



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# Enabling Environment Snapshot

**Eswatini**

**2026**

## Context

Reporting period: June 2025 – April 2026

Eswatini remains an absolute monarchy and continues to be classified as a “closed” civic space by the [CIVICUS](#) Monitor. The legal and political environment remains structurally restrictive, shaped by laws such as the [Public Order Act \(2017\)](#), [Suppression of Terrorism Act \(2008\)](#), and the [Sedition and Subversive Activities Act \(1938\)](#), which continue to be used to regulate and suppress dissent.

During the reporting period (June 2025 – April 2026), civic space has been characterised by continued enforcement of restrictive legislation, increased securitisation of civic activity, and limited progress on enabling reforms. The proposed Non-Profit Organisations (NPO) Bill (2024) remained under discussion throughout this period, raising sustained concern among civil society due to its provisions for expanded state oversight of registration, operations, and funding.

The period further reflects ongoing targeting of activists, [trade unionists](#), and [students](#), including disruptions of gatherings, arrests, and intimidation by security forces. While isolated developments such as [the release of Member of Parliament Mthandeni Dube](#) through royal pardon (during the reporting period) suggest limited concessions, these have not translated into broader structural improvements.

Overall, the reporting period demonstrates a continuity of repression in both law and practice, with civic actors operating under heightened risk and uncertainty.

## 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The protection of fundamental freedoms remained severely constrained during the reporting period, with continued reliance on security legislation and policing practices to control civic participation. Key developments between June 2025 and April 2026 include:

- April 2026 – A peaceful public sector unions’ [gathering was violently dispersed](#) by armed police, reinforcing patterns of excessive use of force [against gatherings](#).
- 2025–2026 (multiple incidents reported) – Activities associated with pro-democracy movements and trade unions, including PUDEMO-aligned engagements and SNAT-related spaces, were repeatedly disrupted, with organisers [subjected to intimidation and surveillance](#).
- Targeting of labour actors (2025–2026) – Dumsile Khumalo, Secretary General of the Eswatini Police Staff Association, was detained and harassed during advocacy for improved working conditions, indicating [shrinking space even within state-linked associations](#).
- Ongoing detention (throughout reporting period) – Student activist Menzi Bongeka Bhembe remained in [prolonged detention under terrorism-related charges](#), highlighting the continued use of pre-trial detention as a punitive measure.
- Political prisoners (status update during reporting period) – While Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza remained imprisoned, Mthandeni Dube was released following a royal pardon, reflecting selective and non-systemic relief.
- LGBTIQ+ rights (reporting period developments) – Despite earlier judicial progress, [public statements by the King rejecting same-sex relationships](#) (2025–2026) reinforced exclusionary

state positions and undermined implementation of court rulings regarding registration of Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities (ESGM).

- [The Public Order Act \(2017\)](#) continued to provide broad discretionary powers to the Commissioner of Police, resulting in denial of permissions, pre-emptive disruption of gatherings, and use of force.

These developments indicate that fundamental freedoms are not only restricted in law but actively suppressed in practice, producing a chilling effect on civic participation, particularly among youth, students, and labour movements.

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

The legal framework governing civil society remained restrictive and increasingly uncertain during the reporting period.

The proposed NPO Bill (2024) remained a central issue throughout June 2025 – April 2026, with continued concern from civil society regarding:

- Expanded state control over [NGO registration and operations](#)
- Increased reporting and compliance burdens
- Potential [restrictions on access to funding](#)

No significant amendments addressing these concerns were publicly confirmed during the reporting period, contributing to a climate of legal uncertainty and anticipatory restriction.

Additional developments include:

- 2025–2026 – Continued reliance on the 2005 NGO Policy as the primary framework, which lacks enforceable protections and leaves room for administrative discretion.
- Judicial and institutional signals (reporting period) – While institutions such as the National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-Up (NMRF) remained operational, there was limited evidence of broader legal reform to strengthen civic space protections.
- Administrative pressure (ongoing) – Government rhetoric during the reporting period included threats to deregister organisations deemed “political”, reinforcing a pattern of selective enforcement.

Overall, the framework remained characterised by broad executive discretion, weak safeguards, and increasing signals of regulatory tightening, limiting the autonomy and security of civil society actors.

## 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Access to financial resources for civil society remained constrained and increasingly securitised during the reporting period.

Key trends observed between June 2025 and April 2026 include:

- Increased financial scrutiny (ongoing) – The Central Bank and commercial banking sector continued to intensify monitoring of CSO transactions, particularly those involving international funding.
- Policy trajectory (linked to NPO Bill, ongoing) – The proposed NPO Bill reinforced concerns regarding state oversight of donor funding, contributing to uncertainty among both CSOs and donors.
- Reduced funding confidence (2025–2026) – The restrictive operating environment contributed to declining donor confidence and reduced sustainability of programming, particularly for rights-based organisations.
- Impact on smaller organisations (ongoing) – Grassroots and community-based organisations faced [disproportionate](#) barriers, including limited access to funding and increased vulnerability due to lack of formal registration.

These dynamics have resulted in reduced organisational resilience, with many CSOs scaling down activities or struggling to maintain long-term programming.

## 4. State openness and responsiveness

State engagement with civil society during the reporting period remained limited, selective, and largely non-transparent.

Key developments include:

- March 2025 – early 2026 follow-through – Civil society actors, including the Foundation for Socio-Economic Justice, remained excluded from meaningful participation in national budget processes and related consultations.
- 2025–2026 (ongoing) – [Consultations](#) on key legislative and policy processes, including the NPO Bill, were selective and lacked transparency, with critical and unregistered organisations excluded.
- Exclusion of key actors (ongoing) – Organisations such as Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities (ESGM) and the Swaziland National Union of Students continued to face barriers to participation due to lack of formal [recognition](#).
- Institutional engagement (limited progress) – [The National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-Up \(NMRF\)](#) remained a potential entry point for engagement, though its impact on broader participation remained limited during the reporting period.
- Structural barriers (ongoing) – Poor infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, continued to [limit outreach](#), participation, and inclusive consultation processes.

Overall, engagement remained reactive and controlled, with participation treated as discretionary rather than institutionalised.

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

Political discourse during the reporting period continued to reflect a securitised and delegitimising narrative toward civil society.

Key trends include:

- 2025–2026 (public rhetoric) – Civil society organisations were frequently portrayed by state actors as linked to political instability or foreign influence, reinforcing mistrust.

- Financial scrutiny narrative (ongoing) – Public statements by senior officials supported increased monitoring of NGO funding, [framing external support as a security concern](#).
- Targeting of student activism (April 2025 – continued into reporting period) – [Government positions](#) discouraging student protest participation continued to shape a climate of fear and compliance within academic spaces.
- Media environment (ongoing) – Dominance of state-controlled media limited pluralistic narratives, reinforcing official positions and marginalising dissenting voices.
- [Marginalisation of vulnerable groups](#) (ongoing) – Women, persons with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ individuals remained excluded from decision-making spaces, particularly at community level.

The broader political culture, shaped by the absolute monarchy, continues to limit pluralism and frame civic engagement as a threat, weakening public trust and solidarity.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

The digital environment in Eswatini during the reporting period remained contested, with increasing regulatory control and persistent risks for activists.

Key developments include:

- Ongoing (2025–2026) – Implementation of [cyber laws enacted in 2022](#)—including the Computer Crime and Cybercrime Act, [Data Protection Act](#), and Electronic Communications and Transactions Act—continued to shape digital governance.
- Use of cyber legislation (reported trend) – These laws were increasingly perceived as [tools to monitor and potentially criminalise online expression](#), particularly targeting [activists and critics](#).
- Surveillance and harassment (ongoing) – Human rights defenders reported continued risks of online surveillance and cyber harassment, contributing to self-censorship.
- Digital access (current estimate) – Internet penetration remained at [approximately 57.6%](#), with social media (particularly Facebook) serving as a key platform for civic engagement.
- No shutdowns recorded (during reporting period) – Unlike the June 2021 shutdown, no internet shutdowns were recorded between June 2025 and April 2026, although concerns about potential restrictions persist.
- Digital divide (ongoing) – Rural communities continued to face limited access and low [digital literacy](#), constraining inclusive participation.

While digital platforms remain critical tools for mobilisation, the environment is increasingly shaped by regulatory pressure, surveillance risks, and unequal access.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Over the next six months, civic space in Eswatini is expected to remain highly constrained, with a strong likelihood of increased restrictions.

Key anticipated challenges include:

- Potential enactment of the NPO Bill (2024), which may significantly restrict CSO operations and funding
- Continued use of security legislation to suppress dissent
- Increased financial scrutiny and funding constraints
- Expansion of digital surveillance and self-censorship

Despite these constraints, several opportunities remain:

- Continued use of digital platforms for mobilisation and awareness
- Engagement through institutional mechanisms such as the NMRF and the Commission on Human Rights and Public Administration
- Strengthened regional and international advocacy networks

To navigate this environment, civil society will require coordinated advocacy, strengthened protection strategies, and sustained international support to promote a more enabling civic space.



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