



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# Enabling Environment Baseline Snapshot

South Sudan  
2026

## Context

Reporting Period: May 2025 – April 2026

South Sudan is entering a critical political transition with [elections](#) scheduled in December 2026. This will be the first general election in the existence of the country, which became independent in 2011. The current transitional government has postponed the elections numerous times, in 2020 and 2024, but this year it is expected that they will proceed, based on President Kiir's ruling party's desire to [consolidate power](#) for easy transition. While these elections represent a milestone towards democratic governance, the environment for human rights defenders (HRDs), including women, journalists, civil society actors, and political actors/activists, remains highly repressive.

State actors, particularly the National Security Service (NSS), continue to curtail fundamental rights and freedoms. This is reflected in the restriction of political activities by opposition actors and individuals critical of government policies and practices. Media outlets are frequently closed or censored, while journalists and human rights defenders face harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary detention. Even vocal political activists and members of parliament are targeted. Recent developments illustrate this pattern, including the treatment of anti-corruption critics, who have faced pressure and reprisals for speaking out, [raising concerns](#) about whether anti-corruption efforts are being used selectively, particularly in the lead-up to the 2026 general elections. This trend is especially concerning as it signals a narrowing civic space during a critical electoral period.

Since January 2026, civil society members and media institutions in South Sudan have faced escalating attacks, including [renewed clashes](#) in Akobo County that have threatened some journalists and a media house, indiscriminate bombardments in opposition-held areas, and systematic intimidation documented by the United Nations [Commission on Human Rights](#) in South Sudan and [Human Rights Watch](#) reports. These incidents highlight a deteriorating security environment where journalists, activists, and civic groups are increasingly targeted.

Amidst an ongoing high-profile [court case](#) of the suspended first vice president, Riek Machar, and the seven co-accused, [clashes](#) between the government forces and opposition forces, particularly the main opposition group, Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO), are ongoing across the country. These clashes have caused a devastating humanitarian crisis and have seen threats to media houses or civil society actors reporting about it. In the report by the [UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan](#) in March 2026, political and military leaders are accused of systematically dismantling the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement with increasing risk of mass atrocity crimes, intimidation of civil society organisations, and harassment of journalists.

A [Human Rights Watch](#) report in April 2026 that documented the impact of the crisis since late 2025 recorded indiscriminate aerial bombardment, intensified clashes - not only in the Greater Upper Nile but across the country - resulting in civilian deaths, destruction of property, and threats to media houses and civic institutions. Concerningly, the recent [uncovering of human remains](#) by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) during road rehabilitation in Jonglei indicates the level at which true records of loss cannot be identified.

## 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Civic space in South Sudan remains fragile and tightly contested, with freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly formally guaranteed but weakly protected in practice. While violations covering the period from May 2025 to April 2026 have been most pronounced around freedom of expression, the overall environment for civil society actors and journalists remains legally uncertain and increasingly restrictive, encouraging self-censorship. The [Transitional Constitution](#) of the Republic of South Sudan (2011, as amended) guarantees freedom of expression (Article 24), freedom of assembly and association (Article 25). However, these protections are undermined by selective enforcement, wide administrative discretion, and restrictive practices at state and local levels. In practice, authorities invoke security considerations to limit civic engagement, media operations, and public discourse, particularly in conflict-affected areas.

Despite the absence of reported large-scale bans on association or assembly over the past year, civil society organisations and journalists continue to operate under implicit constraints, including intimidation, warnings from state actors, and insecurity, which narrow the space for lawful expression and commentary on public affairs. According to [CIVICUS](#) Monitor, South Sudan’s civic space remains categorised as “repressed”, with a low score of 21/100 (2025).

Key developments in the past 12 months illustrate the erosion of freedom of expression:

- In June 2025, the Secretary General of the Union of Journalists of South Sudan [stated](#) that journalists continued to face restrictions in accessing public information despite the existence of media laws guaranteeing access to information.
- In July 2025, the spokesperson of the National Security Service [warned journalists](#) against reporting on matters deemed sensitive to “national security,” reinforcing concerns about the broad and discretionary use of security-based restrictions on access to information. Also in July 2025, security authorities [publicly warned journalists](#) not to cross “red lines” relating to state security, emphasising the possibility of arrest for reporting perceived as threatening to the state.
- In September 2025, independent journalists [were denied access](#) to cover the court proceedings involving opposition leader Riek Machar, with only the state broadcaster permitted to report from the courtroom, undermining transparency and open justice principles. This [was condemned by the Union of Journalists of South Sudan](#), arguing that the measures violated constitutional guarantees of press freedom and public access to information.
- Akobo FM was [forced to shut down](#) in April 2026 following escalating clashes between government forces and the SPLA-IO. Journalists [faced threats](#), intimidation, and deteriorating security, leading staff to flee. The closure disrupted access to information at the community level and highlighted the lack of protection for journalists in insecure areas.
- The South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) spokesperson, Major General Lul Ruai Koang, issued a warning on 10 April 2026 advising [civil society organisations](#) not to speak on behalf of the government or present themselves as official representatives. Although framed as a role-clarification, civil society actors expressed concern that the statement could be interpreted to restrict lawful commentary on governance and public affairs, reinforcing a chilling effect on freedom of expression.

Restrictions on freedom of association have been less visible but persistent. Over the past year, several national and community-based organisations reported being ordered to halt activities, close offices, or suspend field work by security organs and local authorities, often without written justification. These measures were commonly justified on security or registration grounds, despite organisations holding valid legal status. This included [restrictions to humanitarian access](#) imposed by the government in parts of the opposition-held areas of

Jonglei state since December 2025 and [eight targeted attacks](#) on CSOs such as Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). Civil society groups [documented](#) repeated summonses to security offices, demands to share activity plans or participant lists, and warnings against engagement on governance, human rights, or peace-related issues. Such practices have constrained programme implementation and discouraged advocacy.

Freedom of peaceful assembly remains constrained through informal controls. While no major nationwide bans on assemblies were reported in the past 12 months, public gatherings and civic meetings continued to face heightened scrutiny, with organisers required to seek permission rather than provide notification. Fear of disruption or arrest and [repression post exercise](#) of freedom of assembly has led many groups to cancel or scale back public activities.

Overall, the past year reflects a continued narrowing of expressive space, driven less by overt legal reforms and more by intimidation, insecurity, and restrictive interpretation of existing laws. While freedoms of association and peaceful assembly have not seen widespread reported violations recently, the climate of fear and legal ambiguity continues to constrain their full exercise, particularly for journalists, human rights defenders, and community-based organisations.

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

South Sudan's legal framework for civil society is best characterised as formally enabling but substantively restrictive, combining constitutional guarantees with statutory provisions that centralise state control and introduce significant administrative and discretionary barriers to independent civic action. While the [Transitional Constitution](#) (2011, as amended) affirms the right to freedom of association under Article 25, the operational reality is shaped by a suite of laws that regulate, and in practice constrain, the formation, functioning, and sustainability of civil society actors.

The principal regulatory instrument, the [Non-Governmental Organisations \(NGO\) Act](#), 2016, establishes the legal basis for registration, oversight, and coordination of civil society organisations. However, several provisions within the [Act limit](#) the openness of the civic space. Notably:

- The Act (and more specifically Section 5) equates “civil society” with “non-governmental organisation,” framing NGOs largely in terms of voluntary, non-profit entities engaged in humanitarian and development-oriented work, which in practice has contributed to narrowing the space for advocacy and rights-based organisations. For instance, in 2021, following calls for protests by the People's Coalition for Civic Action (PCCA), authorities targeted civil society actors, including [shutting down](#) several organisations' offices.
- Section 8 provides for the establishment and maintenance of a regulatory database, forming part of the broader oversight architecture exercised by authorities over NGO activities. Sections 9–12 set out registration, certification, exemption, and renewal procedures, requiring all NGOs to formally register and periodically renew their status, with no explicit provision for informal or unregistered civic activity, effectively prohibiting such operations.

In practice, however, while some registration records and operational information are maintained by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and the Ministry of Justice, the database does not appear to function as a fully centralised, comprehensive, or publicly accessible online registry. Access to NGO registration information is generally limited and

often requires direct engagement with the authorities, particularly the RRC offices in Juba or at the state level. Civil society actors and [NGOs have frequently reported](#) administrative inefficiencies, inconsistent record management, and limited transparency in registration and renewal processes. There is also no clearly accessible public portal where users can easily verify all registered NGOs, their status, or compliance records.

- Section 9(1)(b) requires disclosure of all known and anticipated funding sources, proof of financial capacity, and payment of prescribed fees as conditions for registration, which creates financial and procedural barriers to entry that disproportionately exclude smaller, grassroots, and marginalised organisations (including women- and youth-led groups), while limiting flexibility in accessing diverse or sensitive funding—ultimately reinforcing structural inequalities in participation within the civic space.
- Section 12 permits the Registrar to renew or reject an NGO’s operational licence if the organisation is deemed to be involved in political or tribal differences, requiring written notification with reasons in case of rejection but providing no explicit appeal mechanism, thereby granting broad discretionary power that can be used to restrict advocacy-oriented or dissenting groups—particularly disadvantaging smaller and marginalized organisations with limited capacity to challenge decisions, and reinforcing unequal access to civic space.
- Section 13 requires periodic renewal of registration requiring NGOs, for renewal, to submit performance reports, audited financial statements, a consolidated list of assets, programme plans and budgets for the next fiscal year, and a full staff list (national and international)—requirements that impose significant administrative and financial burdens, particularly on smaller and grassroots organisations, while strengthening state leverage over the continuity of their operations.
- Section 14 provides for monitoring and evaluation of NGO activities by a Commission, reinforcing ongoing administrative oversight.
- Sections 15, 17, and 19 establish penalties for non-compliance, require prior approval from the Registrar for any activities outside approved programmes, and mandate a three-month notice before cessation of operations, collectively creating strict operational controls that limit flexibility and responsiveness—particularly constraining smaller and grassroots organisations with limited administrative capacity, while enabling state oversight to shape and restrict civic action, thereby reinforcing unequal participation in the civic space.

These provisions collectively create a framework in which legal recognition is contingent on compliance with centralised and sometimes opaque administrative processes, often interpreted and enforced with discretion by regulatory bodies, particularly the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), established under the [Relief and Rehabilitation Commission Act](#) (RRC Act, 2016). In practice, registration and renewal processes are not only procedurally complex but also subject to influence from security actors, leading to instances where organisations are denied renewal on grounds that their work does not align with the statutory definition of NGO activities or broader “national priorities.”

While the legal framework governing CSO registration in South Sudan appears relatively clear, its implementation in practice reveals significant inconsistencies and barriers. There are documented cases where NGOs and CSOs have faced registration rejections, delayed approvals, and the imposition of additional administrative requirements beyond those stipulated in law. For example, [the RRC rejected](#) the Peace Corps Organisation (PCO) renewal application in 2017, illustrating the discretionary nature of the registration process. Field-based accounts in the first quarter of 2026 indicate that NGOs in Western Equatoria have been required to obtain an additional annual “operations certificate,” accompanied by a fee, as a precondition for continued operations. Civil society organisations also frequently report prolonged delays in registration renewals, inconsistent application of requirements across states, and ad hoc requests for supplementary documentation.

In some cases, certificates have been revoked and later reinstated, further underscoring the unpredictability of the process. A good case is the RRC's 7 February 2026 revocation of the registration of the Twic East Community Association (TECA), before reinstating it on 24 February 2026. The revocation came after the Twic East Community (TEC), a separate entity, used TECA's official materials in a community matter involving a vote of no confidence in their National Member of Parliament. In 2025, [proposed amendments to the NGO Act](#) that sought to introduce clearer registration procedures, stricter oversight of donor fund utilisation, mandatory local financial transactions, regulation of employment practices, and a more defined relationship between the RRC and the NGOs Forum have not been passed by parliament. While these measures may improve transparency and coordination, they collectively raised concerns about increased state control over NGO operations.

The legal environment is further shaped by security and digital governance legislation that indirectly impacts civic space. The [National Security Service \(NSS\) Act, 2024 \(as amended\)](#), introduces broad and ambiguously defined enforcement powers, particularly:

- Sections 54, 55, and 57 of the NSS Act authorise arrest with or without warrant based on broadly defined thresholds such as “suspicion” or “attempt,” and criminalise a wide range of vaguely framed activities (including those linked to political or social change), thereby lowering safeguards against arbitrary detention and expanding state surveillance powers—creating a chilling effect on civic engagement, advocacy, and public participation, particularly for civil society actors working on governance or rights issues, and disproportionately constraining smaller and marginalised groups with limited protection or recourse.

Such provisions have contributed to a climate in which civil society actors operate under the risk of surveillance, intimidation, or arbitrary interference. Beyond the law itself, informal practices—such as the reported routine presence of NSS officers at civil society events without a clear legal mandate—reinforce a normalised environment of oversight and self-censorship.

Read together, these legal instruments produce a civic environment that is highly regulated, administratively burdensome, and vulnerable to discretionary enforcement. While the framework provides a formal basis for the existence and operation of civil society, its design and implementation prioritises control and oversight over facilitation and protection of civic freedoms.

The overall implication is that civil society in South Sudan operates within a constrained and compliance-driven space, where legal recognition does not guarantee operational independence. Barriers to entry, unpredictable enforcement, and expansive state authority limit the ability of organisations—especially smaller, advocacy-oriented, or marginalised groups—to function effectively and sustainably. As such, the framework falls short of fully aligning with constitutional protections and international standards on freedom of association and expression, highlighting the need for reforms that enhance legal clarity, reduce administrative burdens, and safeguard civic autonomy.

### 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

South Sudan's civil society operates within a highly donor-dependent, short-term, and unevenly distributed resource environment. Legal and regulatory provisions further shape who can access, retain, and effectively utilise funding—often to the detriment of smaller, grassroots, and advocacy-oriented organisations. As a result, many CSOs struggle to develop long-term strategies due to unpredictable funding cycles, while alternatives such as

community-based financing, livelihood projects, and digital transformation remain largely aspirational, constrained by insecurity and weak local philanthropy.

This environment is characterised by a heavy reliance on external funding, with most organisations dependent on short-term, donor-driven grants and partnerships with international NGOs. These modalities limit institutional stability and reinforce a project-based approach to programming. At the same time, the overall funding landscape has contracted; global shifts, including reductions associated with the [closure of USAID programming in 2025](#), have significantly reduced available resources. Although some partners, such as the European Union, have introduced targeted funding initiatives—including a recent [€4 million programme](#)—these efforts remain insufficient relative to overall need and have intensified competition among organisations.

Donor priorities play a central role in shaping the sector. Funding is typically tied to predefined thematic areas, which constrains CSO autonomy and often compels organisations to align their work with external agendas rather than locally identified needs. Compounding this, the predominance of project-based financing leaves little room for core funding, limiting organisational development and undermining long-term sustainability.

Access to funding is also highly unequal. Smaller and marginalised groups—including community-based, women-led, youth-led, and minority-focused organisations—face structural barriers due to limited capacity, visibility, and access to networks. These challenges are particularly acute for organisations working on sensitive issues, such as human rights, minority protection, or LGBTQI+ rights, which are often excluded from funding streams due to perceived political or cultural sensitivities.

The legal framework further reinforces these disparities. For example, the NGO Act (2016) imposes requirements that can restrict financial access and flexibility:

- Section 9 mandates the disclosure of all known and anticipated funding sources alongside proof of financial capacity, which can deter flexible or sensitive funding arrangements, particularly for advocacy-oriented groups.
- Section 16 allows tax and customs duty exemptions only for registered NGOs engaged in “voluntary humanitarian work,” effectively privileging service delivery organisations.
- Section 7 confines permissible NGO objectives largely to humanitarian and development activities, implicitly excluding civic education, advocacy, and political accountability work from benefiting from such incentives.

In practice, these provisions favour larger, humanitarian-focused organisations while sidelining rights-based and advocacy groups.

The [2025 proposed amendments](#) to South Sudan’s NGO Act proposed prohibition of profit-oriented activities, which risks undermining CSO sustainability at a time of global donor fatigue and shrinking funding. By restricting income-generating and social enterprise models, this provision could significantly weaken the financial resilience, autonomy, and long-term viability of CSOs, especially local organisations striving for self-reliance.

Beyond formal regulation, additional constraints arise from the operating environment. Access to international funding may be subject to informal scrutiny and justification requirements from security actors, contributing to delays and, in some cases, self-censorship. High financial transaction costs—such as exchange rate distortions, compliance burdens, and fees—further erode already limited budgets, disproportionately affecting smaller CSOs. Moreover, some

organisations, particularly those engaged in politically sensitive work, face difficulties in opening or maintaining bank accounts. In a context of political instability, receiving funds from international partners can be especially challenging, as organisations may be required—often without clear legal grounding—to justify funding flows to authorities such as the National Security Service’s Economic Crime Department.

Overall, these dynamics create a resource environment that is not only fragile but structurally exclusionary. Legal, financial, and political factors combine to privilege certain types of organisations while constraining others, particularly those engaged in advocacy and rights-based work. This reinforces unequal access to funding, limits organisational sustainability, and ultimately narrows the diversity of voices within civic space, undermining both the inclusiveness and effectiveness of civil society in South Sudan.

## 4. State openness and responsiveness

South Sudan’s state–civil society relationship is formally recognised but remains practically constrained, marked by selective engagement, limited transparency, and a persistent trust deficit that undermines meaningful participation in governance processes. While a relatively robust legal framework exists, its implementation is uneven, and in practice, it affords only limited space for substantive dialogue between state institutions and civil society actors.

Legal guarantees for access to information are in place, notably through Article 32 of the Transitional Constitution and the [Right of Access to Information Act](#) (2013). However, these provisions are significantly diluted by broad exemptions, particularly those related to national security, which are frequently interpreted expansively. In December 2025, authorities [grounded several United Nations aircraft](#), alleging unauthorised surveillance activities without publicly disclosing evidence, reflecting the securitisation of information and growing restrictions around independent monitoring and humanitarian operations. As a result, access to information—especially on politically sensitive issues—is often restricted in practice, despite formal protections.

Implementation challenges further weaken these guarantees. Civil society organisations regularly encounter delays, non-responses, or outright refusals when submitting information requests, particularly in areas linked to governance, elections, and accountability. These obstacles reflect both bureaucratic inefficiencies and a deeply ingrained culture of secrecy within public institutions, limiting transparency and constraining CSOs’ ability to engage effectively.

Engagement between the state and CSOs does occur but is typically irregular and largely procedural. Notably:

- Youth Peace Ambassadors Forums have been formed as several state governments have established joint platforms with CSOs to train and support youth peace ambassadors, recognising their contribution to fostering reconciliation and strengthening social cohesion at the community level.
- CSO participation was formally included in the 2024 [Voluntary National Review](#) (VNR) on the SDGs, reflecting growing recognition of their role in tracking progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.
- In May 2025, IGAD and government stakeholders [convened](#) national consultation and validation meetings in Juba on durable solutions, involving government institutions, humanitarian actors, and civil society stakeholders in policy discussions. In the same month of

May 2025, the African Union and IGAD [conducted high-level consultations](#) in Juba with South Sudanese authorities and stakeholders on peace implementation, governance, and democratic transition, acknowledging the role of broader stakeholder engagement in sustaining peace efforts.

- In June 2025, IGAD, in collaboration with South Sudan’s Ministry of Lands, [facilitated a national dialogue](#) in Juba involving parliamentarians and governance stakeholders on gender, land governance, and climate resilience, reflecting structured civic participation processes.
- In July 2025, Regional actors [formally launched](#) the IGAD Civil Society Organisations Forum for Peace, bringing together CSOs from member states, including South Sudan, to strengthen engagement in peacebuilding and governance processes.
- In August 2025, IGAD [conducted national consultations](#) in Juba involving government representatives, private sector actors, and stakeholders on refugee livelihoods and self-reliance frameworks, reflecting continued inclusion of non-state actors in policy discussions.
- In October 2025, RJMEC [continued structured public briefings](#) and consultations on implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement, with repeated calls for protection and expansion of civic and political space to support inclusive governance and elections.
- In April 2026, RJMEC’s [quarterly briefing](#) to the Transitional National Legislative Assembly emphasised the need for inclusive dialogue, civic participation, and protection of civic space as part of the peace implementation process.

While organisations may be invited to these consultations, parliamentary hearings, or validation forums, such engagement often takes place at advanced stages of decision-making processes. Consequently, there is little evidence that civil society input substantively influences policy outcomes, reinforcing perceptions that participation is more symbolic than meaningful.

State attitudes towards civil society are also inconsistent. On the one hand, CSOs are recognised as [important partners](#) in development and peacebuilding. On the other, organisations engaged in advocacy, human rights, and accountability work are frequently viewed with suspicion. This duality contributes to ad hoc and uneven engagement, with the space for participation varying depending on the issue area and the actors involved.

Although overt incidents of repression may be less frequent, underlying pressures on civic space remain evident. Public warnings by security actors against involvement in “politically sensitive” issues signal ongoing risk, encouraging self-censorship among civil society actors and discouraging open participation. These pressures are mirrored in the media environment, where outlets reporting on sensitive topics may face [requests to retract or amend content](#). For example, South Sudan authorities in Juba [suspended Hot](#), a news outlet, and ordered its administrators to take down content. This, in turn, narrows public discourse and limits the visibility and reach of civil society perspectives.

Looking ahead, the electoral context introduces an additional layer of uncertainty. With elections planned for December 2026, CSOs are expected to play important roles in voter education, monitoring, and observation. However, unclear state attitudes and the risk of being perceived as politically oppositional constrain their ability to operate freely and effectively during this period.

Overall, these dynamics illustrate a gap between formal commitments and practical realities. Despite the presence of a legal framework that ostensibly supports openness and participation, the overall environment remains characterised by limited transparency, inconsistent enforcement, and constrained dialogue. Civil society participation is therefore often procedural rather than substantive, weakening accountability mechanisms and

discouraging broader civic engagement. These constraints disproportionately affect smaller, grassroots, and advocacy-oriented organisations, ultimately undermining the inclusiveness and responsiveness of governance in South Sudan.

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

Civil society in South Sudan is increasingly visible yet politically contested, shaped by mixed government narratives, cautious media framing, and uneven public perceptions. While the constitutional framework (section 6) and the NGO Act (2016) formally recognise principles of equality, non-discrimination, and participation, these remain largely normative and weakly implemented. There is no comprehensive framework to operationalise inclusion, and LGBTQI+ actors remain effectively excluded due to wider legal and socio-political risks. At the same time, limited integration of civic education within formal systems constrains public understanding of civil society’s role. As a result, recognition exists in principle but is inconsistently realised in practice.

Government discourse reflects this ambiguity. Civil society is acknowledged as a partner in service delivery and peacebuilding, yet, advocacy-oriented organisations are at times portrayed as politically motivated or disruptive when engaging on governance and accountability.

- [CSOs](#), particularly those affiliated with the South Sudan NGO Forum, are widely acknowledged as critical service providers in healthcare, food security, and education. Their work is especially significant in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas, where they often complement and, at times, work in close coordination with relevant government ministries.

Media [narratives](#) mirror these tensions: while independent and digital platforms increasingly frame CSOs as accountability actors, pressures on journalists—including [requests to amend or retract reporting](#)—constrain critical coverage and narrow public debate.

Public discourse is further shaped by high-profile incidents such as the [arrest and detention](#) of activist Moses Monday following the “Gurus Wen” campaign, which reinforces perceptions of risk, contributing to self-censorship among civil society actors. At the same time, citizen perceptions are gradually evolving. Urban populations, youth, and digitally connected groups are increasingly receptive to civil society’s watchdog role, although broader segments remain sceptical about its capacity to influence policy or drive structural change.

Although the Constitution provides a strong normative basis for inclusion—through guarantees of equality (article 14), women’s participation (article 16), and protection of cultural rights (article 33)—these provisions are not effectively operationalised. Legal [commitments](#) to non-discrimination and participation are undermined by weak enforcement, limited institutional capacity, and the absence of complementary legislation. This gap is particularly visible in the continued marginalisation of vulnerable groups, including women, persons with disabilities, rural communities, and LGBTQI+ actors.

Civic education remains limited and uneven, with no systematic approach to fostering understanding of participation, accountability, or the role of civil society. Digital platforms are helping to expand engagement and public debate, but they also expose civil society actors to

surveillance, harassment, and reputational risks, particularly when addressing sensitive issues.

Despite these constraints, there are some indications of support and engagement, including:

- Occasional government recognition of CSOs as partners in peacebuilding and service delivery initiatives.
- Invitations to [civil society actors](#) to participate in consultations, validation workshops, and public forums, including [parliamentary discussions](#) on the national budget, the [adoption of the South Sudan Youth Policy](#), and validation workshops such as the [Media Communication Strategy for the General Elections](#)—indicating formal openings for engagement, albeit within state-led frameworks.
- Increased use of [digital platforms](#) enabling [civic awareness campaigns](#) and public engagement, particularly among youth.

Overall, the political culture reflects a civic space that is formally acknowledged but unevenly legitimised and insufficiently protected. Weak implementation of legal guarantees, combined with cautious public discourse and constrained media space, reinforces a climate of uncertainty. This, in turn, encourages self-censorship and limits inclusive participation, leaving the enabling environment fragile and structurally exclusionary—particularly for advocacy-oriented and marginalised groups.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

South Sudan’s digital civic space is gradually expanding, but it remains structurally constrained and increasingly securitised. Although constitutional provisions guarantee privacy (Article 22) and access to information (Article 32), the absence of a dedicated data protection framework—combined with broad cybercrime legislation—limits the extent to which digital participation is safe, inclusive, and enabling in practice. As a result, civil society engagement online is possible but shaped by significant infrastructural, legal, and security-related risks, with disproportionate effects on smaller and marginalised actors.

Access to digital technologies remains limited and uneven. Internet penetration is low—estimated at [around 13% by the end of 2025](#)—reflecting persistent challenges such as weak infrastructure, high connectivity costs, and limited coverage outside urban centres. Even where access exists, connectivity is often unstable. Conflict, insecurity, and unreliable electricity frequently disrupt telecommunications infrastructure, undermining consistent digital engagement for civil society organisations.

These structural barriers reinforce patterns of exclusion. Digital participation is heavily reliant on mobile networks, yet high data costs and uneven service availability disproportionately affect rural populations, women, and smaller organisations. As a result, digital inclusion remains partial, with many actors unable to fully utilise online platforms for advocacy, coordination, or public engagement.

The legal and regulatory environment further constrains the digital space. The [Cybersecurity and Computer Misuse Act](#), adopted in February 2026, introduces broad and vaguely defined [restrictions](#) on online expression, including the criminalisation of “indecent” or “undesirable” content. It also expands state oversight through provisions such as mandatory data retention for up to 180 days and the assertion of extraterritorial jurisdiction. In the absence of a comprehensive data protection law, these measures [raise significant concerns](#) about

surveillance, misuse of personal data, and the targeting of activists, journalists, and civil society organisations.

State oversight is also embedded in the broader regulatory framework. The [National Communications Act](#) (2012) requires telecommunications providers to operate within state-regulated systems, limiting the independence of digital service provision and reinforcing centralised control over infrastructure. In practice, this contributes to an environment in which monitoring and restriction of digital activity are both technically and legally enabled.

Perceived and documented risks reinforce these challenges. Incidents such as [the detention](#) of journalist Michael Christopher in November 2025, as well as reported cross-border arrests and deportations of government critics, point to an expanding scope of surveillance and enforcement that extends beyond national borders. Key examples include:

- Arrests and deportation of government critics such as activist [William Deng Dut Koor](#), in Kenya in February 2026, [Morris Mabiior Awikjok Bak](#) in Kenya in February 2023, as well as Political Commentator [Peter Oyay](#) in Dubai, in September 2025, signalling an expansion of digital and political monitoring beyond national borders.

Although no widespread internet shutdowns were recorded in 2025–2026, [concerns](#) persist regarding the potential for politically motivated disruptions, alongside ongoing instances of [social media restrictions](#) and localised service limitations.

At the same time, the capacity of civil society to operate securely in digital spaces remains limited. Most organisations rely on basic communication tools, with limited access to advanced skills in cybersecurity, data protection, or the use of emerging technologies. While some capacity-building initiatives—such as digital security trainings led by civil society networks and partners—are under way, these efforts remain insufficient to address broader structural and resource gaps.

Overall, South Sudan’s digital environment is partially accessible but not yet secure or enabling. Expanding connectivity and the absence of systematic shutdowns provide a foundation for engagement, but weak infrastructure, restrictive legal frameworks, and growing surveillance powers significantly constrain safe and meaningful participation. In this context, self-censorship and risk aversion are common, particularly among advocacy-oriented actors. The result is a digital civic space that remains fragile, uneven, and exclusionary, limiting the ability of civil society—especially smaller, rural, and marginalised groups—to fully leverage digital tools for participation, mobilisation, and accountability.

## Challenges and Opportunities

South Sudan’s civic space is likely to remain constrained yet fluid in the run-up to the December 2026 elections, with heightened political sensitivity, security oversight, and financial strain presenting risks, while the electoral moment, growing public awareness, and expanding digital tools offer entry points for engagement and reform.

- Civic space pressures are expected to intensify as elections approach, with continued patterns of harassment, surveillance, and administrative restrictions on CSOs, human rights defenders, and journalists likely to increase around politically sensitive activities.

- Security-led oversight will continue to shape civic action as security institutions maintain a dominant role in regulating public gatherings and discourse, potentially reinforcing prior approval requirements and discouraging open engagement.
- Legal and regulatory uncertainty will persist as selective enforcement of existing laws, alongside expansive provisions in security and cyber-related legislation, sustains unpredictability and encourages self-censorship.
- The broader security context remains volatile with ongoing intercommunal violence and political tensions posing both physical and operational risks for civil society actors, particularly those working at community level.
- Media and information space may face further contraction as pressures on journalists and media houses—already reflected in closures, intimidation, and content restrictions—limit independent reporting during the electoral period.
- Resource constraints are likely to deepen as reductions in traditional donor funding, coupled with restrictive financial and banking conditions, constrain operational sustainability, particularly for smaller organisations.
- State–civil society mistrust may limit collaboration as advocacy-oriented CSOs continue to be perceived as politically oppositional, reducing space for dialogue and partnership.

At the same time, several opportunities remain:

- The 2026 elections present a critical entry point for civic engagement providing opportunities for CSOs to expand voter education, support election observation, and promote transparency and accountability.
- Growing public recognition of civil society creates space for legitimacy-building as citizens, particularly youth and urban populations, increasingly view CSOs as relevant actors in governance and service delivery.
- Increased international attention during the electoral period may open advocacy space enabling development partners and regional actors to push for safeguards, reforms, and protection of civic freedoms.
- Strengthened civil society coordination offers resilience as coalitions and networks can enhance collective advocacy, share resources, and improve protection mechanisms for at-risk actors.
- Gradual expansion of digital platforms provides new channels for engagement allowing CSOs to reach wider audiences, particularly younger populations, and amplify civic messaging despite infrastructural constraints.
- Ongoing capacity-building initiatives present opportunities to strengthen resilience particularly in digital security, organisational development, and rapid response mechanisms.

Overall, the period ahead presents a high-risk but strategic window for civic action, where escalating political pressures and structural constraints may further restrict the enabling environment, yet the electoral moment and evolving public engagement offer openings to strengthen participation, accountability, and civic visibility. The overall trajectory will depend on whether civil society, supported by domestic and international actors, can leverage these opportunities while navigating a tightening but still contested civic space.

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