



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Pakistan

October 2025 - March 2026

Context

Pakistan's enabling environment during the reporting period continued to be shaped by political contestation, tightening regulatory oversight, and a perceptible shift toward greater centralisation and securitisation of governance. Constitutional and institutional reforms, most notably the 27th Constitutional Amendment, were widely interpreted as re-calibrating civil–military relations in ways that narrow the space for independent civic engagement on governance and accountability issues. In parallel, incidents affecting journalists, activists, lawyers, and cultural actors contributed to a cumulative climate of caution across public discourse.

Civil society continued to operate under evolving legal frameworks and heightened administrative scrutiny, with new legislation on charities regulation introduced with limited stakeholder consultation. Despite these pressures, civic mobilisation, media advocacy, and youth engagement remained visible; indicating sustained public demand for accountability, inclusive participation, and rights-based policymaking.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Several incidents during the reporting period illustrate a tightening climate around media, artistic, and civic expression. Police entry into the [Islamabad National Press Club](#) during Kashmir-linked protests, during which journalists were reportedly assaulted and equipment damaged, signalled the erosion of historically protected media spaces. The registration of an [FIR against qawwal Faraz Amjad Khan](#) for a politically-inflected performance at a government-sponsored cultural event in Lahore extended this climate into the cultural sphere, while the [Punjab government's prohibition](#) of political or religious imagery on Basant kites similarly restricted symbolic expression in everyday cultural practice. Taken together, these measures are widening the categories of expression subject to regulation and contributing to self-censorship across media, cultural, and civic sectors.

Peaceful assembly was increasingly met with restrictive responses, including roadblocks and heavy police deployment at the [Karachi Press Club](#) during a lawyers' protest, the preventive [detention of nearly 300 PTI members](#) in Karachi under the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO) ordinance, and the [detention of Aurat March participants](#) and organisers including Farzana Bari ahead of International Women's Day demonstrations in Islamabad. The increasing use of preventive legal provisions and security deployments around political and rights-based mobilisation signals a narrowing tolerance for civic activism, including around long-standing platforms such as the Aurat March, and risks discouraging public participation in collective advocacy.

Concerns regarding arbitrary detention and the transparency of law-enforcement procedures persisted. The case of [Canadian national Hamza Ahmad Khan](#) whose reported disappearance was later revealed to be custody by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, underscored procedural gaps in the disclosure of arrests. The continued detention of Baloch rights activist Dr Mahrang Baloch, with [growing health concerns](#) reported, has become emblematic of broader rights concerns in Balochistan,

particularly around enforced disappearances, restricted protest, and limited legal remedy.

A [media convention in Quetta](#), convened by the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) and the Balochistan Union of Journalists (BUJ), produced consultative recommendations for revising media-related legislation including the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). This multi-stakeholder reform dialogue represents a modest but important counter-trend that civil society may build on.

The cumulative effect of these developments is a narrowing of the space available for open civic debate and peaceful participation. Legal, administrative, and security-related pressures on journalists, activists, and cultural actors are producing a chilling effect that extends beyond individual cases; conditioning how, and whether, ordinary citizens exercise expressive and associational rights. The pattern signals an erosion of the institutional safe spaces like press clubs, cultural platforms, and feminist gathering points that civil society has historically relied on to organise and speak publicly, leaving CSOs without predictable venues for civic action.

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

On 10 March 2026, the National Assembly [passed the ICT Charities Amendment Bill](#) strengthening regulatory oversight of charitable organisations in the Islamabad Capital Territory. While framed as a transparency measure, the Bill was adopted with limited consultation of the organisations it regulates, a pattern familiar in NGO-related legislation in Pakistan. Concerns relate not to the principle of regulation but to the cumulative compliance burden, potential scrutiny of foreign-funded programmes, and the disproportionate impact on smaller organisations already operating in a constrained environment. The combination of expanding regulatory requirements and limited CSO participation in legislative processes contributes to legal uncertainty for civil society actors and narrows the space for independent advocacy, particularly for organisations working on governance, accountability, and rights-based issues. Also, such weak legislative process itself signals that civil society is treated as a subject of oversight rather than a partner in shaping the rules that govern it by weakening the legitimacy of the legal framework in the eyes of the sector and eroding trust between CSOs and state institutions.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Sustained macroeconomic pressure, heightened scrutiny of financial flows, and shifting regulatory priorities continued to shape a constrained funding environment for civil society. Policy [discussions around remittance securitisation](#) and reliance on overseas labour as an economic pillar indicate a state-centric approach to resource mobilisation, with limited parallel attention to financial sustainability for the non-profit sector. CSOs continue to report challenges in accessing diversified funding, institutional support, and predictable partnership arrangements.

Short funding cycles and increased compliance oversight are pushing CSOs toward project-based, deliverable-driven work at the expense of core institutional costs, long-term advocacy, and research, weakening the sector's capacity to engage on structural governance and accountability issues that require sustained, independent presence rather than time-bound interventions.

4. State openness and responsiveness

The [2025 Azad Kashmir protests](#), organised by the Joint Awami Action Committee around a charter of governance and economic reforms, represented one of the region's largest civic mobilisations in recent years. Authorities deployed security forces and imposed communication restrictions, and clashes resulted in casualties before negotiated agreement was reached. In November 2025, several Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) members [reportedly disappeared](#) shortly after participating in a peace jirgah held within the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provincial Assembly, a development that risks eroding trust in the limited institutional dialogue channels available to civil society.

The [adoption of the 27th Constitutional Amendment](#) was widely interpreted by analysts as strengthening the influence of military institutions in governance and policy-making, with implications for civilian oversight and the balance of civil–military relations. Separately, amendments to the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) law linking the [minimum monetary threshold for corruption cases](#) to inflation, applied retrospectively from July 2022, are expected to close or exclude a significant number of cases below roughly Rs 800 million from NAB's jurisdiction. [An IMF report](#) highlighting governance and transparency weaknesses added further momentum to civic demand for accountability reform.

These developments point to a pattern of reduced space for structured dialogue between civil society and state institutions on governance and accountability issues. The perceived consolidation of institutional power, combined with the scaling-back of accountability tools, raises the threshold for civic engagement on reform and sharpens caution among CSO actors engaging with sensitive issues. When state institutions are less open to civil society input, policymaking happens behind closed doors, leaving CSOs without real opportunities to share evidence, represent affected communities, or help shape reforms, which reduces civil society from a policy partner to an outside observer.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

During the reporting period, senior military officials, including the Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), conducted a [series of engagements](#) with students across Pakistani universities, publicly framed as dialogues on national security and youth responsibility. Observers have noted that sustained institutional presence in academic spaces risks shaping political perceptions among students and narrowing the range of perspectives available on questions of governance and civic participation.

When dominant state institutions shape public narratives in academic and youth spaces, the range of acceptable civic debate narrows, making it harder for civil society to introduce alternative viewpoints on governance, rights, and accountability into mainstream discourse.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

The digital space remained one of the most contested areas of the civic environment. In January 2026, an [anti-terrorism court sentenced several journalists](#), commentators, and former military officers to life imprisonment in absentia for allegedly inciting unrest through online commentary related to the 2023 protests. [Proceedings against human-rights lawyers](#) Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir and Hadi Ali Chattha, and the prolonged detention of [digital journalist Sohrab Barkat](#) under cybercrime provisions, further illustrate the use of legal provisions - anti-terrorism, PECA, and cybercrime legislation - to regulate online expression. The reported [removal of an online article](#) profiling youth commentator Zorain Nizamani similarly raised concerns about editorial independence and institutional sensitivities affecting digital content.

The convergence of anti-terrorism, cybercrime, and PECA provisions against online commentary has produced a climate of significant caution in digital expression. Risk is no longer limited to high-profile public figures. The use of overlapping legal regimes against online commentary creates a sense of unpredictable legal exposure, which pushes CSOs, journalists, and rights defenders toward pre-emptive self-censorship and private communication, fragmenting the open public discourse that civil society depends on to build collective positions and sustain public accountability.

Challenges and Opportunities

In the coming months, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Pakistan may face continued uncertainty in their operating environment, particularly in relation to the predictability of regulatory processes, access to funding, and the space for sustained engagement with public institutions. Emerging legal and administrative measures, especially those affecting digital expression and organisational oversight, could introduce additional compliance requirements and operational constraints.

At the same time, the limited institutionalisation of structured dialogue mechanisms between state actors and civil society may restrict opportunities for meaningful policy influence. These dynamics may affect the ability of CSOs to plan long-term interventions, maintain independent advocacy, and engage effectively in public discourse, particularly on sensitive governance and accountability issues.

- 1) CSOs and civic actors may continue to face pressures related to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, particularly in the context of ongoing political mobilisation and potential protest activity. The continued application and possible expansion of laws such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), along with the use of public order and anti-terrorism provisions,

may further restrict online and offline expression, contributing to increased self-censorship among activists, journalists, and rights defenders.

- 2) The regulatory landscape governing civil society is expected to become more stringent, particularly following recent legislative developments such as the ICT Charities Amendment Bill and potential further reforms concerning NGO registration and oversight. These measures may introduce additional compliance requirements, including enhanced reporting, registration procedures, and scrutiny of foreign funding, which could disproportionately affect smaller organizations and those reliant on international partnerships.
- 3) Ongoing constitutional and governance-related developments, including debates around recent amendments and the evolving role of state institutions, may continue to shape civic space. In practice, this may translate into reduced opportunities for structured dialogue between civil society and public authorities, particularly on sensitive issues related to governance, accountability, and institutional reform, thereby limiting the scope for inclusive and participatory policymaking.

In terms of Opportunities

1. Pakistan's continued engagement with international frameworks such as GSP+ and other multilateral commitments provides a key entry point for civil society to advocate for strengthened protections of fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, association, and due process. Increased international attention to cases involving journalists, activists, and digital freedoms can be leveraged to encourage compliance with human-rights obligations and promote institutional accountability.
2. Ongoing legislative reforms and public debates around laws governing media, civil society, and accountability institutions present an opportunity to institutionalize inclusive policy-making processes. Civil society can play a constructive role by providing evidence-based recommendations, facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue, and advocating for consultation mechanisms that ensure laws are responsive, transparent, and enabling rather than restrictive.
3. Ensuring participatory law-making processes, safeguarding media freedoms, and maintaining consistent accountability standards will be critical to fostering a more enabling environment for civil society in Pakistan.
4. Despite constraints, the persistence of civic mobilisation, public protests, and policy discourse demonstrates continued public demand for accountability and participation. This creates space for civil society to strengthen engagement with communities, build coalitions across sectors (media, legal, youth, and cultural actors), and promote structured dialogue platforms that bridge gaps between citizens and state institutions.
5. The expanding role of digital platforms and youth engagement in shaping public discourse offers an opportunity to diversify narratives, amplify underrepresented voices, and sustain advocacy efforts. Civil society can leverage these spaces to promote rights-based discourse, counter misinformation, and foster a culture of critical engagement, particularly among young citizens.

6. External actors, including donors and the international community, have an important role to play in strengthening the enabling environment for civil society in Pakistan. This includes providing flexible and long-term funding to support organisational sustainability, investing in digital security and capacity-building for civic actors, and encouraging inclusive policy dialogue through diplomatic engagement. Continued support for monitoring fundamental freedoms and promoting accountability through international mechanisms can further reinforce protections for civil society.



EU SEE SUPPORTING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



Funded by the European Union

