

# El Salvador

## Country Focus Report

November 2025



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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**

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

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

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

## Brief Overview of the Country Context

From 2021 onwards El Salvador has experienced a growing [concentration of power](#) in the executive, which increasingly controls the judicial and legislative branches, whose own oversight roles have been diminished. Despite the constitutional prohibition of immediate presidential re-election, president Nayib Bukele ran again for the 2024 elections and [won](#) his second term, further consolidating power in the executive.

As of March 2022, El Salvador has been under a [permanent state of emergency](#), otherwise known as the 'exceptional regime', which has been [renewed 40 times](#) and is expected to continue as [state policy](#). Initially, the state of emergency entailed the suspension of four constitutional rights: freedom of association and assembly, the right to defence, the time limit for administrative detention, and the inviolability of the home. However, its prolonged implementation has resulted in the suspension and [violation of other human rights](#) and procedural guarantees, including the right to defence, the presumption of innocence, and due process. This state of emergency has led to the imprisonment of citizens without conclusive evidence and the denial of immediate access to lawyers. The [detention without a court order](#) is also permitted for up to 15 days (instead of 72 hours).

Furthermore, [mass judicial proceedings](#) are being carried out, resulting in the conviction of large numbers of people, who are being grouped into criminal groups without any clear criteria. More than [88 000 people have been detained](#) since the state of emergency started. By mid-July 2025, civil society organisations had documented [427 deaths in state custody](#) relating to those who were captured under the exceptional regime, most of whom were not convicted, and many of whom showed signs of being tortured while in prison. The exceptional regime has also affected the [right to privacy of communications](#), allowing the interception of communications without the established judicial guarantees.

With the absence of effective checks and balances, the situation is [concerning](#) for citizens whose fundamental rights are impeded, without any realistic options for recourse. The [context](#) is highly polarised. The Government claims strong legitimacy and popular support, but there are concerns around democratic backsliding, a lack of institutional independence, and the impact of government actions on civil liberties.

The consolidation of power escalated in 2025 with moves to disempower and control civil society actors through the passing of the [Foreign Agents Law](#). This law has had a profound [negative impact](#) on civil society in that not only does it restrict foreign funding and place financial pressure on civil society organisations (CSOs), it also provides excessive powers for authorities to control and sanction them. It has also brought a degree of legal uncertainty that poses an operational risk to many civil society actors.

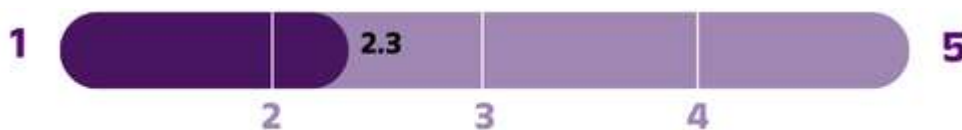
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# B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

## PRINCIPLE SCORE

### 1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score: <sup>1</sup>



Articles 6 and 7 of the [Constitution of El Salvador](#) guarantee freedoms of expression, association and assembly. However, in practice, as highlighted in the 2024 [CIVICUS Monitor Report](#), “civic space has steadily diminished in El Salvador, under an extended state of emergency, which has become a key tool for the state to entrench authoritarian practices and suppress fundamental freedoms”.

In July 2025, the country was included on the [CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist](#), a mechanism that draws attention to countries where there is a serious deterioration in respect for civic space. This is the third time the country has been included on the Watchlist (previously in March 2022 and July 2024), raising serious concerns about a sustained attack on civic freedoms.

#### 1.1. Freedom of Association

Freedom of association is legally protected under Article 7 of the Salvadoran Constitution. However, in recent times this protection has been challenged with laws and actions that target the associational rights of civil society actors.

In May 2025, the Legislative Assembly approved the [Foreign Agents Law](#) (LAEX). Among other things, the law [discourages and hinders organisations](#) in their enjoyment of freedom of association. For instance, it imposes 30% tax on foreign funds received by CSOs and provides the possibility of cancellation of their legal personality under unclear discretionary grounds.

<sup>1</sup>This is a rebased score derived from the [CIVICUS Monitor rating](#) published in December 2024.

Since the Law's passing CSOs have operated under a cloud of fear and uncertainty of whether they will be able to register or continue operating in the country.

For instance, a prominent organisation named Cristosal has [relocated its operations](#) to another country. It [cited](#) the LAEX which it described as “an instrument of authoritarian control that imposes discretionary sanctions, punitive taxes, and state surveillance to censor and punish independent organisations”. At least two other organisations have [announced their closure](#), and one has indicated it will [suspend certain activities](#) until further notice. They have all cited the new law as a key decisive factor, generating [legal uncertainty](#) for CSOs and their enjoyment of freedom of association.

## 1.2. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Article 7 of the Salvadoran Constitution recognises the right to assemble peacefully, without weapons, for any lawful purpose. However, this freedom was temporarily restricted in 2020 due to COVID-19. This temporary restriction became more permanent when the exceptional regime was enacted in March 2022. Under the exceptional regime, the Government has arbitrarily restricted assemblies. A [report by FESPAD](#) shows that that freedom of peaceful assembly is one of the most frequently violated civil rights under the regime.

In addition, people have been arrested during peaceful protests on criminal charges that amount to “aggressive resistance” or “public disorder.” An example of this was seen in May 2025, when a pastor/community leader and an environmental defender were [arrested](#) after peacefully protesting with dozens of families from the El Bosque community. They were subsequently charged with public disorder and aggressive resistance. Having reviewed the videos and court documents associated with these arrests, Human Rights Watch highlighted that those arrests were [arbitrary and the charges unfounded](#), concluding that the authorities had treated peaceful protest as a crime.

In response to mobilisations organised for matters of national interest, the Government has also [set up checkpoints](#) to prevent people from entering the Capital. As a result, many people refrain from organising or joining assemblies and have [expressed fear](#) of being captured for participating in activities carried out by CSOs, or any other similar organisation.

## 1.3 Freedom of Expression

Though Article 6 of El Salvador's Constitution protects freedom of expression, the reality is vastly different, with a severe erosion of freedom of expression and press freedom underway. The exceptional regime has created an atmosphere of fear, given that authorities can arbitrarily arrest and detain citizens for expressing their opinions. For instance, Cristosal, in April 2025, reported the [presence of police](#) when covering activities with the press, which they perceived as an intimidation tactic. Journalists have also described a [growing culture of silence](#), indicating a deterioration in press freedom.

In May 2025, as part of a move towards [silencing critics](#) and organisations, the authorities arrested prominent lawyer and activist [Ruth López](#) who had led [denunciations](#) of arbitrary acts and violations committed by the Salvadoran state. In July 2025, Amnesty International declared Ruth López, and two other activists as [prisoners of conscience](#) amid increasing repression in El Salvador, stating “these detentions are ...a systematic pattern of criminalization that seeks to silence those who denounce abuses, demand justice, and demand transparency in public administration”. On September 23, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) also announced that it had [issued precautionary measures](#) in favour of [López](#) and [Anaya](#), as they were facing risk of irreparable harm to their rights to life, personal integrity and health.

There have been also a noticeable number of [journalists](#), human rights defenders and other civil society actors that have been forced to operate from exile. Various [testimonies](#) indicate

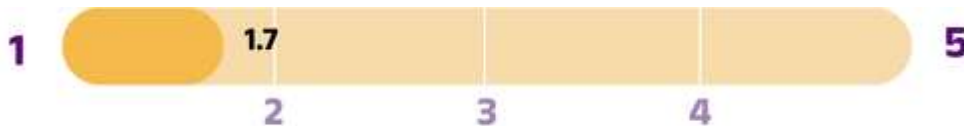
the decision to work in exile is motivated by the fear of being targeted for expressing their opinions. This fear is underscored by the Government's criminalisation of the work of journalists and activists, but also by the lack of guarantees of an independent judiciary.

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## PRINCIPLE SCORE

## 2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score:



While it is still possible to register organisations, recent legal reforms and requirements have introduced [threats and obstacles to CSOs](#), discouraging their registration. In addition, there is lack of regulation, nor is there an effective mechanism, to protect organisations from interference.

### 2.1. Registration

El Salvador's legal and regulatory framework for civil society actors is based on Article 7 of the Constitution (freedom of association), and on the 1996 [Law for Non-Profit Associations and Foundations](#) (LASFL). For years, both instruments have been sufficient to facilitate the registration of organisations. However, the [Foreign Agents Act](#) (LAEX), passed in May 2025, represents a significant deteriorating shift in the enabling environment for CSOs, as it imposes [severe restrictions](#), and introduces new [registration](#) and regulatory requirements.

The new law adds an excessive administrative burden by having a separate registration process for CSOs receiving foreign funding. In accordance with Articles 3 and 6 of the LAEX, any foreign-funded CSOs must register with Registry of Foreign Agents (RAEX), which may deny, refuse to renew or revoke registration if a CSO fails to comply with the requirements, or is deemed to violate LAEX restrictions. Articles 7, 8 and 9 of LAEX impose significant legal, operational and reputational constraints on CSOs receiving foreign funding, giving the Government substantial power to control, restrict or even shut down CSOs. Failure to register with the RAEX may lead to the disabling of operations, and removal of existence of organisations ([LAEX Regulation](#), Arts. 8, 11 and 13). It also increases financial costs with a 30% tax on foreign funds (LAEX Art. 11) and brings stigmatisation by labelling CSOs and donors as *foreign agents*, given one of the purposes of this law is to "safeguard national security and sovereignty" (LAEX Art. 1).

The experts engaged in this research emphasised that, based on these recent provisions, this dimension could easily be assessed as "totally disabling" with regards to the enabling environment for civil society, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to register organisations.

As a result, the LAEX is having a chilling effect on civil society, discouraging organisations and media from registering with the RAEX while continuing to operate, knowing the Registry may use its [power arbitrarily](#) to shut them down.

## 2.2. Operating environment

The LAEX is a huge concern for civil society, since it [threatens](#) the operations of organisations. It is impacting organisations' decisions regarding activities they can undertake, with Article 9a of this law prohibiting the carrying out of activities for “political purposes and others”. Given the vagueness of some phrases such as “political or other purposes”, “public order”, “social and political stability”, as well as the [lack of checks and balances](#), the Law gives room to classify any activity as prohibited. Violating these prohibitions can result in significant fines or, as stated, the outright cancellation of an organisation.

As a result of the above, some CSOs have even decided to close down after more than 30 years of work in the country ([FESPAD](#) and [FUDECOS](#)), considering that the LAEX does not allow them to continue doing the work they have been doing for decades. The LAEX also inhibits free access to cooperation funds, establishing a [30% tax](#) on cooperation funds received by organisations. This will likely affect their survival, as the tax represents a considerable proportion of these organisation's finances. In addition, new inequalities and disincentives are created, as the 30% tax can be [applied selectively](#) without clear and objective criteria, or accountability.

With regard to the provisions of the Law for Non-Profit Organisations (LAFSL) and recurring audit processes, several organisations [report](#) that procedures that previously took less time (such as registering new board credentials) are now experiencing delays, and some organisations have had their public utility status revoked.

## 2.3. Protection against interference

In El Salvador, there is no specific legal framework or mechanism to guarantee the protection of CSOs against interference. On the contrary, considering the current context and the established regulatory framework, organisations find themselves [increasingly unprotected](#), as any type of improper intervention, as well as its discretionary and arbitrary application, is facilitated in the absence of due process.

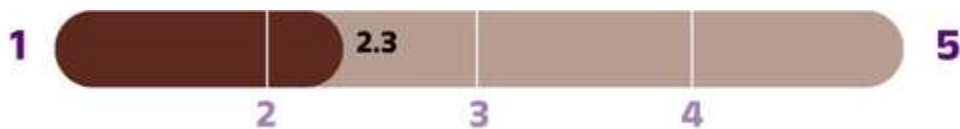
To better understand the current context, it is important to note that, since the [State of Emergency](#) came into force, the guarantee of the inviolability of correspondence and telecommunications has been suspended. During the first months of the State of Emergency, the rights of association and assembly were suspended, and now, three years later, some constitutional guarantees remain suspended. In 2023, a report from Cristosal entitled [“Civil society on alert”](#) indicated that more than 70 Salvadoran organisations had experienced harassment between 2019 and 2023.

~~The LAEX has allowed for greater [oversight of CSOs](#), granting the Ministry of the Interior~~ complete discretion in the application of sanctions, and establishing requirements for the registration of organisations. Article 19 of the Law permits the application of fines and penalties or sanctions that could be excessive or disproportionate (from \$150,000 up to \$200,000 USD), and which could be applied in a discretionary manner. Additionally, Article 7j of LAEX empowers the RAEX to cancel or suspend the legal status of organisations, without establishing a clear mechanism for doing so, undermining the principle of [legal certainty for organisations](#). Recent experience from civil society shows that some organisations who requested an exclusion from the 30% tax instead received warnings of non-compliance from RAEX. In addition, testimonies from other organisations show they have been subject to harassment and excessive fiscal oversight.

## PRINCIPLE SCORE

### 3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Score:



The current access to funding environment in El Salvador is disabling for civil society. There is a trend towards more limited access to international cooperation resources due to the cut in foreign funds, coupled with the Foreign Agents Law, which affects access to foreign funding.

#### 3.1. Accessibility

The decline in international funding has been noticeable for some years, with 2025 proving to be one of the most difficult years in this regard. For instance, the cut in US cooperation funding at the beginning of 2025 [jeopardised](#) the work of many organisations. There are also difficulties in accessing available resources, as demand has increased, and supply has decreased. The manner in which certain priorities are established on the basis of [geopolitics](#) also plays an important role here, displacing certain issues for which it will be even more difficult to obtain funding.

In addition, the entry into force of the LAEX is proving to be a further blow, as it acts as a disincentive towards [accessing funds](#) from international cooperation. This is due the [stigma](#) of being labelled as a “foreign agent” and the [obligation to pay a 30%](#) tax on cooperation funds – which organisations have labelled as “[highly repressive](#)”. While various aid agencies have stated that they are unwilling to pay the 30% tax required by the law on funds received by CSOs, others are looking for [ways to remain in the country](#). The full impact of the Law has yet to be seen, but there is a worrying trend that the situation will evolve to become fully disabling for civil society.

As mentioned, Article 7 of the LAEX allows authorities to suspend or cancel organisations that fail to comply with the Law, while Article 9(b) prohibits CSOs from engaging in activities deemed to “disrupt public order” or “threaten national security.” In the current Salvadoran context, these provisions allow for the [targeting of civil society](#), and for the provisions to be applied arbitrarily, creating uncertainty and discouraging donor support. As a result, some

donors have suspended funding to Salvadoran CSOs. An experience shared by several organisations during panel discussion is that they have had to halt projects prematurely, for which they had already received funding, either as their own decision or at the request of the donor.

### 3.2. Effectiveness

Despite adverse conditions for obtaining funding and achieving the sustainability of various actions, a good relationship still exists between donors and CSOs. For the work that had been carried out before the implementation of LAEX, funding conditions continued to be aligned with the goals and priorities established by CSOs, giving them a degree of autonomy. Donors have tended to be flexible to accommodate changes in the operational environment and evolve with emerging needs. In some cases, given the bold objectives of some funding programs, CSOs tend to implement donor-driven priorities, adapting to what donors are looking for and not necessarily looking for donors who can support their own priorities.

The LAEX has shifted the relationship between donors and CSOs from one based on partnership and shared goals to one dominated by risk management and legal caution. While the degree of impact varies depending on each organisation's thematic focus, most have experienced reduced access to new funding and greater operational constraints resulting from the threats associated with the [full implementation of the LAEX](#). The reduction in international cooperation funds is expected to have a short- and medium-term impact on the effectiveness of specific issues and objectives in some CSO's areas of work.

Throughout 2025, donors have shown flexibility in working with local CSOs, providing funds in advance, adjusting delivery times, and modifying activities. However, many donors have indicated that they will not continue working in El Salvador without an exemption to the 30% tax, which hinders the development of long-term relationships. As some donors and organisations have received the tax exemption, a new dynamic is emerging, leading CSOs to shift their priorities and focus their fundraising efforts on issues and projects eligible for the exemption and, therefore, cooperation support. Consequently, issues that are more sensitive for the current government, and which could be penalised under the LAEX, such as the defence of democracy, human rights protection, accountability, and LGBTQI rights, are receiving less funding. The current trend suggests that risk-sensitive programming is more likely to be possible when operating abroad, given the criminalisation of CSO actors and the huge fines that could be imposed under the LAEX.

### 3.3. Sustainability

The general declining resource environment for CSOs impacts their ability to achieve long-term goals and to comply with their strategic planning priorities. It's a context that forces organisations to make other types of "strategic decisions" to continue operating. For most national organisations, funding has typically been project-based, to adapt to the priority themes of cooperation. Both the national and international contexts make it difficult to obtain other sources of funding, to build self-reliance or conduct income-generating activities, thereby affecting organisational sustainability.

Many organisations possess funding for the current year, but conditions have become unpredictable following the reduction of international cooperation and the implementation of the LAEX, putting the sustainability of multiple processes and actions developed by CSOs at risk. However, our expert panel highlighted that there are significant variations here, depending on the issues addressed. Those that are not politically sensitive may have more opportunities to obtain funding and achieve sustainability.

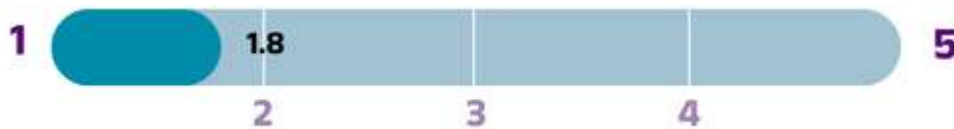
As access to resources becomes increasingly difficult, as evidenced by the immediate impact of the cut in US cooperation funding, organisations have been forced to [suspend all, or part, of their operations](#), affecting the sustainability of their programmes. For example, in February 2025: a school that had been renovated by Germany was closed by the Ministry of Education. Following a statement by the German embassy, the Ministry of Education announced that the facilities would be instead used to [care for the elderly](#). Testimonies from civil society actors have also highlighted changes in the Government's priority issues. Initiatives on gender or sexual health that were in development for more than a decade, have now been discarded.

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# PRINCIPLE SCORE

## 4. Open and Responsive State

Score:



Access to public information in El Salvador has progressively and systematically become more [restricted](#), leading to a culture of opacity which has led to reduced citizen participation and a growing lack of accountability. In 2023, El Salvador was [expelled](#) from the Open Government Partnership (OGP) for “remaining inactive for more than a year and not meeting the minimum requirements of the Cocreation and participation standards”. This reflects the lack of political will to promote transparency, participation and accountability.

### 4.1. Transparency

The [Law on Access to Public Information \(LAIP\)](#) is in place, and provides for access to information held by state institutions. However, in practice, it has become [harder to access](#) public information, and this is affecting CSOs’ work. It is possible to obtain certain information, but the implementation of the LAIP is [inconsistent](#), with full disclosure often the exception. The denial of public access to information is frequent, with authorities often declaring information confidential, restricted or non-existent. Various examples exist in the areas of [health](#), [the environment](#), [security and human rights](#), and beyond. Sometimes, when access to public information is granted, the information is manipulated. In addition, the websites of the entities required to publish this information are often not kept up to date.

In 2024, a [report by Cristosal](#) indicated that less than 50% of requests for access to public information were dealt with in the first instance. Of a total of 1,463 requests for information made since 2019, only 27% resulted in the information being provided. 15% were partially complete, incomplete or not delivered as requested. Furthermore, the Institute for Access to Public Information (the body responsible for enforcing the LAIP) is under the control of the executive branch and, therefore, does not exercise its role independently and objectively. In fact, three commissioners from the Institute were [included in the Engel List](#) for “undermining democratic processes or institutions by deliberately and unfairly blocking access to public information.”

Oversight bodies such as Institute for Access to Public Information (IAIP) and the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ), whom, a few years ago, were crucial to protect access to public information (even sensitive information), have been weakened. This has affected the checks and balances around access to information, thereby weakening civil society participation at both the central and municipal levels.

In addition, there is a lack of transparency around important legislative decisions such as the reform of the political-administrative map, with the reduction of municipalities and seats in the Legislative Assembly. Multiple reforms, including [reforms to the Constitution itself](#) and the approval of various laws have been made with "[dispensation from procedure](#)," which dispenses with the need to provide transparency around the process. Then there are bills such as the [Transitional Justice Bill](#), which has been shelved twice by the Legislative Assembly, and, although a new Proposal was presented in October 2024, it has not been considered. With all the laws and reforms approved in recent years, there is a high degree of regulatory dispersion. Each new law makes opacity the rule, restricting the right of access to public information.

#### 4.2. Participation

Formally, there are no institutionalised spaces for debate or dialogue to ensure effective civil society participation, with spaces that were in place even up until 2019 now dismantled or eliminated. There is lack of [openness](#) to receive input from civil society in law or policy making processes. Calls by the Legislative Assembly for positions or contributions to draft laws have disappeared.

The law-making process lacks transparency and mechanisms for the participation of technical actors, stakeholders, or those themselves affected by the laws. The [Mining Law](#) passed in December 2024, which reverses the 2017 [Law Prohibiting Metal Mining](#), is a clear example of how participation is inhibited. There were various expressions of citizen participation speaking out against the passage of this law, but after the [persecution and capture of environmental leaders](#), these expressions have been virtually eliminated.

The [official narrative](#) strives to delegitimise critical organisations and actors, creating an atmosphere of mistrust that reduces the willingness of CSOs to engage in state processes. Moreover, in early 2025, [reforms to Article 248 of the Constitution](#) removed the requirement that constitutional amendments should be approved by two separate legislative assemblies; this change significantly shrinks the timeframe for public participation and undercuts formal checks and balances.

There also remains a completely closed attitude to the participation from, and scrutiny of, civil society and the [media](#). Small spaces for participation are sometimes available at the territorial level, but they fail to result in genuine impact on decision-making. Experiences shared from the ground indicate that vulnerable groups are not considered.

To reinforce this lack of public participation in the country, the [Open Budget Survey \(2023\)](#) scored El Salvador at 13 out of 100 in terms of public participation, highlighting the very limited participation during the budget process.

#### 4.3. Accountability

In El Salvador, neither the Government nor public officials are accountable to citizens, and the environment is totally inhibiting for [civil society to demand](#) adequate accountability. Formally, there are legal frameworks for oversight and accountability, but, in practice, the institutions in charge are neither accountable, nor do they hold government accountable.

Accountability has not been an established practice at either the central, nor municipal levels. The practice of presenting [annual reports](#) to the Legislative Assembly is intended to be an exercise in accountability. However, it is now treated as means to establish a political narrative.

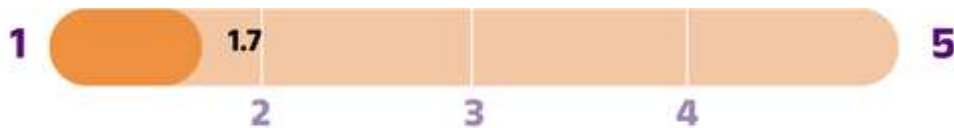
Neither formal, institutional nor informal channels are used to provide accountability or information about decisions made on behalf of citizens. This also happens at the municipal level, where the [Municipal Code](#) requires municipal councils to be accountable, but none of them exercise accountability in practice.

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## PRINCIPLE SCORE

### 5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score:



There is no supportive public culture on civil society; dialogue does not exist, and public discourse is far from being respectful and inclusive. The stigmatisation of civil society actors is prevalent, which has also fuelled distrust and hesitancy to participate on the part of citizens. Women, young people, LGBTQI groups, and rural and indigenous communities, face structural issues which limit their participation in decision-making processes.

#### 5.1. Public discourse and dialogue on civil society

Public dialogue, understood as a space for debate and the exchange of ideas, is non-existent. [Government rhetoric](#) and state media insist on portraying independent civil society as [enemies of the "true people"](#). For the past 5 years, the Government's discourse has been totally inhibiting and has been accompanied by actions aimed at discrediting CSOs. What is most visible is the Government discourse that presents CSOs as the opposition, and even brands them as [the "armed wing of the gangs"](#).

While in the past this negative narrative was found more between the lines, it is now being disseminated boldly and openly, promoting greater vulnerability for CSOs, and citizens in general. The [President](#) has called local and international organisations "[gang allies](#)". During his speech for the first year of this second term in June 2025, he also dedicated time to [justify the Foreign Agents Law](#) and [discredit CSOs and independent media](#).

In addition, the [motivation](#) for proposing and approving the LAEX was justified on the grounds that NGOs manipulate people and attack the Government. For this reason, a 30% tax on their income was proposed, under the justification that these funds would be used to "truly" help the Salvadoran population. Previously, with the US funding freeze in early 2025, there were orchestrated efforts from government to [stigmatise and discredit CSOs](#). They alleged that USAID funds had been misused by journalists, independent media and other civil society actors as part of a global money laundering operation.

## 5.2. Perception of civil society and civic participation

Public perception of civil society varies. There is growing recognition of civil society's role in providing community services, civic education, and local development projects. Many youth and community initiatives enjoy social legitimacy and mobilise volunteers, contributing to a strengthening of civic participation. However, misinformation and mistrust of CSOs working on human rights or political advocacy issues persist, fuelled by official discourse that presents them as opponents of the Government. This narrative limits the involvement of certain sectors of the population in defence of their rights, or in social accountability processes.

The [IUDOP survey](#) of June 2025, shows that 6 out of 10 people say they do not want to give their political opinion and, furthermore, many believe that if they express a critical opinion, the consequence could be imprisonment. The [survey](#) also shows that 74% of the population say they are more careful when sharing information or expressing opinions about the state of emergency, which is a valuable example of citizens' perception of their right to express themselves and form part of public discussions. This is confirmed by the [2024 Latinobarometro](#) which demonstrated that more than 60% of Salvadoreans were afraid to express their opinions in public, on the basis that doing so could have negative consequences for them. The only process of full civic participation is through the elections, although participation in elections is declining.

According to testimonies from experts, people in communities believe in CSOs and see them as a means of learning about the reality of the country. At the same time, they see them as a means of pressuring the Government to return taxes to the population through projects. Despite this, fear of arbitrary arrests coupled with the Government's negative [narrative](#) against organisations, makes it difficult for citizens to fully engage with CSOs.

## 5.3. Equality and civic inclusion

Article 3 of the [Salvadoran Constitution](#) states that "all persons are equal before the law; no restrictions based on nationality, race, sex or religion". There are also specific laws and reforms to enforce equality and non-discrimination, such as: the [Special Law for a Life Free of Violence for Women](#) (2010) and the [Law on Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities](#) (2000).

Initiatives by [community organisations](#), [feminist](#), youth, [LGBTI](#) and [indigenous](#) networks have actively promoted the inclusion of historically marginalised sectors in dialogue and local development processes. However, in recent years, they have reported significant setbacks for their causes. Some important law projects have been archived such as the [Law for the Decriminalization of Abortion](#) and [Gender Identity Law](#). However, the efforts made to protect environment through a [Law Prohibiting Metal Mining](#) (2017) were eliminated with the approval of a [Mining Law](#) (2024). There is also an increase of criminalisation and stigmatisation of environmental defenders ([Santa Marta Case](#) and [El Bosque community case](#)) and [feminist](#) and [LGBTQI](#) activists, which has affected the promotion of equality and silenced the voice of marginalised communities.

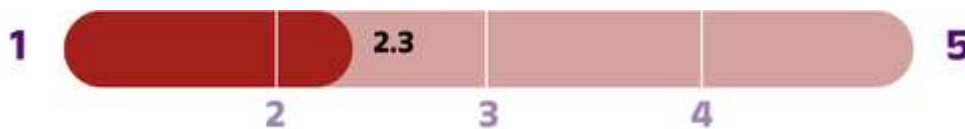
Significant gaps persist. Women, [LGBTQI](#), rural and indigenous communities, young people and others groups still face [structural barriers](#) such as a lack of resources, the risk of violence, and limited representation in decision-making spaces. Various national and international organisations have documented the [criminalisation and persecution of marginalised sectors](#) during the exception regime, reducing free participation and access to civic and governance processes.

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## PRINCIPLE SCORE

### 6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score:



There is no guarantee of protection against [leaks](#), [cyber threats](#), [state surveillance](#), [online harassment](#) or similar actions. [New legal pressures](#) from the cybersecurity and data protection laws, as well as new financial burdens for the Foreign Agents Law, increase the economic and legal risks for organisations to continue operating.

#### 6.1. Digital rights and freedoms

In February 2022, the Legislative Assembly approved reforms to Salvadoran Penal Code to [permit digital espionage](#) against any citizen, authorising the police to conduct “digital covert operations” at the request of the Public Prosecutor’s Office without any requirement for judicial authorisation. Experts, including the Inter-American Press Association, believe the reforms have [serious implications](#) for online freedom and may result in reprisals for investigative journalism in the country.

The [original Decree](#) of the exception regime also suspended rights to freedom of association, assembly and privacy of communications – and this has largely *de facto* remained in place. While there is “freedom” to participate in the digital space, there is a risk of surveillance and the continued targeting of activists. Cases like those of lawyers [Ruth López](#) and [Enrique Anaya](#) demonstrate that opinions expressed on social media or other digital platforms can lead to imprisonment.

Additionally, the [Cybersecurity and Information Security Law](#) and the [Law for the Protection of Personal Data](#) approved on November 2024, [threaten media freedom and privacy rights](#), granting authorities broad powers to monitor online activity and access digital communications without oversight. These provisions risk the further shrinking of digital freedom and online civic space, as journalists, activists, and civil society organisations face increased surveillance, the need for self-censorship, and restrictions on the secure exchange of information. The Organisation of American States’ [Special rapporteur for freedom of expression](#) has stated that, given El Salvador’s context, these laws could be weaponised to threaten freedom of

expression and information, and could be used to delete information that is critical of the Government under the guise of data protection, making a perfect “[recipe for censorship and opacity](#)”.

Although there are no total blackouts, there are [reports of temporary blockages](#) of digital communication platforms: networks such as Telegram – which is the instant messaging platform most used by CSOs to coordinate activities. Telegram has been blocked when peaceful civil society protests have been organised.

## 6.2. Digital Security and privacy

El Salvador has laws such as the [Cybersecurity Law](#) and the [Data Protection Law](#) that aim to protect rights against cyber threats, online harassment, and protect personal data. However, experts have raised [concerns](#) that these laws contain sweeping provisions that pose a threat to media freedom and privacy rights. Under the Cybersecurity Law, a brand-new State Cybersecurity Agency (ACE) will supervise data protection and cybersecurity compliance, conduct oversight activities, and impose sanctions. The Agency has received [sweeping powers](#), with limited accountability or oversight. The Data Protection Law established the “[right to be forgotten](#)” enabling individuals to demand removal of content online if deemed “inaccurate, irrelevant, outdated or excessive.” Experts have raised [concerns](#) that this threatens freedom of expression, as the definitions in this right give the ACE broad powers to order the removal of information related to important matters of public interest.

[State surveillance](#) via the use of [Pegasus](#) software against CSOs and journalists has been reported. In addition to espionage, digital harassment orchestrated by trolls allegedly paid by the Government, or by groups close to government interests, has created a climate of self-censorship among many citizens and politicians in the country, making the digital ecosystem a hostile place for free speech. This has had a greater impact on women, who also face misogynistic attacks, threats and slander based on their gender. APES, for example, recorded more than 300 [digital attacks](#) against journalists in eight months, and female journalists often receive [attacks with significant references to sexual violence](#). In 2024, the Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES) [documented 789 attacks against journalists](#), which included the blocking of access to information, digital harassment, restrictions on journalistic practices, stigmatization and intimidation.

## 6.3. Digital Accessibility

In El Salvador, there is relatively decent internet [accessibility](#), but with low digital literacy, which prevents people from being aware of their digital rights, and lacking the means to mitigate risks in this environment. The latest population and housing census demonstrates that there is a [high rate of internet use](#) (almost 80% of the population). However, there are significant differences in accessibility in rural areas (40%), when compared to urban areas (70%), and there are no media literacy and digital security programmes that enable [safe](#) browsing. However, there is a government effort to provide primary and secondary school students with [access to technology](#) through as laptops and tablets.

Most citizens have basic [IT skills](#), making it difficult for them to fully utilise the online space for civil society engagement. In addition, there are difficulties relating to digital risk, being aware of the threats in the digital sphere, and a general lack of understanding around how to better adapt to emerging technologies.

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# C) Recommendations

Given the progressive closure of civic space that El Salvador is experiencing, it is crucial that all actors in society, starting with the Salvadoran State, make a genuine commitment to respecting fundamental rights and promoting democracy. They must recognise that each actor plays an important role in building a prosperous country where everyone's opinions and human rights are respected. Based on the content of this CFR, the following recommendations are made to promote a better enabling environment for civil society in El Salvador.

## **To the Salvadoran government:**

- Safeguard civic space and media freedom by ensuring CSOs and independent journalists can operate without surveillance, intimidation, or administrative obstacles, and by strengthening access to information.
- Restore constitutional guarantees by lifting the and reinstate full protections for fundamental freedoms and due process, including access to legal counsel and judicial oversight of detentions, in line with the Constitution and international human rights treaties.
- Protect freedom of expression and prevent stigmatisation or reprisals on CSOs by avoiding harassment, espionage and the use of inflammatory language against civil society, journalists, activists or community leaders. Ensure the State of Emergency is not used as a tool to silence dissent or criminalise legitimate civic activity.
- Repeal or suspend the Foreign Agents Law and halt all sanctions until transparent, rights-compatible procedures are in place; ensuring future nonprofit regulations are developed in consultation with CSOs.
- Review and amend cybersecurity and data protection frameworks to require judicial authorisation for any government access to personal data and ensure independence and transparency of the relevant oversight bodies.
- Strengthen democratic oversight by reinforcing the independence of the judiciary and regulatory institutions, ensuring transparent legislative processes, and enabling meaningful public participation.
- Comply with international human rights obligations, including precautionary measures issued by the Inter American Commission on Human Rights, and implement effective, victim-centered protection for at-risk individuals such as Ruth López and Enrique Anaya.

## **To donors and the international community:**

- Strengthen the monitoring of the enabling environment in El Salvador by developing a coordinated monitoring framework across embassies, multilateral agencies, and international NGOs to regularly track shifts in civic space, regulatory changes, and risks to fundamental freedoms in the country.
- Communicate evidence-based concerns to Salvadoran authorities regarding the practical impacts of the Foreign Agents Law and related regulations on humanitarian, development, and human rights work.

- Expand core and multi-year funding for Salvadoran CSOs, simplify administrative requirements, and finance legal, administrative, and digital-security support to help organisations comply with evolving regulations.
- Increase engagement with regional and global human rights mechanisms, ensuring that risks to civic space in El Salvador are documented, monitored, and addressed.
- Prioritise support for independent civic actors—particularly those working on transparency, accountability, youth participation, and human rights—while strengthening protection mechanisms for journalists and defenders.
- Use development and cooperation frameworks to incentivize an enabling environment, integrating civic space indicators into cooperation strategies, country frameworks, and funding agreements.

### **To Civil Society Organisations:**

- Monitor and expose restrictions on civic space to document violations, regulatory barriers, and patterns of intimidation affecting civic actors and communities in El Salvador.
- Build alliances to produce evidence-based reports and adopt coordinated advocacy strategies to defend fundamental freedoms and promote legal reforms.
- Use innovative, secure, and community-cantered communication tools to raise awareness of CSO contributions and keep civic space issues in the public debate.
- Implement physical, digital, psychosocial and legal security measures, establish contingency plans and document all incidents of harassment, threats, surveillance, persecution or similar incidents, to strengthen protection measures.
- Expand work with citizens to develop new proposals based on the needs and priorities of the population in the territory. Development grassroots outreach for citizen capacity building and support community-driven monitoring to strengthen accountability and citizen empowerment.
- Explore alternative funding models to increase resilience and strengthen internal governance and transparency to enhance credibility and trust with communities and donors.



## 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 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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