

Pakistan

Country Focus Report

2026



Photo Credit: Muhammad Khubaib
Sarfraz



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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. 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 from across Pakistan 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.

Brief Overview of the Country Context

Reporting period covered: July 2025 to July 2026

Pakistan has faced a democratic deficit for several decades. Repeated periods of military rule, quasi-democratic regimes, and frequent political upheavals have adversely affected its democratic development and broader human development objectives. During both military rule and the relatively brief periods of civilian government, civic spaces have remained heavily controlled and regulated. The exercise of fundamental freedoms associated with these spaces has often been at the mercy of successive regimes, which have restricted or curtailed them under various pretexts, including national security concerns, armed conflicts, the war on terror, and other related challenges.

In recent years, civic space has come under particularly severe pressure as the state has engaged in negotiations with militant and terrorist groups and responded to internal political and social upheavals, border skirmishes, armed conflicts, and natural disasters, often resulting in heightened restrictions on freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and the operations of civil society organisations. These circumstances, compounded by broader political considerations, have further narrowed civic space and reduced opportunities for political expression and participation.

At the same time, [several new regulatory laws and measures](#) have been introduced to control dissent, regulate expression on social media, restrict rights-based advocacy, and constrain criticism of state actions and political opposition. These increasingly restrictive measures often go unnoticed by international institutions and governments or are overlooked for political and economic considerations. Meanwhile, citizens of Pakistan continue to bear the consequences of these state actions and policies, as fundamental freedoms and opportunities for civic participation remain subject to sustained constraints.

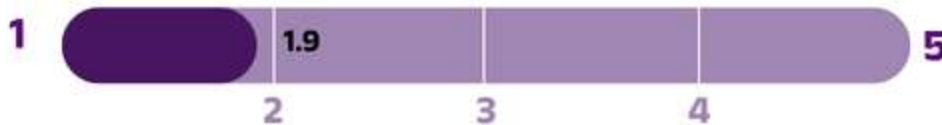
The overall assessment of the enabling environment for civil society in Pakistan is overwhelmingly negative, with five of the six core principles scoring firmly in the “Disabling” range. The findings point to a systematic and multifaceted constriction of civic space, reflecting a state approach that places greater emphasis on control than on enabling civic participation. While civil society remains resilient, it operates under significant and increasing pressure. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of each principle, drawing on the consensus scores and justifications provided by the expert panel.

B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

PRINCIPLE SCORE

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score: () ¹



The [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan \(HRCP\)](#) launched its flagship annual report, [State of Human Rights in 2025](#), on 4 May 2026 in Islamabad. The document details a sharp contraction in civic freedoms, growing state-level security pressures, and serious concerns regarding judicial independence across Pakistan through 2025.

1.1/ Freedom of Association

Civil society organisations (CSOs) broadly agree that people can form associations, formally or informally, where this is permitted by law and the Constitution. While the basic right exists and association is legally permitted, this does not mean the right can always be exercised freely, as restrictions can limit the de facto enjoyment of freedom of association.

[The Kachhi Abadi \(slum dwellers\) Alliance Islamabad](#) and other organisations representing affected communities are cited as examples of collective organisation and rights-based advocacy that benefit from formal freedom of association guarantees and can exercise this right. Bar associations, which operate within a specific statutory and legal framework and generally enjoy greater autonomy, are another example. However, such autonomy is the exception rather than the norm.

The majority of organisations report serious restrictions on activities, registration, advocacy, protests, and rights-based work. These include registration requirements for organisational

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

information and personal details of staff and board members, unannounced visits by security agency personnel, police verification of activities, events, and staff members, and late-hour phone calls to staff and management seeking information or verification.

Participants note that exercising the right to freedom of association can carry costs, restrictions, or consequences, particularly when organisations challenge government policies or the status quo. Rights-based organisations continue to face greater difficulties than organisations engaged in less politically sensitive activities.

1.2/ Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

During 2025–2026, freedom of peaceful assembly also faced severe challenges and constraints, as documented in the [Amnesty International Pakistan Report](#), which describes systemic crackdowns on political opposition, sweeping legal bans on public gatherings, and widespread communication blackouts used to preemptively restrict civic mobilisation.

Although peaceful assembly is constitutionally protected, CSOs confirmed that requirements such as No Objection Certificates (NOCs), permissions, police clearances, and other administrative restrictions make the right difficult to exercise in practice. Even when permission is granted, [authorities may impose preconditions that hamper](#) the full enjoyment of freedom of peaceful assembly. These requirements can therefore discourage or effectively prevent peaceful assemblies.

Authorities regularly use [Section 144 of the Pakistan Penal Code](#) to impose blanket bans on peaceful protests. Several incidents were reported during the year, where local administrations disallowed peaceful rallies or public assemblies, or imposed preconditions for allowing them, citing security concerns. These included [incidents in Gilgit-Baltistan](#) following the killing of Iran’s Supreme Leader, as well as restrictions imposed on the [Aurat March in Karachi](#). Similarly, in March 2026, the Punjab government [imposed a ban](#) on public gatherings and sit-ins. Police often [cite vague security concerns](#), elections, or opposition to the government as reasons for preventing CSO events.

While there have been instances of protesters committing violence, vandalism, or damage to private property, such individual acts of violence have at times been used to justify broader [restrictions on freedom of assembly](#), particularly through the application of Section 144 and the [Maintenance of Public Order \(MPO\) legislation](#) 1960. Panelists argued that continued reliance on Section 144 to restrict gatherings of five or more people is unconstitutional because, in their view, it is inconsistent with the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

Several civil society organisations (CSOs) emphasised that restrictions on protests can extend beyond formal bans. Surveillance, threats, arrests, and the risk of consequences after a protest may lead people to censor themselves and avoid participating in public gatherings, even when protests have not been officially prohibited. In fact, protests continue to take place, including student, labour, and political demonstrations, indicating that the right to assembly is not subject to absolute prohibition. However, incidents in which police disperse such gatherings on questionable or inadequately substantiated security grounds have become relatively routine.

During the year, security agencies also heavily enforced controlling and regulatory laws, granting authorities wide discretion to penalise organisers. Preventive detention of protesters and political activists for up to three months without formal charges or independent judicial oversight was also reported. Human rights lawyers and independent journalists covering suppressed demonstrations [faced harassment](#), arbitrary detention, and accreditation revocations under vague “public order” mandates.

Panellists also noted regional variations throughout the year, particularly differing restrictions imposed across Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad, and other areas. While some gatherings continued to take place, certain political, religious, and regional groups faced more severe restrictions. For example, rallies organised by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and regional movements [faced violent dispersal](#), mass arrests, and prolonged detentions. Authorities repeatedly blocked mobile broadband, social media platforms, and landline services around protest sites and politically symbolic locations, limiting real-time organising and reporting.

Collective action increasingly took place online, while internet shutdowns and platform restrictions interfered with this emerging form of assembly. Several panellists emphasised that the government undertook various measures to shut down digital networks and suppress or remove online spaces used by minority and activist communities.

1.3 / Freedom of Expression

During 2025–2026, freedom of expression in Pakistan faced severe contractions, driven by the use [of cybercrime laws, strict digital censorship](#), physical and legal intimidation of journalists, and new administrative controls over foreign reporting. Human rights groups placed Pakistan at 153rd out of 180 countries in the 2026 [World Press Freedom Index](#).

During 2025, [amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act \(PECA\)](#) criminalised “fake or false” information with penalties of up to three years in prison, giving state bodies [broad powers to act against online dissent](#). The National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), in its [report on PECA and the 2025 amendments](#), also characterised these amendments as intrusive and over-controlling.

Additionally, [the Foreign Media Facilitation Guidelines](#), introduced in early 2026, require foreign and locally collaborating journalists to secure No Objection Certificates (NOCs) from the Ministry of Information before travelling outside Islamabad, Lahore, or Karachi. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its affiliate, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), have [condemned the restrictions](#), arguing that they enable arbitrary limitations on international reporting, and have called for the guidelines to be reversed to protect media plurality in Pakistan.

The [Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority \(PEMRA\)](#) intensified crackdowns, issuing heavy fines and channel suspensions, including the [suspension of Geo News Channel](#) in July 2026, over content deemed controversial or critical of state policy. State authorities also leveraged financial pressures, including the suspension of government advertising and interference with media houses’ operational logistics, which media organisations reported as contributing to self-censorship.

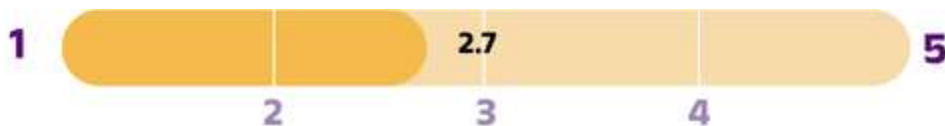
During the year, several media reporters faced arbitrary arrests, physical assaults, and enforced disappearances. Scores of [legal cases under sedition or counter-terrorism charges](#) were filed against journalists and political commentators reporting on civil-military relations or political opposition. Media watchdogs and annual reports from organisations such as Freedom Network and Reporters Without Borders identify [Punjab and Islamabad as high-risk areas for journalists](#), where media practitioners [face](#) arbitrary detention, physical violence, legal harassment under laws such as PECA, and enforced disappearances. At the same time, opportunities for judicial relief in cases of criminalisation have reportedly reduced amid changes to judicial appointment and other institutional changes under the [27th Constitutional Amendments](#).

In response to the serious contraction of freedom of expression, on 4 August 2026, 13 leading international and local human rights organisations [wrote to the Prime Minister of Pakistan](#), the Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, and the Federal Minister for Law and Justice, appealing for an end to [restrictions on freedom of expression](#) in Pakistan.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score:



2.1 | Registration

During 2025/26, registration remained possible, but experiences varied significantly across provinces and types of organisation, with regulatory pressures contributing to an environment in which organisations struggle to maintain influence, as [documented](#) by Accountability Lab Pakistan.

The legal registration of NGOs/CSOs remained [challenging](#). CSOs/NGOs must register either under the [Societies Registration Act 1860](#) or the [Companies Act 2017](#), the latter of which is done via registration with the [Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan \(SECP\)](#). Depending on the nature of the organisation, additional registration may be required under the [Religious Society Act 1880](#), the [Charitable Endowment Act 1890](#), the [Trust Act 1882](#), the [Charitable and Religious Trust Act 1920](#), the [Mussalman Wakf Act 1923](#), the [Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies \(Registration and Control\) Ordinance 1961](#), or the [Cooperative Society Act 1925](#), alongside oversight from provincial Charity Commissions. Police, intelligence, and other inter-agency verifications pose major obstacles in registration and renewal processes, whether conducted manually or online. Renewal is reported to be more problematic than initial registration in several cases, with some organisations facing prolonged delays or non-renewal.

While CSOs/NGOs agree that there should be reasonable accountability and regulation, additional, inconsistent, or discretionary requirements create unnecessary barriers. Many CSOs have limited understanding of the different registration laws and regulatory routes. Organisations working on disability rights, children's issues, human rights, and other specialised areas face additional registration requirements, creating a multiplicity of regulatory obligations.

In these cases, [multiple or overlapping registrations](#)—such as charity, social welfare, human rights, child welfare, and sector-specific registrations—are major burdens for organisations

seeking registration or renewal. These difficulties are systemic but appear to weigh more heavily on organisations working on human rights, political rights, advocacy, or other sensitive issues.

Some registration authorities, including charity commissions, have introduced online processes that make registration easier and more streamlined. Some organisations have chosen to register as companies through the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan ([SECP/Section 42](#)), which can be used as an alternative route when conventional registration and banking arrangements are considered too difficult.

Requirements and practices differ across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), creating a fragmented regulatory environment. Balochistan is cited as [particularly problematic](#), with claims that registrations and renewals have stalled and that additional requirements have been introduced. In July 2025, Balochistan's Charity and Regulation Authority cancelled the registration of all NGOs and welfare organisations previously registered with the Social Welfare Department. Around 1,500 entities were required to re-register under the provincial law and with the provincial authority, which is now mandatory.

Similarly, in August 2025, the Punjab Home Department decided to close down all unregistered welfare organisations operating in the province. The decision was taken during the 23rd meeting of the Punjab Charity Commission, which also emphasised that registration with the Punjab Charity Commission is mandatory for all charitable organisations in the province. Measures were reportedly taken in order to help Pakistan exit the [Financial Action Task Force \(FATF\)](#) grey list. No clear justification was given to the organisations affected by the decision. Further, on 28 February 2026, Punjab's Home Department [listed 89 proscribed organisations and unregistered charities](#), warning that donations to them could lead to criminal action under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997. The list did not specify the charges, raising concerns about discretionary powers and transparency. Registration processes are therefore described as extremely stringent and disabling. Some [NGO/CSO platforms engaged with the Punjab Charity Commission](#) to demand that registration and operational conditions be eased.

Organisations operating in ICT also face burdensome renewal requirements, including unusual documentation requests. In Lahore, renewal and new registration under the Societies Registration Act 1860 are reportedly almost blocked for NGOs, while registration under the [Punjab Charities Act 2018](#) remains available.

In summary, at both national and provincial levels, persistent regulatory, administrative, financial, and coordination challenges limit the effective operation and participation of CSOs in development and policymaking. Lengthy, overlapping registration, renewal, verification, and compliance procedures remain a major burden across provinces.

2.2 | Operational Environment

Registration difficulties extend beyond obtaining legal status to other essential aspects, including opening or maintaining bank accounts, meeting additional biometric or board-member requirements, complying with restrictions or prior-permission requirements for international funding, and managing operational consequences when renewals are delayed. Government permissions/NOCs for registration and the holding of events have also been discretionary, and slow approvals and extensive documentation delay organisational operations and project implementation, particularly in Punjab and ICT.

A [fact-finding report](#) released by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in March 2026 observed that the continued shrinking of civic space and systematic curtailment of rights-based NGOs across Punjab were being carried out using different pretexts and

reasons. The report documents cases in which NGOs were subjected to multilayered approval processes, including district-level no-objection certificates for organising activities or relief actions, and security clearance prior to registration. These requirements have been compounded by compulsory re-registration under provincial charity commissions. Policies and administrative requirements—particularly those [involving the Federal Economic Affairs Division \(EAD\)](#), Charity Commissions, and sensitive terminology or issues—can constrain what CSOs are able to do. These regulatory authorities impose multiple information requirements, repeated documentary demands, and scrutiny by federal and provincial authorities and security agencies. This has interfered with the scale and scope of NGO operations and has led to the suspension or closure of critical human-rights and democracy programmes. While courts have provided intermittent relief, the absence of a coherent, rights-compliant legislative framework has continued to enable administrative overreach.

[The Policy for Local NGOs/NPOs Receiving Foreign Contributions 2022](#), issued by Pakistan's Economic Affairs Division (EAD), requires civil society organisations to obtain federal clearance and security vetting to receive overseas funds, introducing another tier of scrutiny. The process requires extensive information, scrutiny by several federal and provincial authorities, including security agencies, and ultimately the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Economic Affairs/Economic Affairs Division (EAD). These [procedures](#) adopted by Economic Affairs Division can delay processes for several months, and many applications for EAD MoUs are reportedly rejected without clear reasons or an opportunity for appeal. Critics and human rights groups argue that the policy lacks statutory backing, infringes on constitutional freedom of association, and grants security agencies arbitrary veto power. The policy was struck down by a court in September 2024 but was [restored](#) by the Lahore High Court Divisional Bench in April 2026, reigniting debates over executive power and excessive controls over CSOs.

CSO regulation is perceived as discretionary rather than risk-based. Several new protocols have been added that create further hurdles for CSOs, including mandatory tax disclosures under a Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) notification, additional security clearances for each activity or event organised at the local level, and restrictions on NGO/CSO operations in many districts of KP, Balochistan, Punjab, and other sensitive areas.

De facto [restrictions are often more significant than formal policy restrictions, particularly for rights-based organisations](#). CSOs emphasised that restrictions may not appear in written policy but are experienced through administrative discretion. Key challenges reported in 2025/26 include particular difficulties in conducting advocacy and political discussions. For example, students at LUMS (Lahore University of Management Sciences) [reportedly faced restrictions](#) on political discussion and activities imposed by university management and local authorities. Service-delivery organisations operating within a less confrontational engagement framework may have somewhat more room to operate and greater flexibility from the government.

Non-state actors can also impose operational restrictions, including reported restrictions on entry or NGO activity in certain areas where religious groups are particularly active, especially in KP, Punjab, and Gilgit-Baltistan. There is significant variation across organisations and banks, so the environment cannot be characterised as uniformly restrictive. In five provincial consultations, several CSOs reported that high registration and renewal fees, taxation and certification costs, and difficulties accessing organisational bank accounts disproportionately affect smaller and grassroots CSOs.

CSOs also noted some positive legislative steps, including the passage of the [National Commission for Minorities Act 2025](#) and localised [Child Marriage Restraint Acts](#). Civil society organisations see these recent legal developments as encouraging because they provide stronger legal tools to protect vulnerable groups, particularly women, children, and religious or ethnic minorities. They also acknowledged specific higher-court rulings that advanced women's inheritance and marriage rights.

In summary, CSOs in Pakistan continue to operate within a challenging regulatory and administrative environment. Complex registration and compliance requirements, restrictions on funding and foreign contributions, and extensive reporting obligations have reduced organisational flexibility and sustainability. CSOs also face difficulties obtaining government approvals, maintaining access to funding, and carrying out activities in sensitive or politically significant areas. These challenges are particularly significant for smaller organisations, which often lack the financial and human resources needed to meet extensive regulatory requirements. Collectively, these constraints can reduce the ability of CSOs to plan independently, respond quickly to community needs, and sustain long-term development and advocacy initiatives.

2.3 / Protection from Interference

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Pakistan faced a restrictive environment in 2025 and 2026. Rather than a supportive framework ensuring protection from state interference, organisations encountered multilayered bureaucratic hurdles, intense surveillance, and restrictive foreign-funding rules overseen by overlapping federal and provincial authorities.

Obtaining No Objection Certificates (NOCs) and [Memoranda of Understanding \(MoUs\)](#) for specific operational projects involved prolonged administrative bottlenecks. Thousands of groups reportedly faced suspension or deregistration in the context of non-compliance audits. For example, in September 2025, the [Public Accounts Committee of the Sindh Assembly](#) ordered the [blacklisting of eight NGOs for failing to provide audit records](#), invoices, and expenditure details. The concerned NGOs refuted the allegations and described them as political targeting intended to silence dissent. Similarly, the Counter Terrorism Department in KP Province has reportedly gathered information from NGOs/NPOs using forms that characterise them as potential conduits for terrorist financing.

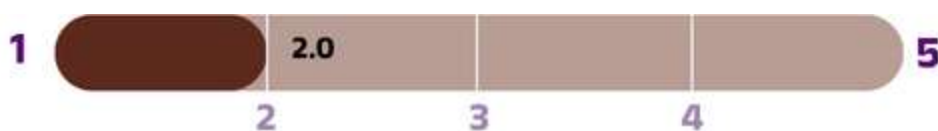
The EAD screening framework requires clearances across numerous state departments and security agencies and has a significant impact on human-rights and governance groups. Court actions and administrative policies [affecting foreign-funding pipelines](#) have, according to CSOs, forced groups focusing on legal aid, minority rights, and advocacy into self-censorship or operational paralysis.

Legal safeguards exist but are not always implemented consistently. Laws provide mechanisms such as departmental or administrative appeals, judicial remedies, and defined regulatory procedures. However, under registration laws including the Social Welfare Agencies Registration and Control Ordinance 1961 and the Societies Registration Act 1860, registration authorities can suspend or deregister organisations, appoint administrators, or otherwise take control for non-compliance. Panellists emphasised that interference is not limited to formal government or legal entities and can also involve non-state actors.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Score:



3.1/ Accessibility

Funding is increasingly scarce, particularly for rights-based organisations. Access to available funding opportunities, including competitive donor and government-linked grants, is limited by imposed conditions, intense competition for remaining funds, and discretion in grant-making, leading to unequal access. Additionally, CSOs face bureaucratic hurdles, arbitrary delays, restrictive requirements, and difficulties with banking and financial access. NOCs and government liaison can effectively determine whether organisations are able to operate in particular areas.

During 2025–2026, NGOs and other civil society organisations faced severe resource constraints [due to global cuts in Official Development Assistance \(ODA\)](#), high inflation, and a [large national macroeconomic financing gap](#) affecting local sustainability. The shrinking ODA and pauses in major international programmes, including USAID and FCDO, have created institutional instability. Complex international consortium and contractor rules can marginalise smaller local CSOs that lack advanced administrative systems. International funders now tie resource disbursements closely to rigorous data tracking. Smaller local NGOs often lack the sophisticated Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) frameworks and digital reporting infrastructure needed to compete for these grants. As a result, local groups struggle to access complex international green funds despite high vulnerability to climate shocks.

[Some resources for training and capacity development](#) nevertheless support CSOs in meeting funder requirements and securing sustainable funding. Some NGOs/INGOs also coordinate with [government authorities to help CBOs/NGOs function effectively](#) and meet regulatory requirements. Useful [information portals and sessions](#) have likewise been organised by NGOs and networks to guide organisations toward funding resources. The Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives of the federal government also

publishes monthly development updates. However, these initiatives remain too limited in scale and reach to significantly improve access to sustainable resources for CSOs/NGOs.

In several cases observed during the year, the selection of local partners and funding allocations by bilateral and multilateral funders [were not sufficiently transparent and appeared to be driven more by institutional interests](#) than by local realities and needs. Significant volumes of funding were awarded to institutions that, according to the assessment, did not meet the necessary qualifications to implement large-scale programmes, particularly in areas where they lacked credible and well-established implementation experience. Furthermore, the funding policies of several bilateral funders appeared to be based on unarticulated and unverifiable criteria, thereby shrinking the available fiscal space for well-established, experienced, and qualified local organisations.

The restoration of the previously repealed [Policy for Local NGOs/NPOs Receiving Foreign Contributions 2022](#) through the Lahore High Court in April 2026 created further legal uncertainty regarding access to funding. Several organisations reported extensive, multilayered regulatory vetting as maintaining a valid MoU and NOCs from the EAD and provincial authorities remains mandatory for legally securing and implementing foreign-funded initiatives.

Fear and security concerns further restrict physical access, particularly in areas such as Balochistan and the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where ongoing military operations are being conducted against terrorist groups operating or seeking refuge in these sensitive areas. Travel restrictions, limited mobility, and other security measures impede CSOs' access to major cities and constrain their connectivity with resource providers.

Traditional giving, such as zakat or sadaqah, remains fragmented and tilted toward charitable and welfare-oriented activities rather than being channelled into development-focused and rights-based CSOs with transparent systems.

High inflation and compliance costs associated with Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) and Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) requirements place additional pressure on small nonprofit budgets. The majority of CSOs and members of the expert panel reported that [Pakistan's volatile tax policies, adopted under IMF conditionalities](#) during the 2025/26 fiscal periods, created additional fiscal hurdles for CSOs, severely constraining resources and affecting operations. The Finance Acts [intensified withholding tax \(WHT\) rates](#) on services, supplies, and digital/cash transactions, frequently treating nonprofit operational outflows in the same manner as commercial entities. Higher withholding taxes and rigid asset/wealth assessments eroded operational budgets, directly reducing project scopes and organisational capacity. [New tax-registration requirements introduced in May 2026](#) for foreign NGOs, increasing administrative costs and requiring disclosure of operational details, also deeply impacted the fiscal spaces for local NGOs and NPOs.

3.2 | Effectiveness

For some CSOs, especially those working on feminist agendas or women's rights programmes, donor conditions are considered reasonable and broadly aligned with CSO objectives. Similarly, a small number of NGOs working with groups such as persons with disabilities (PWDs) and transgender persons report that their funders provide flexible funding, allowing some discretion over activities and spending. These funders also offer collaborative relationships and shared decision-making. However, such experiences are limited to a small number of organisations, with the majority of CSOs continuing to face low

donor flexibility, top-down relationships, and restrictive conditions that limit partner-level decisions on fund utilisation.

Very few donors recognise the financial pressures created by inflation and operational realities. Instead, the majority of funders continue to impose conditions that substantially restrict CSOs' flexibility and autonomy. During 2025/26, bilateral donors continued to be highly prescriptive about activities, budgets, personnel, and reporting. Branding and communications may require prior approval, including banners and participant-related details. Inflation can make approved budgets inadequate—for example, printing, Braille and accessibility measures, and staff salaries may become significantly more expensive while donors resist corresponding budget adjustments.

Some organisations described donor compliance requirements as excessively burdensome. Increased intrusiveness was observed following major changes in the donor environment, including [the withdrawal of USAID](#) and [abrupt closure of FCDO funded projects in early months of 2026](#) and greater dependence on remaining donors, including the EU. CSOs expressed serious concerns about agenda-setting and the shrinking of civil society space by major funders in Pakistan, rather than merely about administrative restrictions. With donors increasingly determining agendas and priorities, CSOs' flexibility to pursue locally identified initiatives is limited. Responding to Requests for Proposals (RFPs) often means working within predefined donor agendas. Additionally, indirect or overhead costs that were previously supported are no longer consistently covered. Additional regulatory and tax-compliance pressures may further constrain donors and CSOs.

Operating a bank account was one of the biggest operational challenges reported by several CSOs in 2025/26. Organisations reported [major delays or refusals](#) in opening bank accounts, including accounts for new subsidiaries. Experiences varied considerably by bank: some were cooperative, while others were highly restrictive. Even where [the State Bank of Pakistan](#) guidance states that banks should facilitate NGO accounts, commercial banks may exercise significant discretion because of concerns about money laundering, terrorist financing, and compliance risks. Effective complaint and remedial mechanisms are reportedly absent or limited when banks do not follow State Bank guidance.

With regard to government funding, there have been instances in which, rather than providing funding in a way that empowers CSOs, CSOs were funded to implement services usually delivered by the government without receiving sufficient support to implement them effectively. For example, the Government of Punjab has [outsourced](#) approximately 13,000 public schools to private operators, NGOs, and individuals through the [Punjab Education Foundation \(PEF\)](#) as part of its Provincial School Reform Programme. The policy aims to address low enrollment, inadequate infrastructure, and teacher shortages, but it has triggered significant criticism from teachers' unions and public advocates. NGOs running these government schools face difficulties meeting expenditures and maintaining the quality of education. There is also a lack of transparency regarding the selection process and the outcomes of these public-private partnerships. In essence, this model creates funding arrangements in which CSOs may be unable to fulfill their mandates effectively.

3.3/ Sustainability

For Pakistan in 2025/26, the funding environment can be described as constrained but not without opportunities. The key issue is that traditional, unrestricted/core funding is becoming harder to secure, while project-based, thematic, and consortium funding remain more accessible. At the same time, Pakistan's economic stabilisation creates a difficult operating environment for civil-society organisations, with pressure on both donors and local organisations to demonstrate value for money, measurable results, and stronger domestic sustainability.

Pakistan entered 2025/26 with a somewhat more stable macroeconomic position than in the preceding crisis years, but fiscal space remains limited. The IMF-supported programme continues to emphasise fiscal consolidation, revenue mobilisation, debt reduction, and improved spending efficiency. While these reforms are intended eventually to create more space for social spending, in the short term they constrain the government's ability to finance development and civil-society initiatives directly.

Recurrent climate shocks disrupt long-term local planning, especially in high-risk areas including Sindh, Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and large parts of Punjab and KP. Several organisations report difficulties accessing the funds that respond to these shocks, which are often diverted to national and well-established organisations, leaving local organisations and CBOs behind. This situation compels local organisations to continually divert baseline structural resources toward immediate humanitarian crisis management rather than predictable community programming.

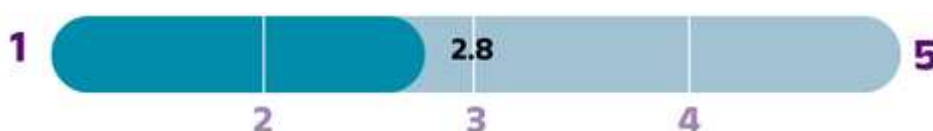
During the early months of 2026, broad macroeconomic inflation, compounded by the consequences of the [war in the Persian Gulf and Middle East](#) and associated global and regional security developments, had volatile impacts on domestic funding availability. Several INGOs and funders substantially reduced their operations or left Pakistan, leaving a large gap between funding needs and availability. This fluctuation also limits unearmarked programmatic funding, making operations difficult to sustain over multi-year cycles.

Changing donor priorities make it difficult to sustain initiatives over time. As a positive step, some NGOs, including [AKDN and several other platforms](#), are running [civil-society strengthening programmes](#), including support to improve their ability to respond to funder requirements and procedures. This has improved the capacity of some smaller and mid-sized NGOs to meet funder requirements.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

4. Open and Responsive State

Score:



4.1 Transparency

During 2025/26, the state and its operations continued to lack open, transparent, and responsive governance, particularly regarding the effective and meaningful enforcement of [Right of Access to Information \(RTI\) laws in Pakistan](#).

It is noted that RTI is recognised as a constitutional right, and laws and commissions now exist across the provinces. Government websites and online information have improved compared with 2024/25. CSOs have successfully obtained information through RTI—for example, information concerning disability data, electoral rolls, disability-disaggregated information, budget allocations, and special-education funding.

However, the Right to Information (RTI) framework is still [interpreted and implemented](#) in ways that reduce the public's ability to obtain information from institutions exercising constitutional or public functions. The basic principle is that citizens should be able to obtain information held by public authorities, subject to specified exemptions such as national security, privacy, or certain confidential information. Similarly, bodies created or recognised by the Constitution—such as constitutional commissions and other independent institutions—often exercise significant public powers. According to the assessment, their records and decisions can be inaccessible under RTI, with implications for institutional accountability. The courts continue to interpret relevant statutory provisions or exemptions in ways that may restrict disclosure, meaning that information previously expected to be accessible could become harder to obtain. The concern is not necessarily that the courts have abolished RTI, but that judicial interpretation has limited the circumstances in which RTI can be invoked. This situation has further exacerbated the tension between institutional independence and transparency. Constitutional bodies require confidentiality and

independence to perform their functions effectively, but because they wield public authority, excessive secrecy can make meaningful public scrutiny difficult. For example, in February 2026, [the Election Commission of Pakistan expanded secrecy-related exemptions](#) to transparency by declaring 10 of the 49 categories of information identified in the Regulations for Right of Access to Information as “classified.”

Additionally, RTI commissions are described as incompletely functional, and there are concerns about vacant civil-society representation or seats on commissions. Information may be available but not timely, comprehensive, or easily accessible. RTI procedures can be complex, with delays or incomplete responses. A requirement to provide a Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC) in Balochistan was mentioned as another potential practical barrier to exercising the right to information. On the other hand, [the KP Government has stated that public transparency is a top priority](#), signalling greater commitment to transparency at provincial level.

4.2 / Participation

It is noted that during 2025/26, civil-society participation in government planning and policymaking improved for specific policy areas. Consultations occurred across a range of legislative, policy, and institutional processes, with CSOs invited to committees, task forces, policy consultations, budget processes, legislative reviews, and national plans. In some of these cases, [CSO input has had substantive influence](#). For example, CSOs were invited to provide input on labour codes, women’s protection legislation—particularly in Punjab, Sindh, and KP—the [National Action Plan for Human Rights 2026](#), climate and environmental policies, disaster response, and Law Commission/Supreme Court-related consultations.

However, space for state-civil society engagement is not institutionalised across all policy areas or decision-making processes and overall opportunities for civil society organisations to input into legislative processes continue to reduce. Legal and institutional requirements remain weak, with little evidence of substantial improvement in formal requirements for public consultation, and implementation varies considerably between institutions and provinces. Panellists noted particular concern for the shrinking space for parliamentary oversight and engagement in legislative processes related to more sensitive policy areas. They perceive that participation in legislative processes on topics such as women’s protection and labour codes is possible due to external pressures, such as conditionalities built into the GSP+ agreement.

Even where it occurs, participation in consultation spaces is inconsistent and selective. Invitations often go to established or elite organisations, while grassroots, rural, disability, minority, local-media, and less-connected CSOs are frequently excluded. For consultation spaces where international organisations (IO) such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) play an important role, participation by national organisations can be contingent on them having established organisations with the respective IO or INGO. Participation can also be constrained by the political environment: CSOs may attend meetings but cannot always speak freely or exercise meaningful influence.

It is also reported that online portals and consultations can disadvantage persons with disabilities, rural communities, and people without reliable digital access. In most cases, consultations are superficial. Drafts may be circulated or posted online, but CSOs often receive little or no feedback on their submissions, and recommendations are not consistently incorporated. Consultations are thus perceived to be largely tokenistic.

There have, however, been some efforts to strengthen CSO engagement. In [Punjab Assembly, a Parliamentary Development Unit \(PDU\)](#) has been established to facilitate

engagement with CSOs on legislation concerning the public interest. However, the PDU currently lacks the expertise and resources needed to ensure meaningful and inclusive participation of citizens and relevant stakeholders in legislative and policy development processes.

At the same time, participation in local government processes in Punjab is hampered by the lack of an elected local government. The province has been awaiting local-government elections for more than 11 years, with assessments attributing the delay to political and bureaucratic factors. Following pressure from CSOs and court judgments favouring early local-government elections in Punjab, [the provincial government agreed to hold elections in December 2026](#). However, no clear schedule had been announced by the time of report compilation. This leaves Pakistan's largest province without elected local representatives and, according to the assessment, limits residents' ability to exercise their constitutional rights. Because of the absence of an elected local-government system in Punjab, CSOs and citizens report feeling constrained in having their voices heard on issues directly concerning their rights and entitlements at local level.

Overall, political engagement is often described as transactional rather than substantive. Politicians and bureaucrats may engage CSOs for resources, expertise, events, or access, but CSOs questioned whether this amounts to genuine policy dialogue.

4.3 / Accountability

During the year 2025–2026, government accountability toward civil society organisations (CSOs) remained weak and superficial. In particular, the government provided little or no meaningful and transparent feedback on how CSO recommendations influenced public policy and decision-making.

Several CSOs reported receiving feedback through informal or partial mechanisms, including responses during face-to-face meetings, requests to submit written proposals or recommendations, inputs from seminars and consultations, minor changes to policy drafts, inclusion of selected recommendations in final documents, and responses through routine or weekly reporting mechanisms. However, these mechanisms are neither standardised nor guaranteed, leaving CSOs uncertain about whether and how their recommendations were considered.

A recurring concern is that government agencies often state that CSO recommendations have been “heard” or “considered” without providing written feedback on the outcome. CSOs lack clarity on which recommendations were accepted or rejected, the reasons for rejection, and the extent to which their input influenced final decisions. The absence of publicly available consultation records is therefore viewed as a significant weakness in transparency and accountability.

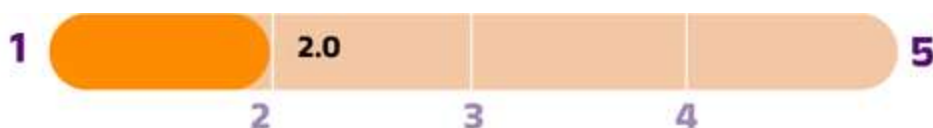
[The National Action Plan for Human Rights 2026](#) can be cited as an example of weak follow-through. CSOs noted that civil-society representatives had been invited to participate in the consultation process. However, they questioned how the plan would be implemented in practice, particularly given the increasingly limited space for civil society to operate.

While government accountability to CSOs is already low, the assessment states that it may deteriorate further following the recently passed [27th Constitutional Amendments](#). According to the report's analysis, [changes associated with the amendment could affect executive power](#) and judicial independence, with implications for accountability mechanisms available to civil society and the general population.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score:



5.1 | Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

Public discourse and constructive dialogue regarding civil society in Pakistan during 2025 and 2026 reflect a tension between restricted discursive spaces and resilient digital and academic forums. International bodies such as Human Rights Watch and [CIVICUS report](#) that state authorities have intensified crackdowns on journalists, political opposition, and non-governmental organisations using broad legislative tools, affecting the openness of public discourse. Conversely, local think tanks, universities, and coalitions continue to host public dialogues aimed at institutional reform, economic resilience, and digital rights.

During the year, when politicians and government officials discussed public issues, NGOs/CSOs were seldom invited to participate, provide evidence, or respond. These discussions were also described as less respectful and inclusive, and civil-society actors were often excluded from representation or meaningful participation in these discourses.

Public discourse is further polarised along religious and sectarian lines, with [incendiary hate speech](#) posing threats to religious communities and impeding constructive dialogue. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Harmony has noted that blasphemy laws have occasionally been misused to publicly accuse individuals as part of personal enmities, disputes, or for personal financial gain. Apart from the impact on individuals, this practice can distort public discourse and overstate religious divisions.

Throughout 2025-2026, a trend was reported in which civil society, particularly organisations working on rights and excluded groups, were portrayed negatively in government rhetoric, media representations, and political dialogue. Several nongovernmental organisations reported that during 2025/26 they faced increasing media vilification, propaganda, and insinuations by government authorities, politicians, and religious groups, including portrayals of civil society organisations as being influenced or controlled by foreign interests. Civil-

society actors and non-governmental organisations also face perceptions of being politically aligned or donor-driven, which may weaken their broad-based legitimacy among citizens.

In addition to reducing their legitimacy, negative narratives about civil society also lead to a broader deterioration in their environment. In 2025 and 2026, the Pakistani government and state-affiliated bodies were reported to have intensified a broad crackdown on civil society, [frequently framing independent journalists, researchers, and rights-based NGOs](#) as instruments of foreign or enemy propaganda. Beyond these state-led smear campaigns, as documented by local and international watchdogs, such portrayals were also used to justify greater government scrutiny and restrictions on the registration and functioning of international human-rights and humanitarian organisations and were used to arbitrarily detain or silence dissenting voices.

Concern about the foreign influence of NGOs increased after the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader during the US-Israel-Iran war. In response, a local sectarian organisation in Gilgit-Baltistan [issued a public notice](#) in March 2026 banning NGOs from entering the district's jurisdiction. The text further stated that American and Israeli citizens, as well as NGOs from those countries, would be prohibited from entering Gilgit-Baltistan. Anyone already there would be required to leave, with the ban justified by concerns about foreign influence in the region.

Concerns have emerged about how civil society organisations use digital platforms. Recent evidence suggests that CSO digital communication can be shaped by short-term project requirements, donor reporting and organisational visibility rather than by sustained, mission-driven public engagement. [A 2026 Accountability Lab Pakistan policy brief](#) argues that this can weaken public narratives about social impact and leave the connection between organisational activities and broader change insufficiently articulated.

5.2 | Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

During 2025–2026, perceptions of civil society and civic engagement in Pakistan reflected what participants described as a profound crisis of civic culture. Public belief in the ability to influence governance remains low due to widespread institutional distrust, shrinking civic space, and rote-based schooling, characterised by heavy reliance on memorisation rather than internalising concepts. The assessment further states that the education system strongly emphasises the state's narrative, which can contribute to mindsets that follow official positions.

As a result, citizens frequently perceive themselves as silent observers rather than active participants in democracy, according to the assessment, contributing to low voter engagement and weak accountability pressure on political actors. A deepening divide separates the public from formal state institutions, eroding confidence that community initiatives or grassroots advocacy can meaningfully influence national policy.

Increased enforcement of electronic-crime legislation and continuing social-media platform restrictions suppress online political organisation and open public debate. High inflation, economic strain, and basic survival priorities push community-level volunteering and civic initiatives to the periphery for many households.

Formal academic frameworks heavily emphasise traditional nationalist narratives and rote memorisation over practical human-rights or constitutional literacy. The assessment indicates that a large majority of youth complete basic schooling without encountering structured, interactive political or civic education. Instead, access to civic learning remains largely confined to a few academic institutions in urban centres or specialised NGO

programmes, leaving rural populations and marginalised youth largely without modern civic-empowerment tools.

Several public universities, including the University of Engineering and Technology (UET) Lahore and UET Taxila, require candidates or students to sign an undertaking containing a mandatory clause prohibiting participation in political activities during the academic term. Non-compliance may result in expulsion from the university. Similarly, several universities have hired retired military personnel as security staff, contributing to an environment in which students are closely monitored and discouraged from participating in political or other non-academic activities. These restrictions may limit civic engagement by discouraging young people from participating in public discourse, developing political awareness, organising collectively, and gaining practical experience in democratic participation.

5.3/ Civic Equality and Inclusion

During 2025/26, evidence collected indicates that legal and policy progress for civic equality and inclusion has been made. Some reforms have [expanded participation](#) for marginalised groups, including postal ballots for persons with disabilities, voting-related provisions for transgender persons, and gender and disability working groups within electoral institutions. Despite the [introduction](#) of affirmative measures and new policy and institutional frameworks for excluded groups—including older persons and religious minorities—, significant gaps remain between formal recognition and substantive inclusion. Evidence from [human-rights institutions](#) and civil-society organisations points to persistent weaknesses in implementation, monitoring, accountability, access to services and protection from discrimination. The experience of these reforms suggests that affirmative action should not be limited to numerical representation or formal policy recognition; its broader objective should be the mainstreaming of marginalised groups through their meaningful participation in decision-making, employment, public services and community life.

There were also important institutional developments in 2025. Parliament approved the [National Commission for Minorities Rights](#) legislation, and the National Commission for Minorities Rights Act, 2025 was [promulgated](#) on 18 December 2025. The Commission is intended to protect minorities' social, economic, political and legal rights and includes minority representation from the provinces and Islamabad Capital Territory, including women. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) [argued](#) that the minority commission needed to be independent, adequately resourced and inclusive, and explicitly warned that minority communities should not be included merely as “token” representatives.

Local government reforms have sometimes reduced rather than [expanded reserved positions](#) for women, persons with disabilities, and other groups. These reforms, as reported by CSOs and panellists, can increase the formal share of reserved seats while simultaneously reducing the actual number of seats available to a particular group. This can happen because of changes in how reservations are calculated, combined, or rotated. In addition, reserved seats from national to local governments continue to be stigmatised, with women and other representatives sometimes portrayed as having obtained positions through “charity” or token mechanisms.

While some progress has been noted, major gaps remain between policy and social attitudes. Public discourse, social attitudes, and perceptions remain exclusionary despite improvements in laws and policies. Derogatory language toward persons with disabilities, transgender people, women, and minorities remains common in mainstream media, political discourse, and everyday conversation. Social stigma is reinforced by stereotypes, including beliefs that disability is punishment for parents' actions. Recent social media practices,

including AI-generated degrading imagery and gendered insults, were cited as examples of persistent and, in some cases, worsening hostility in public discourse.

Moreover, HRCP's 2025 reporting [documented](#) continuing attacks on religious minorities and persistent problems involving blasphemy cases, forced conversions and impunity. Its 2026 review of 2025 concluded that vulnerable groups, including religious minorities, continued to face violence and discrimination despite some positive institutional reforms. Religious minorities thus continue to face particular barriers. Continuing exclusion and distrust toward religious minorities, including Ahmadis, Hindus, Christians, and others, remain part of social and political discourse. Inclusion also remains selective, with some minority communities receiving greater social acceptance than others. Inclusion thus cannot be achieved through legislation alone. Media, politicians, educational institutions, communities, and social-media users all play a role in either promoting inclusion or reinforcing exclusion.

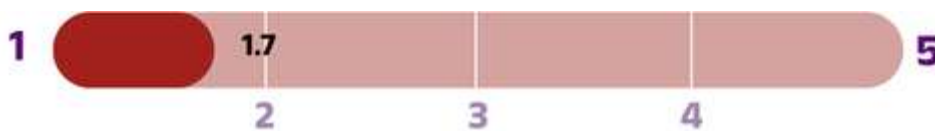
Constitutional and legal provisions relating to religious exclusion, including laws concerning blasphemy, are identified as a [continuing structural concern](#) by minority-rights organisations and other CSOs. Such organisations ([especially those working on minority rights issues](#)) have called on the federal government to pursue comprehensive constitutional reforms to enhance protections for religious minorities, women, and children under the proposed 28th Constitutional Amendment Bill. Gender equality remained a significant concern. The [Global Gender Gap report](#) cites Pakistan's low position on international gender-equality measures as evidence of persistent structural problems. Violence and degrading treatment of women also remain serious concerns for CSOs. Commissions on the status of women at both national and provincial levels were described as largely ineffective or non-functional because of political and bureaucratic interference and manipulation.

In summary, while Pakistan has introduced legal reforms, established some institutional mechanisms, increased visibility, and achieved limited improvements in representation, these advances have not been matched by effective implementation. Persistent social and economic barriers, discriminatory public discourse, tokenistic representation, limited decision-making power for marginalised groups, and continuing structural and legal exclusions continue to hinder meaningful inclusion. Overall, progress made from a policy and legal perspective has yet to translate into meaningful and mainstreamed civic equality and inclusion across society.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score:



6.1 | Digital Rights and Freedoms

During the year, significant restrictions on the free use of the internet were reported. In 2025 alone, [20 network-shutdown incidents](#) were reported, and YouTube channels were [reportedly asked to shut down](#) on 27 occasions. Parts of Kashmir reportedly [experienced prolonged internet disruptions during July 2026](#), when a civic-rights campaign was under way. Beyond outright shutdowns, citizens experienced [repeated throttling, filtering, firewalls](#), and selective restrictions that limited particular users' or organisations' access to online platforms.

During 2025 and early 2026, journalists, human-rights defenders, opposition figures and other citizens in Pakistan raised concerns about restrictions on political expression, including the filtering and blocking of online content and the use of cybercrime laws against critics. Citizens specifically [raised concerns](#) about amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act and their enforcement, which were described as [broad and potentially draconian](#), particularly regarding definitions of "fake news" and online offences. As a result, around [1,200 cases were reportedly registered](#) under amended PECA provisions. Documented cases included arrests and prosecutions of journalists and human-rights lawyers as well as attempts to block YouTube channels operated by journalists and opposition figures. Participants also argued that [institutional capacity and avenues for timely redress](#) remain inadequate.

Fake news and harmful content were [acknowledged as genuine problems](#). Misinformation, defamation, abuse, hate speech, and AI-generated propaganda create legitimate challenges. However, positive developments were also noted in Pakistan, including the

[restoration of access to Twitter/X in 2025](#) after more than a year of restrictions. Incremental improvements in digital connectivity were also reported in 2025–26, including rising broadband penetration, expanded mobile coverage, and progress toward 5G and fibre infrastructure. However, these developments occurred alongside continued restrictions and disruptions affecting internet freedom.

6.2 | Digital Security and Privacy

The [Digital Nation Pakistan Act \(2025\)](#), [Digital Public Infrastructure policy](#), Digital Governance framework, and creation of a Digital National Authority are cited as recent developments in regulating digital security and privacy. However, CSOs questioned their practical impact. The primary critique from CSOs is that Pakistan's recent digital frameworks prioritise top-down state control, law enforcement, and bureaucratic consolidation over genuine digital inclusion, citizen privacy, and fundamental human rights.

A major concern is that Pakistan's proposed or expected [data-protection framework](#) may not align sufficiently with international human rights standards, particularly if meaningful data protection would require restrictions on existing surveillance practices. Panellists expressed concern that the law may either not materialise or, if enacted, may suffer from weak implementation.

Extensive surveillance and data collection, including Safe City systems and social-media monitoring, continue to raise concerns about civic freedoms and spaces. Monitoring tools can be configured with keywords and used to retrieve relevant online activity over specified periods. In Sindh and Punjab, Safe City data are controlled by the National Radio Telecommunication Corporation (NRTC), raising concerns about centralised access to sensitive citizen information, particularly information concerning people working on rights-related issues.

Concerns about the involvement of cyber armies and the recruitment or induction of hackers into government or surveillance-related roles were identified as key features affecting citizens' cyber freedoms. Government agencies, political actors, and other groups are seen as potentially using fake accounts, bots, cyberattacks, and coordinated online activity to spread disinformation, intimidate civil-society actors, or manipulate public conversations. Online restrictions and digital violence continue to disproportionately affect women and girls, including through harassment and attacks facilitated by digital platforms.

Although Pakistan has various laws and legal provisions addressing privacy and cybersecurity, CSOs emphasised that a significant gap between formal protections and actual implementation and enforcement remained in 2025/26.

Digital-rights organisations and activists are increasingly sharing practical knowledge about data security, privacy protection, secure communications, and responding to breaches. Technical experts are helping strengthen these community-level defences. Emerging challenges include AI-generated content, propaganda, polarisation, and misinformation. Participants argued that laws and institutions need to adapt rather than rely on outdated approaches.

6.3 | Digital Accessibility

Internet availability, affordability and quality of service remain significant challenges to meaningful internet access in Pakistan. Although [mobile and fixed-line infrastructure has expanded and connectivity is available in many areas](#) (including former FATA/merged districts), substantial gaps persist between coverage and actual use, particularly among rural and low-income communities. [During FY2025/26, Pakistan's broadband subscriber base exceeded 160 million](#), with mobile broadband accounting for the overwhelming majority of connections. In contrast, fixed-line broadband and FTTH remained relatively limited and concentrated in major urban markets such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad.

Challenges are visible in underserved regions, including Balochistan and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), where government-supported broadband and optical-fibre projects have expanded infrastructure but do not necessarily ensure universal, affordable or high-quality access. Especially in these regions, physical infrastructure does not necessarily mean usable access. Services have frequently been switched off, restricted, or unavailable in particular locations. Some areas along major routes and in rural regions still have gaps in coverage. Additionally, internet quality and speed vary significantly, even within major cities. Urban inequalities can be seen, for example, in differences in service quality between affluent and less-developed parts of Islamabad. Rural and remote areas face greater problems with reliable connectivity.

Pakistan is described as comparatively costly for internet and data services relative to other countries in the region. Poverty and deprivation therefore remain major barriers to meaningful digital access. Merely having a network or tower does not mean people can use digital services. Accessibility also depends on literacy, digital skills, displacement, language, disability, and whether services are actually enabled.

In 2025/26, many government and development-sector websites were reportedly not accessible to visually impaired users. Images without appropriate descriptions or sufficient quality may not be readable by assistive software. Urdu-language accessibility and appropriate script or encoding remain problematic for a large number of users. Videos often lack captions or sign-language interpretation, creating barriers for people with hearing impairments. Many government portals, applications, and digital resources remain predominantly in English.

Displaced populations may technically have access to digital services but lack the devices, connectivity, literacy, or resources required to use online portals. The example of displaced persons being expected to apply online for assistance illustrates the gap between formal availability and practical accessibility. Basic digital literacy is an important component of accessibility. Internet availability alone does not ensure that people can effectively use online government services, applications, or emerging technologies.

AI has the potential to expand digital inclusion but also creates new skills and accessibility requirements. AI-generated content, deepfakes, and other emerging technologies require users and systems to have sufficient digital and technical capabilities to understand and engage with them. Rural populations continue to face greater barriers to benefiting from AI because of connectivity, affordability, skills, and language limitations. Although infrastructure and internet services exist in many parts of the country, access remains uneven, and large parts of the population cannot fully use those services.

CSOs consider internet access essential for education, healthcare, livelihoods, freelancing, emergencies, and economic activity. However, structural and systemic barriers continue to affect large segments of the population, including women, persons with disabilities, rural communities, and people in far-flung areas.

C) Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish a Unified One-Window System for Civic Action

Federal Government, EAD and Provincial Registration Authorities

- Develop an evidence-based national CSO policy through a consultative and quality-assured process to address fragmented regulation, duplication, unclear approvals, and weak inter-agency coordination.
- Establish a single mechanism for CSO registration, renewal, NOCs, EAD approvals, NTN/tax requirements, and other compliance processes.
- Eliminate duplicate registrations, documents, and fees, and standardise procedures across provinces and districts.
- Develop integrated online portals with clear requirements, timelines, application tracking, and standardised guidance, supported by a practical legal and compliance handbook for smaller organisations.

Law Enforcement Agencies

- Improve information sharing and digital integration among regulators, FBR, banks, and other institutions.
- Introduce transparent, standardised, risk-based, and time-bound NOC procedures, with civilian authorities responsible for NGO scrutiny.
- Establish predictable criteria and coordination mechanisms for EAD approvals and foreign-funded projects.
- Ensure that minor administrative or security-clearance issues do not unnecessarily delay legitimate projects and events.

Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Law and Justice

- Strengthen regulatory bodies through adequate resources, trained staff, clear mandates, autonomy, and effective coordination.
- Reform regulations to create an enabling civic environment and avoid excessive monitoring, scrutiny, and restrictions, particularly for grassroots, women-led, rights-based, and community organisations.

Recommendation 2: Reduce Financial and Compliance Burdens on CSOs

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and CSO Networks

- Establish government–CSO mechanisms to resolve registration, compliance, operational, and protection challenges.
- Ensure timely grievance resolution and regular government–CSO dialogue.

- Ensure that reforms reflect CSO experiences and strengthen networks for information sharing, solidarity, and collective engagement.

Donors and International Community

- Promote predictable, transparent, flexible, and locally led financing.
- Expand technical assistance in proposal development, financial management, MEL, digital reporting, safeguarding, and compliance.
- Provide accessible support and dedicated funding for grassroots CSOs, including those in climate-vulnerable and underserved areas.
- Simplify application and reporting requirements while maintaining appropriate accountability.

Donor Governments and EU Delegation

- Increase multi-year, locally led climate-adaptation and resilience funding.
- Provide transition funding and responsible exit strategies when programmes are reduced or phased out.
- Account for inflation and macroeconomic volatility and allow reasonable adjustments to budgets, staffing, and timelines.
- Recognise legitimate overhead and institutional costs and reduce excessive reporting, branding, procurement, and compliance requirements.
- Promote partnership-based and shared decision-making models that give local CSOs greater influence over programme design and resources.

State Bank of Pakistan, Ministry of Finance and FBR

- Ensure that banks consistently facilitate CSO accounts and provide effective complaint and redress mechanisms.
- Issue clear AML/CFT guidance without unnecessarily excluding legitimate organisations.
- Review taxes and fiscal measures that disproportionately affect nonprofits and establish a tax framework recognising their public-interest nature.
- Provide relief for small organisations and standardise bank-account requirements while reducing unnecessary documentation and verification.
- Improve coordination between banks and regulators.

Corporate Sector and Philanthropists on CSR giving

- Use clear and transparent criteria for selecting CSO partners and make funding processes simple, fair, and accessible to local CSOs.
- Use clear partnership agreements with defined roles and responsibilities and provide predictable and timely funding to CSO partners.
- Recognise CSOs as partners in social development, not only as service providers.
- Involve CSOs and affected communities in designing social-impact programmes and give CSOs meaningful opportunities to provide feedback and influence programme decisions.
- Use transparent monitoring and reporting systems that focus on results and learning.
- Publicly report on philanthropic funding, partnerships, and social-impact results.
- Avoid funding practices that create excessive administrative burdens for smaller organisations.

Recommendation 3: Improve Physical and Operational Access for CSOs

Federal and Provincial Governments

- Recognise civic empowerment and institutional independence as legitimate objectives.
- Ensure proportionate, predictable, and risk-based oversight and protect CSOs' ability to address legitimate local rights, development, humanitarian, and community priorities.
- Expand domestic funding through zakat, sadaqah, philanthropy, corporate giving, and grants, including transparent pooled funds for smaller organisations.
- Encourage diversified CSO income sources.
- Ensure that security and mobility restrictions do not unnecessarily obstruct legitimate CSO activities.
- Establish clear operating procedures for sensitive and conflict-affected areas and connect grassroots organisations with donors and resource providers.

Parliament and Parliamentary Standing Committees

- Include grassroots, rights-based, women-led, and community organisations in policy development and review.
- Ensure equal, merit-based regulatory treatment and eliminate favouritism.
- Protect a safe and enabling environment for lawful CSO activities.
- Apply proportionate, risk-based, privacy-respecting verification and monitoring.

Ministry of IT and PTA

- Address hate speech and misinformation through proportionate regulation and counter-speech rather than broad censorship or shutdowns.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Right to Information and Institutionalise Meaningful CSO Participation

Federal and Provincial Governments

- Fully implement Right to Information (RTI) laws by ensuring adequately staffed, accessible, adequately resourced, and functionally independent information commissions, with clear procedures for timely responses and narrowly defined exemptions. The Ministry of IT and relevant digital authorities should also ensure that RTI information and application mechanisms are accessible through user-friendly digital platforms, including for persons with disabilities and people with limited digital access.
- Establish transparent, timely, and inclusive mechanisms for public consultation at federal and provincial levels, ensuring that consultation processes are accessible to grassroots, rural, disability, minority, local-media, youth, and other marginalised CSOs.
- Restore regular local-government elections and strengthen meaningful citizen and CSO participation in local decision-making, enabling communities and CSOs to engage with elected local representatives on issues concerning public services, local development, rights, and entitlements. Provincial Governments should ensure that local-government institutions have adequate authority and mechanisms for citizen participation and public accountability.
- Establish transparent consultation-feedback and documentation mechanisms requiring Federal and Provincial Governments, ministries, departments, and regulatory bodies to publicly record consultations, summarise CSO submissions, and explain which recommendations were accepted, rejected, or incorporated into final policies, legislation, plans, or regulations. Where consultations are conducted digitally, the Ministry of IT and PTA should support accessible and publicly searchable platforms for publishing consultation documents and responses.

- Strengthen CSO institutional capacity and compliance by encouraging and facilitating support for improved governance, financial management, human-resource systems, safeguarding, transparency, accountability, and legal and regulatory compliance. Federal and Provincial Governments should ensure that regulatory and reporting requirements are clear, proportionate, predictable, and accessible, while relevant public institutions and CSO-support platforms can provide guidance and capacity-building opportunities.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen Public Dialogue, Civic Education and Youth Participation

Federal Government, Media and Information Ministries and Departments

- Establish regular and transparent mechanisms for CSO participation in policy discussions, parliamentary processes, consultations, and media forums.
- Promote evidence-based discourse and avoid stigmatising CSOs as foreign- or donor-driven.

Government–CSO Platforms

- The platforms should promote a clear distinction between lawful civic participation and activities that genuinely threaten institutional security or disrupt educational activities. They should work with educational institutions to ensure that rules governing student societies, public discussion, peaceful assembly, volunteering, and civic activities are transparent, proportionate, and consistently applied.
- They should ensure that civic education is not concentrated in urban universities and better-resourced institutions. They should partner with grassroots CSOs, schools, community organisations, local governments, and youth groups to extend civic-learning opportunities to rural, remote, low-income, and marginalised communities.
- Particular attention should be given to young women, persons with disabilities, minorities, displaced populations, and other groups facing barriers to participation.

Civil Society Organisations

- Promote responsible public discourse and counter hate speech, discrimination, harassment, and harmful AI-generated content while protecting legitimate online civic engagement.
- Use digital platforms for sustained civic education, public debate, evidence sharing, and community engagement.
- Strengthen legal, governance, and compliance capacity of service providers, especially those officials from the registration and compliance authorities.

Provincial Government – Especially in Punjab

- Hold timely local government elections and devolve citizen-related services and entitlements to empowered local governments down to the village level.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen Digital Rights, Privacy, Access and Resilience

Ministry of IT, Ministry of Interior and Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA)

- Review PECA and related digital policies for compliance with international human-rights standards.
 - Establish independent oversight and effective redress for censorship, surveillance, shutdowns, cyberattacks, and misuse of personal data.
 - Address misinformation through proportionate regulation and counter-speech.
 - Expand affordable, reliable broadband, especially in rural and underserved areas, and address barriers affecting women, persons with disabilities, displaced populations, and low-income communities.
 - Make government digital services accessible in Urdu and other local languages and compatible with accessibility technologies.
 - Strengthen digital-security and media-literacy capacity among CSOs, journalists, activists, and communities, including privacy, secure communications, misinformation, AI-generated content, and cyber threats.
 - Promote safe civic dialogue, public-interest advocacy, and open-source/local digital solutions.
-

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 July 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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