Adopt practical digital-security, data-protection and online-harassment response protocols; support women, journalists, human rights defenders and marginalised groups facing online abuse; and ensure that digital engagement is accessible to persons with disabilities and communities with limited connectivity.

3. To Donors and the International Community

- **Provide flexible and predictable funding.** Increase multi-year, core and flexible support for local, grassroots and rights-based organisations, including groups working on accountability, media freedom, Indigenous rights, labour rights, gender equality and minority protection.
- **Shift more resources directly to local actors.** Simplify due-diligence and reporting requirements where possible, provide compliance support rather than transferring risk to smaller partners, and expand locally led funding mechanisms that allow Bangladeshi organisations to set priorities and adapt to changing conditions.

- **Fund and support locally led rapid-response and protection mechanisms.** Provide predictable resources to trusted Bangladeshi civil-society networks and specialised organisations to deliver emergency funding, legal assistance, temporary relocation support, psychosocial care and digital-security support for civic actors facing threats, arbitrary detention, attacks, online harassment or sudden funding disruption.
 - **Prioritise civic-space protections in diplomatic and policy engagement.** In consultation with Bangladeshi civil society, use bilateral and multilateral dialogue to raise serious restrictions on fundamental freedoms, support the restoration of independent oversight institutions and encourage transparent, inclusive processes for major legal and institutional reforms.
 - **Invest in digital rights and equitable access.** Support independent data-protection oversight, digital-security capacity, responses to technology-facilitated gender-based violence and efforts to close rural, gender, disability and income-related gaps in meaningful internet access.
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D) Research Process

Each principle encompasses various dimensions which are assessed and aggregated to provide quantitative scores per principle. These scores reflect the degree to which the environment within the country enables or disables the work of civil society. Scores are on a five-category scale defined as: fully disabling (1), disabling (2), partially enabling (3), enabling (4), and fully enabling (5). To complement the scores, this report provides a narrative analysis of the enabling or disabling environment for civil society, identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as offering recommendations. The process of drafting the analysis is led by Network Members; the consortium provides quality control and editorial oversight before publication.

For Principle 1 - which evaluates respect for and protection of freedom of association and peaceful assembly - the score integrates data from the [CIVICUS Monitor](#). However, for Principles 2–6, the availability of yearly updated external quantitative indicators for the 86 countries part of the EUSEE programme are either limited or non-existent. To address this, Network Members convene a panel of representatives of civil society and experts once a year. This panel uses a set of guiding questions to assess the status of each principle and its dimensions within the country. **The panel for this report was convened in May 2026.** The discussions are supported by secondary sources, such as [V-Dem](#), the [Bertelsmann Stiftung Governance Index](#), the [RTI Rating from the Centre for Law and Democracy](#), and other trusted resources. These sources provide benchmarks for measuring similar dimensions and are complemented by primary data collection and other secondary sources of information available for the country. Guided by these deliberations, the panel assigns scores for each dimension, which the Network Members submit to the Consortium, accompanied by detailed justifications that reflect the country's specific context. To determine a single score per principle, the scores assigned to each dimension are aggregated using a weighted average, reflecting the relative importance of each dimension within the principle. This approach balances diverse perspectives while maintaining a structured and objective evaluation framework.

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