



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Bangladesh

September 2025

Context

In July 2024, Bangladesh witnessed the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government, marking the [end of 15 years](#) of authoritarian rule. The change in government was triggered by student [protest](#) over government jobs quota reform, which turned into an uprising and Hasina's subsequent resignation. An [interim government](#) led by Dr. Muhammad Yunus assumed office in August 2024. Though the Hasina regime oversaw some periods of economic growth, it left most state institutions on the brink of collapse due to widespread irregularities, rampant politicisation, and institutional decay. Until 2024, Bangladesh performed worse than other South Asian countries on governance indices such as [Democracy Index](#), [Rule of Law Index](#), [Worldwide Governance Indicators](#), [Press Freedom Index](#) and corruption-related indices. The lack of accountability, consolidation of power, unchecked corruption, and systematic suppression of dissent—through state-sponsored violence, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings—had become the norm. Freedom of expression and the press were severely curtailed as self-censorship and fear of legal reprisals silenced many voices.

Amid this backdrop, the student-led uprising and change in government have sparked a new wave of hope and window of opportunity to rebuild the nation. For instance, the interim government [signed](#) the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances within 20 days of coming to power, indicating a commitment to end human rights violations. Embracing this historic moment, the interim government also launched an [ambitious reform agenda](#) – targeting critical issues such as the [judiciary](#), [elections](#), [public administration](#), [police](#), [anti-corruption](#), and [constitutional reform](#) – to restore accountability, revive broken institutions, and chart a new democratic path. However, there are still some challenges as the reform efforts face some [serious hurdles](#), ranging from a fragile law and order situation and deeply entrenched political polarisation to a sluggish, often resistant bureaucracy. Despite these challenges, there is a renewed sense of urgency and collective will to steer the country toward a more transparent and inclusive future.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The [Constitution of Bangladesh](#) guarantees several fundamental freedoms, including the right to assembly (Article 37), the right to association (Article 38), and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and expression (Article 39). Since the fall of the Hasina regime, there has been a welcome decline in violations of fundamental freedoms by state actors. However, this progress has been overshadowed by a troubling rise in [attacks](#), including from [non-state actors](#), often targeting individuals for expressing their thoughts.

There has been a worrying trend of violation of freedom of expression and opinion. For example, in February 2025, poet Sohel Hasan Galib was [arrested](#) on charges of hurting religious sentiments on social media and in his poetry book. During the same month, there was another [attack of a book stall](#), despite the presence of security forces, which was condemned as an assault on freedom of expression. In light of these cases, prominent human rights organisations [urged the government](#) to step up and protect citizens expressing their freedoms from attacks by non-state actors, which [commentators](#) have also pointed out that the interim government seems to fail to do.

Press freedom has not been spared, with journalists [targeted](#) for harassment. Human rights organisation [Ain o Salish Kendra](#) recorded [531 incidents of harassment](#) against journalists in 2024. Of these, 235 were during Hasina's tenure, while the rest took place under the new interim government. This has also continued in 2025, with Ain o Salish Kendra documenting [315 incidents of harassment](#) against journalists between January and September. For instance, in February 2025, four Shariatpur-based journalists were [injured](#) after being attacked by a group of miscreants for publishing news over the negligence of doctors at a hospital.

Freedom of assembly has also come under threat. Incidents of excessive force by law enforcement by the ousted government, such as during student protests or political demonstrations, have been [documented](#). In May 2025, Bangladesh passed amendments to [the International Crimes Act](#) and [Anti-Terrorism Act](#) that significantly expand government powers to ban or restrict political organisations and individuals, often without clear definitions or due process. These changes allow authorities to shut down activities, block online expression, and prohibit gatherings based on vague allegations such as “reasonable grounds”, even without formal listings – opening chances for abuse by government. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)) has raised serious concerns regarding the amendments, warning that such sweeping measures undermine free expression, association, and democratic participation, and risk silencing dissent under the guise of national security.

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

In Bangladesh, CSOs operate within a legal framework shaped by two main types of laws: incorporation laws and regulatory laws. Incorporation laws, including the [Societies Registration Act 1860](#), [Trust Act 1882](#), [Companies Act 1994](#), [Cooperative Societies Act](#), and [the Waqf Ordinance](#), provide CSOs with legal status and a governance structure. Regulatory laws such as the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation Act 2016](#) and the [Microcredit Regulatory Law 2006](#) are in place to oversee and monitor CSOs, especially those receiving foreign funding or engaging in financial services. In addition the [Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies \(Registration and Control\) Ordinance 1961](#) also plays a significant role in CSOs' operation as the majority of CSOs in Bangladesh are recognised as voluntary social welfare organisations (SWOs). CSOs working on women's and children's welfare are registered under this Act with the Department of Social Services (DSS) as well as with the Department of Women Affairs (DWA). While registration under regulatory laws is encouraged, a CSO remains legally valid if it's incorporated under any existing incorporation law, even if regulatory registration is denied.

NGOs in Bangladesh must register under the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation Act 2016](#), which places stringent conditions such as registration, project by project

approval and fund clearance, on foreign-funded entities. However, the interim government has made some attempts to simplify the registration process for new NGOs through a new [circular](#) issued by the NGO Affairs Bureau on 3 March 2025. The time required for NGO approval has been reduced from 180 to 45 days – which is a quarter of the previous duration. Under the new rules, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Financial Institutions Division must provide their opinions within 45 days regarding the approval of a new NGO. If they fail to respond within this timeframe, it will be assumed that they have no objections. Additionally, any proposal to establish a new NGO will be subject to investigation by a government intelligence agency; previously, verification by two agencies was needed. The new guideline also instructs that the proposed executive committee members of an NGO must not be investigated based on political affiliation. Instead, their involvement in social service and public welfare activities should be assessed.

The NGO Affairs Bureau, under the Prime Minister's Office (now the Chief Adviser's office of the interim government), holds sweeping oversight, including the power to delay or deny project approvals. At times, experience from CSOs in Bangladesh includes some government harassment, such as repeated inspections or excessive demands for documentation. This is believed as often being driven by political motives, especially when their advocacy work is seen as critical of those in power. In such cases, seeking legal recourse can be extremely challenging, as the justice system is often slow, costly, and difficult to navigate, leaving affected organisations with limited options for protection or redress.

CSOs critical of the government also face threat of deregistration. According to Section 14 of the [Foreign Donations \(Voluntary Activities\) Regulation Act 2016](#), making “malicious” or “derogatory” statements by any NGO or civil society member against the constitution and constitutional bodies of Bangladesh is a punishable offence; and based on that ground, NGOs’ registration can be cancelled. This provision contradicts the right to freedom of expression, and is considered a [weapon to gag](#) critical CSO voices. Despite CSOs’ long-standing [call](#) for reform of the law, the interim government is yet to respond positively.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Domestic fundraising for CSOs in Bangladesh remains limited considering the size and scope of available funding. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds, particularly from banks, telecom companies, multinationals, and Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs), support mainly small social initiatives. In addition, philanthropic contributions from wealthy individuals, families, and foundations play a small role. The main challenge of domestic fund raising is that there are no significant tax incentives that encourage individuals or businesses to donate. Moreover, smaller CSOs often rely on community-based fundraising, including charity events and limited crowdfunding efforts, especially in areas like disaster relief and healthcare. This makes CSOs heavily dependent on foreign funding to sustain their operations and therefore more restricted to external interests, making it harder to follow their own agendas freely.

Diminishing foreign funding has also posed serious challenges for CSOs in Bangladesh. The recent US funding cuts [struck a severe blow](#) to the development sector, as USAID halted nearly all of its projects in early 2025, leading to the [loss](#) of an estimated \$500–700 million in aid and leaving between 20,000 and 50,000 [development professionals unemployed](#). The abrupt shutdown derailed initiatives in education, health, food security, climate change, governance, and skills development, pushing many NGOs into acute financial crisis and, in some cases, forcing them to close down.

While there is no explicit ban on receiving foreign funding, the process is highly regulated. CSOs must secure project-by-project approval from the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), and fund disbursements are often delayed for political reasons. Additionally, restrictions on re-granting were introduced in a [November 2021 circular](#) issued by the Prime Minister's Office. Under this rule, only organisations registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau can receive grants from other Bureau-registered CSOs. As a result, organisations registered under other legal frameworks but not with the Bureau are excluded from receiving such funding, making sub-granting, including to smaller grassroots organisations, more difficult. [A 2025 circular](#) has introduced a 45-day timeframe for the Bureau to issue final approval of project proposals, which was previously open-ended. Another provision states that projects exceeding five years in duration must receive approval from the Chief Advisor's Office/ the Prime Minister's Office (under which the NGO Affairs Bureau operates), depending on their significance.

CSOs also face increasing [challenges](#) in navigating enhanced financial regulations. Concerns over money laundering and terrorist financing have been used to require banks and financial institutions to conduct [heightened due diligence](#) on civil society transactions, creating obstacles for CSOs to navigate banking systems in order to receive and use funds.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Bangladesh enacted [the Right to Information Act \(RTI\) in 2009](#) which guarantees the right to access public information. Under this law, citizens, journalists, and civil society organisations have used the Act to access data on governance, social services, public spending, and more. On average, around [10,000 RTI applications](#) are filed each year, and about [90% of applicants](#) receive the requested information. The Act also emphasises the proactive disclosure of information by public and private organisations through their websites. [An assessment](#) showed that 75% of government entity websites published satisfactory information. To administer this law and ensure the free flow of information, an Information Commission was established. However, over the past year, the fate of the Commission has remained [in limbo](#) as the government failed to appoint new commissioners.

CSOs in Bangladesh do participate in decision-making processes, but their involvement is often [selective and shaped by political considerations](#). Many engage through consultative forums, partnerships with ministries, and donor-driven programmes that require civil society input. In the last 16 years, CSOs working on human rights and governance came under increasing pressure and were pushed to the brink of closure, while others shifted focus to

basic service delivery to avoid conflict and protect their staff. The government encouraged this shift, rewarding service-oriented CSOs with recognition and resources, effectively sidelining those working on rights and accountability. This created a [deep divide](#) within civil society, isolating rights-based organisations and forcing many CSOs to choose between alignment and survival, or advocacy and marginalisation.

The student-led “July Uprising” reshaped the political landscape, bringing an end to the authoritarian regime and igniting fresh hope across the country. Several [prominent CSO leaders](#) joined the Dr. Yunus-led interim government as advisers, with key reform initiatives like elections, anti-corruption and women’s affairs being [spearheaded](#) by well-known rights activists and civil society figures. CSO leaders heading these initiatives are also part of the [National Consensus Commission](#), established by the new government to drive forward the reform agenda and build political consensus.

However, despite these promising developments, the interim government has moved ahead with several ordinances such as on cyber protection and the draft personal data protection ordinances, either without consultation or with limited input from civil society or affected groups such as women. This has [triggered concerns](#) among CSOs and, in some cases, sparked backlash, highlighting the [need for more inclusive](#) and transparent processes moving forward.

5. Political culture and public discourses on civil society

In Bangladesh, the relationship between civil society and the country’s political culture is complex, often strained, and marked by deep polarisation. CSOs are meant to serve as [critical actors](#) in a democratic society, amplifying citizen voices, promoting accountability, and ensuring rights-based development. However, in practice, they face significant barriers rooted in a political culture dominated by rigid party loyalties, confrontational politics, and a “winner-takes-all” mentality. This environment leaves little room for dissent or independent civic action.

Rights-based CSOs operate under pressure and are sometimes branded as politically biased or as [“foreign agents,”](#) “anti-state”, or “foreign funded troublemaker”; a narrative used to discredit their work and weaken public trust. For instance, Transparency International Bangladesh has been branded as an [opposition](#) and foreign agent by politicians, while Odhikar has been branded as [“anti-state”](#) for documenting enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings by the fallen regime.

Despite this, the public, especially in underserved and rural areas, continues to rely on NGOs for vital services, such as healthcare, education, and humanitarian support, advocacy work on wide-ranging areas of rights, governance and climate change, reinforcing their relevance and impact on the ground. Media coverage also reflects this duality—progressive outlets highlight their contributions, while partisan outlets echo state or politically biased narratives, often portraying CSOs negatively.

Lastly, over the years, civil society has played a key role in advancing women’s rights, expanding access to education, and supporting marginalised communities. Initiatives aimed

at increasing women's participation in politics and tackling gender-based violence have gained visibility and some policy traction. However, advocacy in more sensitive areas, such as [LGBTQI+](#) rights and religious freedom, continues to face intense resistance. These groups often encounter not just societal stigma but also institutional obstacles and policy pushbacks, limiting their ability to operate freely or scale their efforts.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Over the last two decades, Bangladesh has made significant strides in transforming its [digital landscape](#), providing civil society actors with important avenues for communication, mobilisation, and advocacy. However, this growth has been shadowed by escalating concerns over intimidation, censorship, surveillance, and online repression, particularly targeting those who challenge government policies or promote rights-based causes. In the last few years, journalists, human rights defenders, and women activists have been subjected to coordinated trolling, [targeted online abuse](#), and legal harassment under the Cyber Security Act 2023 – which has since been replaced by the interim government with the [Cyber Protection Ordinance 2025](#). However, the new law also fails to comply with international human rights standards. For instance, Section 8 gives authorities the power to block content - in the name of the integrity, security, or defence of the country- that is deemed as disrupting public order, containing religious or communal hate speech. This is over-broad and subject to interpretation – leaving room for potential abuse by government.

Increasingly, digital platforms are still being [weaponised](#) as tools to suppress dissent and critical voices, narrowing the space for free expression. Bangladesh became a [surveillance state](#) during the previous regime, as its security and intelligence agencies acquired an [extensive arsenal of surveillance technologies](#). The National Telecommunication Monitoring Cell (NTMC) built the Integrated Lawful Interception System (ILIS), a centralised infrastructure capable of intercepting, decrypting, and storing massive volumes of internet and telecom traffic in real time. Meanwhile, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and Bangladesh police procured a range of target-based snooping tools, including backpack IMSI catchers, GPS trackers, spyware injection devices, and satellite communication analysers. While justified as tools for crime prevention and national security, civil society actors have [warned](#) that without transparency and judicial oversight, this sweeping surveillance apparatus risks being weaponised against political opponents (allegedly used extensively during the July uprising) and citizens, eroding democratic freedoms and violating constitutional rights to privacy.

In the past, Bangladesh has also imposed internet and social media shutdowns during political unrest and protests. For example, the longest [mobile internet blockage](#) was for 11 days in July 2024 to quell student protests. These restrictions undermine civic engagement and weaken trust in digital platforms as spaces for free expression. On a positive note, the interim government has committed to uninterrupted internet and declared access to the internet as a right in the Cyber Protection Ordinance 2025.

Civil society actors, particularly journalists, human rights defenders, and prominent activists have faced [digital repression](#) through coordinated harassment, threats, and smear

campaigns. State-linked actors and partisan groups often spread disinformation and propaganda to delegitimise critical voices.

Challenges and Opportunities

As Bangladesh heads toward the February 2026 national election, as promised by the interim government, civil society finds itself at a defining moment. The fall of the authoritarian regime and the rise of the Interim Government have created a rare opening for democratic reform—but the road ahead is anything but easy.

Challenges

Despite the interim government's reformist image, major decisions are being made without structured civil society consultation. This exclusion weakens the legitimacy of reforms and undermines CSOs' ability to represent citizen concerns in policy debates. Political polarisation and recurring instability pose risks to CSO operations, particularly in mobilising communities or monitoring electoral processes. A volatile security environment could limit safe civic engagement and deter grassroots participation. In the coming months civil society actors are likely to continue facing disinformation campaigns, online harassment, and politically motivated misuse of digital laws. Such threats not only silence critical voices but also create a chilling effect, discouraging CSOs from engaging in sensitive advocacy or holding authorities accountable.

Opportunities

The transition period offers CSOs an opportunity to advocate for transparent electoral processes, legal safeguards for civic space, and institutional platforms for dialogue with the interim government. By pressing for these reforms, CSOs can help ensure that the 2026 election marks a step toward genuine accountability and inclusiveness. Civil society has a chance to rebuild trust with citizens by documenting abuses, monitoring reforms, and amplifying marginalised voices. Visible, credible watchdog work can re-establish CSOs as indispensable actors in democratic governance. With growing energy among young people, CSOs can mobilise youth networks for voter education, digital literacy campaigns, and countering disinformation, thereby shaping a more informed and resilient electorate.

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