



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Trinidad and Tobago

August 2025

Context

The first half of 2025 marked a period of political transition and persistent insecurity in Trinidad and Tobago, as a new government took office amidst ongoing economic strain and escalating violence. Trinidad and Tobago continues to face compounding crises in security and the economy. In late 2024, the former government imposed a [state of emergency](#) in response to record homicides, granting broad police powers that raised civil society concerns about profiling and rights protections. After the April 2025 election, a UNC-led administration took office. New security threats led it to declare a [second state of emergency](#) in July 2025, again expanding police powers and prompting renewed scrutiny from civil society over human rights and civic space.

At the same time, rising inflation and cost-of-living pressures triggered unrest. In late 2024, [protests](#) broke out over unpaid wages, water shortages, and service failures, [with some protests continuing into](#) 2025. Trade unions and community groups led these demonstrations, reinforcing civil society's frontline role in voicing public frustrations.

Despite tensions, meaningful collaborations have occurred. In November 2024, parliamentarians and NGOs convened to explore environmental rights through the [Escazú Agreement](#). Also, in March 2025, the government partnered with CSOs and international agencies to launch a [Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan](#).

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Trinidad and Tobago generally respects constitutional freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and is [rated](#) "open" on the CIVICUS Monitor. NGOs, unions, and advocacy groups operate [without formal restrictions](#). In the past year, numerous peaceful protests on wages, public services, and governance were permitted without crackdown. Even during the 2024 state of emergency, [gatherings were allowed without curfews](#).

Examples include [pilots protesting in October 2024](#) and utility workers assembling outside a minister's home, to which he responded with "no objection." However, in a notable departure from this trend, [police denied permission in late April 2025](#)—shortly after the state of emergency was lifted—for a peaceful protest on prison reform. The Commissioner cited public order concerns and the strain of concurrent election rallies as justification for the refusal. This was an uncommon decision in a country accustomed to largely unhindered demonstrations. Civil society organisations [condemned the move](#) as unconstitutional and disproportionate, and promptly initiated legal proceedings, underscoring their commitment to defending civic space through the courts.

On 18 July 2025, the incoming government declared [a new state of emergency](#), citing intelligence of a prison-based criminal syndicate planning assassinations and institutional destabilisation. The move granted authorities expanded powers—including warrantless searches and arrests—though no curfew was imposed. In late July, Parliament approved [a three-month extension](#) following disclosures of ongoing threats and compromised prisons. To date, there have been no recorded public statements from civil society organisations specifically addressing transparency or rights protections under the state of emergency. While the regulations have not introduced extraordinary restrictions, the expansion of police powers carries heightened risks for groups historically vulnerable to profiling and disproportionate enforcement, including Afro-Trinidadian youth in urban communities, Venezuelan migrants, and lower-income households. For others, particularly more privileged groups, the impact may feel minimal, underscoring how unevenly such measures are experienced.

The full scale of the threat remains unclear, and governments are rarely fully transparent in such circumstances. Under Trinidad and Tobago's Constitution, a state of emergency is time-

bound and subject to parliamentary approval, but broader international standards on necessity and proportionality are not automatically binding. Independent oversight has so far been limited: Parliament went into recess shortly after the July declaration, leaving little room for committee scrutiny. The judiciary has an indirect role through [challenges](#) to State of Emergency-related detention orders, and on 22 July 2025 the Chief Justice appointed members to [a State of Emergency Review Tribunal](#), which has already begun receiving applications. While these mechanisms exist, their effectiveness in ensuring accountability remains to be seen. The Ombudsman's mandate does not typically extend to states of emergency, leaving civil society with few clear avenues for oversight outside the courts.

The media landscape is pluralistic, and press freedom is broadly upheld. In October 2023, the UK Privy Council [restricted](#) the use of Trinidad and Tobago's Sedition Act to cases with proven intent to incite violence. While this strengthened protections for expression, the Privy Council's role as the country's highest appellate court remains contested. In March 2025, outgoing Prime Minister Keith Rowley [called](#) for adopting the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) as the final court of appeal, framing it as completing independence. In June 2025, CCJ President Justice Adrian Saunders [reiterated](#) that the transition was inevitable, highlighting growing momentum for change.

Press freedom in Trinidad and Tobago remains largely protected, though not without pressures. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [noted](#) a steep fall in ranking from 6th in 2023 to 24th in 2024, citing rising threats and self-censorship. By 2025, the country had rebounded to 19th globally and first in the Caribbean, demonstrating resilience despite ongoing risks related to politically charged rhetoric, expanded police powers, and selective enforcement of defamation or cybercrime laws.

Legal reforms are ongoing. The long-dormant [Data Protection Act](#) saw proposed amendments in 2023, following civil society concerns over its potential impact on journalism. The Ministry of Public Administration initiated a [policy review](#) to explore exemptions for certain categories of expression, including investigative journalism, aiming to balance privacy protection with journalistic freedom.

However, in March 2025, Trinidad and Tobago's Court of Appeal [reinstated colonial-era laws](#) criminalising same-sex relations, drawing strong [criticism](#) from human rights groups and raising concerns about regression in civil liberties. In May 2025, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [urged](#) Trinidad and Tobago to uphold LGBTQI+ rights, declaring that such anti-sodomy laws violate international standards on privacy and equality.

Overall, while day-to-day civic activism remains vibrant and unrestricted, these developments since April highlight the enabling environment's fragility: occasional official overreach and regressive court rulings remind civil society that even in an "open" civic space, vigilance and advocacy are needed to maintain hard-won fundamental freedoms.

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

No repressive new laws have been imposed on civil society since April 2025; however, compliance pressures under existing frameworks remain high. While Trinidad and Tobago has historically maintained a broadly supportive legal environment for civil society, legislation such as the [Non-Profit Organisations Act \(2019\)](#) has introduced higher levels of complexity into the system. According to [a 2025 review of the NPO Act](#), its interaction with other legislation has resulted in overlapping and inconsistent compliance requirements, particularly affecting smaller organisations. NGOs typically register under the Companies Act, or as Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) under the Non-Profit Organisations Act 2019. The NPO Act, which aims

to strengthen financial transparency and prevent misuse of funds, mandates annual reporting and registration with the Registrar General. The Registrar General can refuse or cancel registration, but only for specific compliance breaches (e.g. failure to file returns). The NPO Act does not allow deregistration based on national interest or political grounds.

While these requirements promote accountability, some smaller NGOs struggle with the administrative burden. In 2024, the Trinidad and Tobago Red Cross Society had its TT\$730,000 (ca. 90,000 Euro) government subvention [suspended](#) due to governance and financial non-compliance, signalling stronger enforcement of NPO accountability standards. By June 2025, the organisation reported that it was finalising three years of overdue audits and would hold internal elections by August to meet legal requirements and restore funding eligibility. This followed an International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) mission report from December 2024, which raised serious concerns about internal governance, including election irregularities and executive overreach. Notably, the government did not move to deregister or shut down the organisation. Instead, it opted to suspend funding until corrective measures were implemented. The requirements are not intentionally used to limit NGO operations, but the lack of clarity and coordination among regulations creates grey areas that make compliance difficult. This can lead to excessive penalties and ultimately hinders NGOs' ability to operate effectively.

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

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

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

Most NGOs continue to depend more on external donors and corporate partnerships than on state funding. In June 2025, the U.S. Embassy in Port of Spain issued a [Notice of Funding Opportunity](#) for its Public Diplomacy Small Grants Programme, offering US\$200,000 in total across individual civil society projects. While this appears encouraging, there has been a noticeable shift in funding priorities compared to 2024. [The Embassy's 2024 programme](#) explicitly supported initiatives related to human rights, media freedom, democratic governance, and inclusion of marginalised groups, aligning closely with traditional civil society objectives. By contrast, [the 2025 programme](#) de-emphasises rights-based themes and instead prioritises areas such as STEM education, entrepreneurial development, law enforcement cooperation, and U.S. foreign policy promotion. This shift reflects broader geopolitical trends and potentially signals a tilt toward more conservative, securitised funding priorities.

Meanwhile, corporate social responsibility efforts like the [United Way's "Trinidad and Tobago Day of Caring"](#) brought together public sector institutions and corporate partners to support community organisations through volunteerism and micro-grants.

A major concern is the long-term [phasing down of EU operations](#) in Trinidad and Tobago, announced in August 2025, as part of a shift in development priorities toward lower-income countries. While legacy programmes remain active, the gradual withdrawal of EU development assistance raises concerns about future funding and support for civil society capacity-building. The EU has long been the most consistent provider of core funding for civil society in Trinidad and Tobago and remains virtually the only major donor currently supporting rights-based

programming, including projects focused on civic space, governance, and human rights. Its departure could leave a significant gap in both financial and political support for CSO development.

In June, UNHCR [announced](#) it would close its Trinidad and Tobago office by 31 August due to global funding cuts. This decision immediately impacted local civil society groups that relied on UNHCR for funding, coordination, and protection services. Organisations such as La Casita and the Caribbean Centre for Human Rights have warned that the closure creates a severe protection vacuum for refugees, particularly Venezuelans, without a national asylum system to fill the gap. CSOs are now expected to carry out refugee support work with drastically reduced resources and no clear state partnership, putting service delivery and institutional sustainability at risk.

The [Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan](#) opens funding avenues for women-led initiatives, and diaspora crowdfunding is gaining traction.

Despite small gains, civil society's financial landscape remains fragile, as it is highly susceptible to funding cuts, regulatory burdens, and shifting international priorities.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Trinidad and Tobago's previous government's engagement with civil society was [mixed over the past year](#). Notable collaboration occurred during the creation of the [Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan](#), which included extensive consultation with CSOs and international partners, and a [Parliamentary Caucus on the Escazú Agreement](#) which brought together lawmakers, NGOs like the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, and UN agencies to discuss environmental rights. These were examples where civil society participation and consultation were fully integrated into the process, and in some cases playing a lead role. Trinidad and Tobago is still a signatory (not yet a party) to the Escazú Agreement on environmental access rights; despite a parliamentary caucus in late 2024 and sustained NGO lobbying, no ratification has occurred, and it is unclear if Cabinet will prioritise this treaty under the new leadership.

Formal public consultations exist such as those by Joint Select Committees but are inconsistently applied. The constitutional reform consultations initiated under the previous government (which gathered thousands of public submissions in early 2025) have stalled; no new announcements have been made about it since.

Since the April 2025 general election, civil society engagement has remained uneven, though the new government has taken steps to address long-standing labour sector concerns. While broad civil society engagement remains limited, there has been a notable shift in the government's posture toward trade unions. The newly appointed Labour Minister — himself a former union leader — used his [Labour Day address](#) to highlight union contributions and unveiled a "Workers' Agenda" shaped by union input. The government also halted the rollout of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority and rescinded a controversial Water and Sewage Authority (WASA) restructuring plan, moves that addressed union concerns and prevented mass layoffs. Promises were also made to [settle wage negotiations](#) with 10% increases, significantly above the previous administration's offer, and to update labour laws to better protect workers. The [revival of the National Tripartite Advisory Council](#), which includes unions, government, and employers, marks a return to more formalised civil society consultation, particularly around economic and labour issues.

5. Political culture and public discourses on civil society

Trinidad and Tobago continues to generally maintain a respectful public discourse toward civil society. NGOs are not vilified by the media or state, and civil society leaders often appear on

talk shows or in news articles as expert voices on national issues such as crime and poverty. Government rhetoric tends to be positive, with officials frequently acknowledging partnerships with NGOs on initiatives like [disaster relief](#) and vaccination drives. Recently, the new Labour Minister's [Labour Day message](#) paid tribute to past trade unionists, acknowledging that many rights in today's society were won through civil society struggle. Such statements from officials reinforce a culture that values civil society's contributions rather than demonising them.

In July 2025, relations between state actors and civil society were strained when Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar publicly [criticised](#) the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago (LATT) for defending Independent Senators in a pensions debate. The UNC reinforced this criticism in a statement labelling LATT's stance "[anti-democratic](#)." Although no formal action followed, the rhetoric framed civil society oversight as partisan interference, signalling a deterioration in civic discourse and risking a chilling effect on independent voices.

At the same time, the government's rhetoric has reflected a shift toward conservative global ideologies, [criticising "wokeness"](#), [endorsing "stand your ground" laws](#), and questioning established human rights principles. While not yet embodied in policy, such statements risk narrowing space for rights-based advocacy and discouraging CSOs from addressing sensitive issues such as equality, migrant rights, and LGBTQI+ protections. Additionally, the tone of media coverage varies by topic. A 2022–2024 analysis of local media revealed that while [reporting on LGBTQI+ issues](#) was largely free of slurs, it often lacked inclusivity.

During [Pride Month 2025](#), civil society groups organised several events under the theme "Love is the Language" to raise awareness. The culmination was the Trinidad & Tobago Pride Parade on 20 July, which, despite the legal context, proceeded peacefully with around 200 people marching in Woodbrook ([including the British High Commissioner](#), who attended in solidarity). Media coverage of Pride was largely neutral-to-supportive, framing it as a call for equal treatment. On talk shows and social media, many citizens expressed empathy, though others echoed religious objections.

Women's rights campaigns and anti-violence vigils generally receive empathetic coverage, especially amid high rates of gender-based violence. For instance, a [2024 vigil for domestic violence victims](#) was prominently and sympathetically covered.

Regarding migrants and refugees, public attitudes are still mixed and sometimes harsh. While civil society groups like Living Water Community advocate for inclusion, [Freedom House](#) notes that some officials and citizens have made derogatory remarks.

Social media allows civil society to speak directly to the public, and during recent protests, many users expressed solidarity with demonstrators.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Trinidad and Tobago's digital space remains fundamentally open. Since April 2025, there have been no instances of internet censorship, social media blocking, or government-mandated digital shutdowns. Civil society organisations, activists, and independent media continue to utilise online platforms freely for advocacy and mobilisation, including live-streaming protests and conducting webinars on issues from climate action to public budgeting.

The [Social Media Monitoring Unit](#) of the Trinidad and Tobago Police continues to track public online content for criminal activity, including human trafficking and terrorism. Although its role is officially limited to open-source monitoring, privacy advocates remain watchful to ensure it is not used for political surveillance. As of 2025, no abuses have been reported.

Cybersecurity remains a concern. In 2023–2024, several ransomware attacks targeted public institutions - including one that shut down the [postal service](#). These incidents exposed

weaknesses in national infrastructure. At the same time, efforts to fully implement the Data Protection Act (passed in 2011) are ongoing. [Amendments](#) tabled in 2023 addressed [media concerns](#), but the Office of the Information Commissioner remains unstaffed, leaving privacy enforcement in limbo.

While no civil society groups reported targeted cyberattacks in the past year, the threat of phishing, trolling, and misinformation—particularly ahead of elections—persists. Groups like the [Media Institute of the Caribbean](#) are offering digital safety training to NGOs and journalists.

Challenges and opportunities

As Trinidad and Tobago remains under a second state of emergency under the newly elected UNC-led government, civil society faces both renewed uncertainty and emerging opportunities. While the state of emergency regulations have not directly curtailed CSO activity, expanded policing powers increase risks of profiling against vulnerable groups and create an atmosphere of caution. The new government has signalled alignment with more conservative global ideologies, publicly criticising “[wokeness](#)”, supporting “[stand your ground](#)” laws, and voicing scepticism toward traditional human rights principles. While this rhetoric marks a shift from previous administrations, it remains untested how this government will treat civil society actors, particularly those focused on rights-based work. However, the presence of new ministries and state actors opens early-stage opportunities for CSOs to influence key reforms, including stalled legislation like the Data Protection Act. In this fluid environment, proactive engagement will be critical to safeguarding civic space and advancing inclusive governance.

In the next 3–4 months, maintaining civic space during the ongoing state of emergency will require transparent oversight and consistent communication from authorities. Dialogue mechanisms like the Tripartite Advisory Council should be broadened to include rights-based CSOs, while immediate donor coordination is needed to offset gaps from the EU and UNHCR withdrawal. Supporting NGOs to build financial resilience and fast-tracking stalled reforms, such as Data Protection Act amendments that safeguard journalism and advocacy, would provide quick, tangible improvements to the enabling environment.

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