

Curtailing Civic Space: Tightening Restrictions on Civil Society in the Americas

By: Maureen Meyer & Corie Welch

**RESEARCH
REPORT**

JUNE 2025



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
LEGAL TOOLS AND COMMON PATTERNS.....	2
CASE STUDIES.....	4
GUATEMALA.....	4
PARAGUAY.....	6
VENEZUELA.....	7
PERU.....	9
EL SALVADOR.....	12
PARALLELS IN THE UNITED STATES.....	14
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	16

INTRODUCTION

The last few months have been marked by aggressive measures by numerous governments that aim to further restrict civic space in the Americas. In Venezuela and El Salvador, prominent human rights defenders have experienced short-term enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions by authorities in both countries, deepening fears among others that they could be next. These governments and the government of Peru have also enacted laws designed to make it difficult, if not impossible, for human rights organizations and other civil society organizations to operate. At the same time, the Trump administration's termination of approximately 84 percent of USAID funding appropriated by the U.S. Congress and allocated for Latin America, as well as the cancellation of additional assistance through the State Department and other agencies, has forced numerous organizations to reduce staff and in some cases to cease operations completely. Likewise, a provision included in the massive tax and spending bill passed by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives in May would increase taxes on the assets of large foundations, which could further limit support for civil society actors in the U.S. and globally.

Civic space—the conditions needed for civil society to participate in public life, including policymaking—is a central part of a functioning democracy. Democratic government institutions derive their legitimacy and authority from the consent of the people. While arbitrary and unlawful detentions of human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and others can have a chilling effect, laws that constrain and impede the vital work of civil society organizations themselves more broadly undermine citizens' capacity to hold government officials and institutions to account.

This report examines recent trends in five countries—Guatemala, Paraguay, Venezuela, Peru, and El Salvador—where government authorities are acting aggressively to curtail civic space through regulatory changes and legislation. Many of these restrictions have been modeled on similar restrictive laws in Russia, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. We also identify worrisome trends emerging in the United States, where existing laws are being applied selectively and rhetoric and proposals targeting non-governmental organizations are on the rise. The report provides a comparative analysis of how governments are using legal tools to constrain civil society and offers recommendations for safeguarding civic space.

LEGAL TOOLS AND COMMON PATTERNS

In September 2024, several UN and regional human rights mechanisms issued a joint declaration that noted their concern about the “increasing imposition of laws, policies and administrative procedures that unduly restrict funding of associations from international sources and cause unjustified and discriminatory interference with the enjoyment of the right to freedom of association and related rights and freedoms, which is disproportionate and unnecessary in a democratic society.”

This same month, the U.S. Senate held a hearing, “Anti-NGO laws and other tools of democratic repression.” According to one of the witnesses, Douglas Rutzen of the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, “[g]overnments are converting the rule of law into the rule by law. They are using legislation to consolidate power, control civil society, and constrain civic freedom.” Rutzen described several ways that this is happening: impeding the formation of civil society organizations; restricting the right to receive funding from domestic and international sources; and imposing legal restrictions that apply to “all sectors of society.”

Many anti-NGO laws have been inspired by Russia’s 2012 Foreign Agents law, which accumulates a series of amendments to existing laws and codes in the country. The law regulates the activities of organizations that receive funding from abroad and that participate in political activities, requiring them to register as “foreign agents.” The Putin regime has expanded the scope of the law so that it now also applies to the media and individual activists. With a broad definition of what is considered “political activity,” the law can be wielded against a wide array of organizations. In practice, it has been used against organizations critical of the government or that support views opposed by the government, such as LGBTQI rights or democracy promotion.

In December 2022, a new law went into force in Russia that builds on existing legislation. According to Human Rights Watch, the “law expands the definition of foreign agent to a point at which almost any person or entity, regardless of nationality or location, who engages in civic activism or even expresses opinions about Russian policies or officials’ conduct could be designated a foreign agent, so long as the authorities claim they are under ‘foreign influence’.”



Laws restricting NGOs, including foreign agent laws, are also on the books in China, Ethiopia, India, Uganda, and elsewhere. Restrictive measures are being approved in Europe as well, with a foreign agents law adopted in Georgia last August, and another in Slovakia's parliament this year. Hungary, which since 2017 has sought to enact legislation requiring organizations receiving support from abroad to register and to restrict their activities, is proposing a new law that would enable the government to shut down any organization it deems to be a “threat to national sovereignty.” Amid protests in Hungary

pressure is mounting on the European Commission to press for the draft law to be withdrawn, as it contravenes EU principles and law. When Hungary was considering similar legislation in 2017, the European Commission referred the case to the European Union's Court of Justice. Similarly, in 2024, the Commission referred Hungary to the Court over a law that criminalizes organizations that receive foreign funding for political causes.

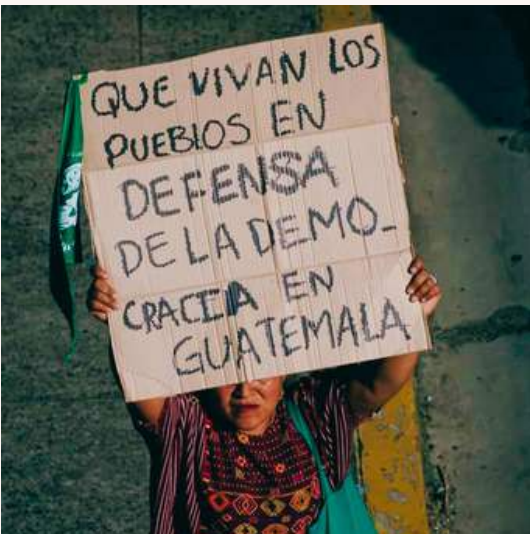
In Latin America thus far, notwithstanding legal barriers for independent organizations to exist in Cuba dating back decades, Nicaragua's Ortega regime holds the notorious distinction of having put in place the region's most restrictive anti-NGO laws and measures. In October 2020, Nicaragua's National Assembly approved a law requiring Nicaraguans who work for “governments, companies, foundations, or foreign organizations” to register as foreign agents. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights condemned the law for seeking to “silence individuals and organizations who are deemed to oppose the Nicaraguan government and to prevent the exercise of civil liberties, including freedom of expression and association, freedom to get involved in defining public affairs, the right to protest, and the right to defend rights.”

The 2020 law was followed by the March 2022 General Law for the Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations, which gives the government the power to cancel the legal registry of organizations that it contends are promoting “campaigns to destabilize the country.” Along with this cancellation authority, the law provides the government with the power to seize an organization's assets. Additional laws enacted between August and October 2024 (Laws 121218, 121519, 121820, 121921,

and 122022) further consolidated control over the non-governmental organizations still existing in Nicaragua, as well as enabling persecution against individuals and organizations deemed to be “opponents” of the government, both within and outside of the country. According to the [February 2025 report](#) of the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, “The National Assembly and the Ministry of the Interior have forcibly cancelled the legal status of at least 5,437 non-profit organizations since December 2018 – 1,939 since March 2024.” Numerous Nicaraguan organizations and independent media outlets now [operate in exile](#), primarily in Costa Rica.

CASE STUDIES

GUATEMALA



Civil society has played important roles in key moments of Guatemalan history to challenge corruption and promote human rights.

Under President Alejandro Giammattei’s administration, Guatemala passed [Decree 04-2020](#), commonly referred to as the “NGO Law,” which came into full effect in early 2022. The law imposed sweeping new controls on non-profit organizations, [drawing criticism](#) from national and international observers who warned that it threatened civic space, freedom of association, and the democratic rule of law.

Under the NGO Law, all civil society organizations are required to register with the Ministry of the Interior according to narrowly defined categories. Notably, there was no designated category for organizations focused primarily on human rights advocacy or reporting, raising concerns that such groups could be excluded from legal recognition altogether. Some feminist and women’s groups have been banned from registering, underscoring concerns about the eligibility criteria being used.

The law grants the Ministry of the Interior broad discretion to cancel the legal status of any organization it deems to be “altering the public order,” a term left deliberately vague and undefined. Any group stripped of its legal status would be effectively shut down, and its staff barred from working in the non-profit sector for two years.

A coalition of Guatemalan civil society organizations described the law as “a straitjacket to citizen expression and organization,” warning that the legislation gave the government unchecked power to intimidate and dismantle groups that challenged corruption, impunity, or authoritarian control. The law was condemned internationally, including by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, who warned of a wave of organizational dissolutions, reiterating the need to prevent the law’s use as a tool to restrict civic space.

So far, the practical impact of the NGO Law has been less devastating than had been feared initially. While the legislation remains on the books and continues to pose a threat to civic freedom, it has not been used during Bernardo Arévalo’s presidency and civil society in Guatemala has proven remarkably resilient. Civil society organizations—including grassroots movements and Indigenous-led organizations—have continued to play a central role in shaping national political discourse and defending democratic values.

Civil society has played important roles in key moments of Guatemalan history to challenge corruption and promote human rights. It was instrumental in pushing for the 1996 Peace Accords, helping build momentum for negotiations, and in securing the installation of the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). Over the last decade, Indigenous-led protests have been at the forefront of efforts to challenge corruption and authoritarianism. In 2015, mass mobilizations forced the resignation of then-President Otto Pérez Molina, who was implicated in a massive corruption scandal. That same spirit of collective action reemerged in 2023, when widespread protests defended the electoral victory of Bernardo Arévalo, after a coalition of entrenched political and economic interests—often referred to as the “pact of the corrupt”—attempted to overturn the democratic outcome.

Since the passage of the NGO Law, Guatemala has made some democratic gains, most notably with Arévalo’s election and the public support behind it. However, these advances have not come without serious challenges. The Attorney General’s office has continued to undermine the work of human rights organizations, launching legal actions and investigations that are designed to intimidate and criminalize critical voices. Since 2021, at least 77 people—including former prosecutors, judges, human rights defenders, and journalists—have been forced into exile from Guatemala as a result of political persecution.

Efforts to weaken judicial independence and silence critical voices remain persistent obstacles to meaningful reform.

While the NGO Law has not yet resulted in the widespread dismantling of civil society that many feared, it remains a powerful tool in the hands of state actors seeking to consolidate power and suppress opposition and could be more forcefully applied by governments in the future. The continued vigilance and activism of Guatemalan communities—especially Indigenous peoples, youth, and grassroots organizations—remain vital to protecting the country’s fragile democratic gains.

PARAGUAY

In November 2024, Paraguay passed Law No. 7363, “Law Establishing Control, Transparency, and Accountability for Non-Profit Organizations,” a sweeping measure that seeks to impose strict oversight on NGOs in Paraguay. The law was introduced in the Senate in December 2023 and was ultimately approved with modifications from the Executive, following debate in both legislative chambers. Despite some adjustments, such as reducing proposed fines and temporary suspensions, the final version still imposes disproportionate requirements and penalties on civil society organizations.



Paraguay is seeing a broad campaign against civil society, driven by legislative and political efforts to restrict the work of NGOs.

The law compels all non-profit organizations that receive or administer public or private funds, whether domestic or foreign, to register with a new National Registry of Non-Profit Organizations, document the origin and use of all funds, and submit annual financial reports along with detailed disclosures about all service providers. The law’s vague language and excessive bureaucratic demands could easily be used to harass or dismantle critical voices, particularly smaller or grassroots organizations with limited capacity to meet such burdens. It also threatens donor and beneficiary privacy and grants authorities the ability to suspend organizational activities or disqualify staff for up to six months, without clear due process guarantees.

The Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE) of the IACHR expressed alarm, warning that it “could hinder and restrict the operation of non-profit organizations in Paraguay” and “generate excessive administrative burdens.” RELE further warned of vague and ambiguous terms that contradict inter-American standards, stating that “freedom of association implies the right of organizations to establish their internal structure, activities, and program of action without intervention by the authorities that restricts or hinders the exercise of this right.”

Paraguay is seeing a broad campaign against civil society, driven by legislative and political efforts to restrict the work of NGOs. A Bicameral Commission of Inquiry (CBI) in Congress has been created to investigate alleged money laundering by these organizations. Members of the commission plan to request documents from USAID to scrutinize organizations that have received U.S. funds, advancing a narrative that equates foreign funding with political subversion. Lawmakers, citing transparency concerns, have also supported freezing USAID funding, significantly disrupting the work of civil society across the country. Though framed as a stand against foreign interference, critics argue the real goal is to silence groups that expose corruption and human rights abuses.

Jazmín Acuña, co-founder of El Surtidor, warned that the law is part of a “fierce misinformation campaign” to delegitimize watchdog groups and silence independent media. “They don’t want us to talk about how they squander public funds, or their connections with organized crime,” she said. Political scientist Esteban Caballero argued the law is unnecessary, noting that “enough mechanisms already exist to control and audit non-profit organizations.”

As it stands, Law 7363 represents not just a legal assault on civil society, but a symbolic shift in Paraguay’s democratic trajectory—a signal that dissent, scrutiny, and independent organizing are no longer welcome in the eyes of those in power.

VENEZUELA

Venezuela presents a striking case of how governments can use legal frameworks to restrict civic space and tighten political control. Over the past decade, a series of laws and administrative measures have gradually limited the operating environment for civil society organizations. The most recent of these is the NGO Oversight Law, passed in November 2024, which authorizes the state to dissolve organizations accused of



Venezuela presents a striking case of how governments can use legal frameworks to restrict civic space and tighten political control.

promoting “fascism” or engaging in activities deemed political. The law’s vague terminology allows broad interpretation and has raised concerns among civil society actors and legal experts about the potential for selective enforcement. It requires organizations to register and, upon authorization by the Autonomous Service of Registries and Notaries (a body that depends on the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace, run by Diosdado Cabello), they shall be granted legal personality or stripped of it.

This legislation follows a longer pattern of regulatory efforts aimed at curbing dissent and increasing state oversight of non-governmental organizations. As early as 2010, under the leadership of former President Hugo Chávez, the government and allied actors began accusing certain NGOs of undermining national sovereignty. That same year, the Law for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination was passed, prohibiting foreign funding for activities related to civic participation and allowing for administrative sanctions against organizations that failed to comply. Legislation aimed at combating money laundering has also been used to further restrict civic space and target civil society, including through the regulation of banking activities.

Calls for further restrictions intensified in subsequent years. Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, a central figure in Venezuela’s political landscape, has publicly questioned the legitimacy of NGOs receiving foreign support since at least 2014, particularly those with links to U.S.-based funders. These statements have shaped a broader narrative that frames independent organizations as instruments of foreign interference, setting the stage for more comprehensive regulation.

The political climate following the July 2024 elections—in which the government claimed victory despite widespread evidence to the contrary—further accelerated these legal efforts. In addition to the NGO Oversight Law, the National Assembly passed the Simón Bolívar Law last November, which includes provisions penalizing individuals and organizations that support international sanctions or question the legitimacy of state institutions.

Of particular concern is Article 23, which establishes a registry of individuals and entities—both national and international—suspected of actions contrary to the state’s “non-negotiable values.” The law enables authorities to impose measures such as asset freezes or travel restrictions, often without the guarantee of due process.

The legislative agenda has not stopped there. Two additional proposals—the Anti-Fascism Law and the International Cooperation Law—remain under the National Assembly’s consideration. It should be noted that, in the Venezuelan context, the government regularly labels the country’s opposition as “fascist,” allowing for broad discretion to apply the law to organizations that promote ideals or causes that are perceived as contrary to the ruling party. Both laws would expand the government’s ability to regulate or dissolve organizations and restrict gatherings perceived as politically sensitive.

These measures create an environment of legal uncertainty and limit civic engagement, especially for organizations involved in human rights, transparency, and electoral observation. The growing body of legislation contributes to what many describe as a progressive narrowing of civic space, where regulatory mechanisms are increasingly used to control public discourse and limit independent initiatives.

In this context, and with many organizations dramatically impacted by the cancellation of U.S. assistance, Venezuelan civil society continues to operate under significant pressure. Although many organizations have adapted to continue their work, pressure within Venezuela is rising. On May 29, Cabello publicly and arbitrarily accused several human rights organizations of being part of an alleged “terrorist structure” during a press conference, revealing first-hand how the cumulative effect of these laws aims to constrain the ability of independent actors to contribute freely to public life.

PERU

In March 2025, the Peruvian Congress passed a controversial law that significantly increased state control over non-governmental organizations, particularly those receiving international funding. Framed by its supporters as a measure to improve financial transparency and limit foreign interference, the law has been widely criticized by national and international observers for imposing broad, ambiguous, and punitive restrictions that could severely constrain the work of civil society in Peru.



In March 2025, the Peruvian Congress passed a controversial law that significantly increased state control over non-governmental organizations, particularly those receiving international funding.

At the center of the new legislation is a revision to the powers of the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation (Agencia Peruana de Cooperación Internacional, APCI), the state body that oversees foreign-funded initiatives. Under the new framework, APCI is no longer merely a reporting agency but now functions as a gatekeeper, requiring NGOs to obtain prior approval for their projects, programs, and activities. Failure to secure this approval before using international funds is now classified as a serious administrative offense, potentially

resulting in elevated fines and the suspension of operations.

One of the most contentious provisions is the classification of legal actions against the state as a “very serious offense”. This includes cases brought at both national and international levels. Organizations providing legal support to victims of human rights abuses, environmental harm, or state negligence—previously a critical function of civil society—now risk fines of up to 500 Tax Units (approximately \$720,000) and potential suspension of legal status. The law effectively penalizes advocacy, placing a chilling effect on legal accountability and public interest litigation. The law also represents a threat to investigative journalism, which has been critical in uncovering government abuse and corruption in Peru.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) voiced concerns, warning that the law “contains elements that could unduly restrict freedom of association, among them disproportionate administrative requirements and the need for prior approval for projects.” UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk urged the Peruvian government to uphold its international human rights obligations and to ensure civil society can operate freely and effectively. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights also questioned the law for stripping victims of state abuses of legal representation, thereby undermining their right to access justice.

The National Human Rights Coordinator, an umbrella organization that unites 79 human rights organizations working throughout the country, has denounced the law as an attempt to silence civil society and has called for its derogation. The Bar Association of Lima, which criticized the law as violating human rights enshrined in

Peru's Constitution, has said that they are studying legal actions to challenge its constitutionality.

More than 300 journalists, editors, and international organizations have expressed concern about the law's impact on freedom of the press. Their signed statement says that the law "constitutes a tool for political control over organizations that receive international cooperation" by granting the Executive Branch, through the APCI, "the power to authorize or block projects that finance journalistic or investigative work" and by prohibiting "cooperation funds from being used to initiate legal actions against the State, including litigation for access to public information, a fundamental tool for investigative journalism."

Victims of human rights violations during the internal armed conflict, as well as in recent years of political turbulence, alongside Indigenous rights organizations, have also denounced the law for stripping them of legal representation and undermining their demands for justice and accountability. The Regional Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the East (Orpio) described the legislation as a "serious step backwards" for access to justice and protection of Indigenous rights, particularly in a country where Indigenous communities have long faced systemic exclusion and environmental harm.

Peru's civil society has historically played a vital role in the defense of democracy and human rights, especially amidst recurring cycles of authoritarian rule, political instability, and entrenched corruption. In this context, NGOs have often stepped in to promote human rights, accountability, Indigenous rights, and social equity. However, the current political climate has become increasingly hostile toward independent organizations.

Narratives portraying foreign aid as politically motivated have also gained traction. Peru's ultra-conservative right has increasingly cast USAID and other international partners as instruments of foreign interference. This discourse intensified after the Trump administration slashed foreign assistance in February 2024—an action that many in Peru's Congress used to justify the need for increased regulation of foreign funding.

In practice, this law could serve as a powerful deterrent to public interest advocacy, particularly in areas sensitive to state accountability such as human rights,

anti-corruption, and Indigenous rights. The law’s long-term impact will depend heavily on how it is enforced, but civil society groups remain deeply concerned about its potential to stifle independent voices at a time when Peru’s democratic institutions face mounting pressure.

EL SALVADOR

On May 20, 2025, the Salvadoran National Legislative Assembly passed the “Foreign Agents Law” – a law that will greatly restrict the ability of civil society organizations to operate in the country. President Bukele first announced the introduction of the law via X on May 13, condemning the work of NGOs and explaining the need for tighter oversight on their finances and operations. The bill was introduced on the evening of May 20 and approved after just an hour and a half of debate in Congress, which is controlled by Bukele’s “New Ideas” party with a supermajority. It entered into force on June 7, 2025.



With the consolidation of power in El Salvador under President Bukele, civil society organizations have played a fundamental role in providing oversight over the government.

As a “foreign agents” law, the heart of the legislation is the imposition of a 30 percent tax on all foreign funding being brought into El Salvador. It’s modeled after a similar bill that was introduced in 2021, but was never taken to the floor to debate after the Bukele administration decided not to move it forward amidst international pressure. This tax will be applied to any entity that receives foreign funding, including organizations, foundations, and individuals. According to the National Assembly, the law will “guarantee transparency” about how NGOs are spending their funds and “allow citizens to be informed about the activities they carry out.”

In addition to the tax, the law establishes a new government body: The Registry of Foreign Agents or RAEX. Once the law comes into effect, all entities, including individuals such as consultants, receiving funding from foreign sources, will need to register with RAEX; if they do not register, they cannot operate. Then, they will be

required to report the source and purpose of all donations they receive and share their accounting information with RAEX, keeping in line with anti-money laundering laws in the country. Organizations that fail to comply with RAEX could receive fines of \$100,000 up to \$250,000 or even face closure.

But the law goes deeper than financial oversight and taxation; it also gives RAEX discretion to close any organization that it determines is engaging in activities that threaten “public order” or “national security.” This essentially gives power to the ruling government to shut down any organization that dares speak out against Bukele’s policies. The OHCHR issued a [statement](#), warning that the law “is likely to stigmatise and negatively impact the important human rights work carried out by civil society organisations in El Salvador, with some potentially forced to halt their activities.”

Over 8,000 NGOs will be impacted by this legislation, many of whom are already navigating the recent loss of U.S. government funding. On May 21, over 70 Salvadoran organizations came together in a [press conference](#) to denounce the new law and warn of the impacts it will have on civil society. “These events are part of the escalation of violence that has created a dangerous scenario of criminalization and censorship of human rights defense by the Salvadoran state,” said Verónica Reyna, director for human rights at the Passionist Social Service (SSPAS), during the press conference.

With the consolidation of power in El Salvador under President Bukele, civil society organizations have played a fundamental role in providing oversight over the government. In May alone, three human rights defenders were [arrested](#). Civil society organizations warn that this law is a further escalation in a war against dissident voices by the Bukele administration. To them, it is yet another step towards choking civil society in an environment already deprived of oxygen.



PARALLELS IN THE UNITED STATES

As has happened during different moments in the United States' history, measures by the federal government to investigate the work of U.S. civil society organizations have seen an uptick in recent years. The country's Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) dates back to 1938, with additional expansions during World War II. FARA "requires certain agents of foreign principals who are engaged in political activities or other activities specified under the statute to make periodic public disclosure of their relationship with the foreign principal, as well as activities, receipts, and disbursements in support of those activities." While it has been on the books for decades, FARA has been enforced more frequently since 2016, and U.S. civil society organizations have expressed concern over how the legislation's broad reach and vague language may stifle rights to speech and association.

In a 2022 letter sent to the Department of Justice in response to a request for input on potential amendments to the legislation, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and over a dozen other organizations highlighted how a "wide range of expressive and associative activity protected by the First Amendment could, in theory, fall under the Act's vague and sweeping provisions." A Lawfare article by Nick Robinson of the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law provided further context for this concern, underscoring how increased Congressional investigations against non-profits, particularly by House Republicans, have been justified by arguing that the organizations should have registered under FARA.

Apart from the potential political motivations for FARA investigations, U.S.-based civil society organizations are facing additional legislative proposals that could limit their work. During the 118th Congress, the House of Representatives approved a bill in November 2024 that would grant the U.S. Treasury Department the ability to cancel the tax-exempt status of any non-profit organization that it designates as a "terrorist supporting organization," without providing the organization with a meaningful ability to defend itself and without the need for the Treasury to present the evidence it has used to make such a determination. If similar legislation is taken up in the current Congress and is approved by both chambers, there is deep concern that its



During the 118th Congress, the House of Representatives approved a bill in November 2024 that would grant the U.S. Treasury Department the ability to cancel the tax-exempt status of any non-profit organization that it designates as a "terrorist supporting organization," without providing the organization with a meaningful ability to defend itself.

enforcement would be politicized given the lack of a clear definition in the legislation and the discretion given to Treasury officials to make the determination. Already, there were attempts to attach language similar to the November 2024 legislation to the tax and spending "reconciliation bill" passed by the House on May 22, 2025. Apart from potential new federal legislation, 32 states and Washington, DC, have state anti-terrorism laws, some with vague language that could also raise First Amendment concerns.

During the first few months of the second Trump administration, we have also seen additional

measures targeting civil society organizations. As WOLA has highlighted elsewhere, the freeze and subsequent cuts to U.S. foreign assistance have dramatically impacted civil society organizations promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Latin America and elsewhere. Domestically, Trump issued the executive order "Advancing United States Interests When Funding Nongovernmental Organizations" on February 6, 2025, which states "The United States Government has provided significant taxpayer dollars to Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), many of which are engaged in actions that actively undermine the security, prosperity, and safety of the American people. It is the policy of my Administration to stop funding NGOs that undermine the national interest." This order, as well as many others, including those targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (many of which are being challenged in court), have further impacted NGOs' ability to operate, including countless organizations that partner with the federal government in providing essential services to local communities. These measures have also heightened fears of additional actions, as was rumored to be the case in April, particularly targeting environmental organizations. As one analyst from the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute put it, the Trump administration "wants to control and punish those it perceives to be its opponents in civil society, which turns out to be a very long and growing list."

In the September 2024 [Senate hearing](#), then Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, former Senator Cardin (D-MD), stated that “in recent years we have also seen more and more nations that we would consider mostly democratic or partially free turning to these laws as tools of repression.” Ranking member and current chair of the committee, Senator Risch (R-ID), remarked that “Unfortunately, it is a fact that autocrats and their governments will do whatever it takes to stay in power. They survive and in some cases reemerge, using creative methods to repress their political opposition and silence human rights advocates and others who seek to shine a light on their actions.” At the time, the hearing was focused on ways the U.S. could support civil society actors abroad, including by highlighting several programs and initiatives once funded by USAID or by the State Department. In a dramatic turnaround, U.S. support is now a shadow of what it once was, with anti-democratic governments, from Russia to [Venezuela](#) to Nicaragua, [celebrating](#) USAID’s dismantling, while U.S.-based organizations conduct [risk assessments](#) and implement other measures in case they are potential targets of the administration.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Civil society organizations and the independent media play a crucial role in overseeing state power and the conduct of government agencies and public officials, promoting civic engagement and transparency. Such organizations often deliver essential and life-saving services to the most vulnerable members of society, including defending victims of grave human rights violations. Supporting a vibrant and independent civil society is a [key element](#) of any democracy. As Senator Risch stated in last year’s hearing, “I think we should all agree and recognize this [anti-NGO law] is not a partisan issue. This is a bipartisan issue, and it is an American issue and something we all need to work on together... The tool of choice for authoritarians these days is anti-nongovernmental organization laws, also referred to as foreign agent laws. These laws claim to stop foreign influence, but in reality are used to close the space for civil society and opposition.”

In her [testimony](#) at the same hearing, the director of Transparency International-Georgia pinpointed two essential strategies for prevailing against anti-NGO laws:



Civil society organizations and the independent media play a crucial role in overseeing state power and the conduct of government agencies and public officials, promoting civic engagement and transparency.

“Unity among proactive citizens who have chosen freedom, valuing it enough to defend it, and consistently strong support from the international democratic community for the vibrant civil societies they help develop and grow.”

Throughout Latin America, we have witnessed NGOs defending human rights in an authoritarian context, resisting democratic backsliding, and finding ways to operate and continue documenting human rights violations and other abuses from exile. Yet as anti-NGO laws proliferate under governments with authoritarian

tendencies, with three new laws enacted in the region in the past six months alone, there are fewer voices in the international community to defend and support civil society organizations. For those that remain, additional actions are needed to ensure that NGOs can remain outspoken and independent.

Since last fall, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and its special rapporteurs have denounced laws restricting the operations and funding of civil society organizations in Paraguay and Peru while previously expressing concerns about the long-looming and now approved law in Venezuela, the laws in Nicaragua and Guatemala, and the proposed law in El Salvador in 2021. Likewise, the European Parliament has condemned the restriction of civil society space in Venezuela, and UN human rights bodies have expressed serious concerns about the adoption of legislation in Paraguay, El Salvador, Peru, and Venezuela, apart from widespread documentation by the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on the impact of the multiple laws and restrictions on Nicaraguan organizations, to name a few.

As the Trump administration retreats from the United States’ long-professed role of supporting human rights and democracy worldwide and contemplates further restrictions on civil society organizations and foundations domestically, Congress should step up and provide a much-needed counter-balance to the Executive Branch by supporting the vital role of non-governmental organizations operating domestically and abroad.

Actions to consider undertaking include:

- **Providing robust support to civil society organizations and independent media.** While the Trump administration unlawfully cut foreign assistance without the consent of Congress, Congress can still assert its constitutional authority to establish the federal budget and appropriate funds for Fiscal Year 2026. This means assistance well above the proposed 48 percent cut to the State Department's budget (an overall 85 percent cut in foreign assistance if Congress approves the cancellation of previously appropriated funds), including funding for organizations that support democracy and human rights in Latin America and globally. At a recent hearing on the State Department's budget, the chair of the House subcommittee tasked with foreign assistance, Congressman Diaz-Balart (R-FL) commented on the need to provide funding to advance U.S. national security that includes "supporting those suffering under tyranny by standing in solidarity against oppressive – and often dangerously anti-American – dictatorships." As WOLA has highlighted previously, cuts in U.S. assistance have put at risk the ability of human rights organizations to continue working in Venezuela, and hindered the work of independent press from Nicaragua and elsewhere that have been forced to operate in exile. In recognition of this growing reality, as recently experienced by Transparency International Venezuela, U.S. support should not only fund civil society organizations in their home countries but also consider establishing and strengthening mechanisms that enable organizations to operate safely from abroad.
- **Speaking out against proposed anti-NGO laws and other legal threats against civil society organizations, while stressing the need to repeal existing laws.** When Salvadoran President Bukele introduced his first law targeting civil society organizations in 2021, it was not voted on in Congress, largely due to international pressure. If new laws are proposed elsewhere, and as the laws in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Paraguay, Venezuela, Peru, and El Salvador move forward, voices denouncing the impact of their implementation will continue to be important. For example, bipartisan legislation introduced in the Senate in the previous congress by Senators Kaine (D-VA) and then-Senator Rubio (R-FL), Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2023,

contained several provisions calling for targeted sanctions against Nicaraguan officials responsible for violence and other punitive actions against organizations and other actors in the country. It also raised the need to encourage multilateral institutions, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), to seek the repeal of Nicaragua's foreign agents law, amongst other measures. Members of Congress could also consider developing legislation or resolutions condemning anti-NGO laws, supporting civic space, and codifying mechanisms to support non-governmental organizations globally.

In the absence of robust U.S. support, other international actors, particularly European governments, the European Union, Canada, and multilateral organizations, should also take proactive steps to support civic space and defend fundamental rights. Actions to consider include:

- **Increasing direct support for civil society organizations under threat.** International donors should expand direct financial support to non-governmental organizations and independent media outlets, including those operating in exile or under threat. As traditional sources of funding become more restricted or politically targeted, flexible, long-term funding mechanisms are essential to ensure that these organizations can continue their critical work.
- **Using diplomatic leverage to oppose repressive laws and protect civic space.** As with members of the U.S. Congress, other actors should actively monitor and speak out against proposed or existing laws that undermine civil society and democratic freedoms. European governments, the EU, and other OAS member states should publicly and privately press for the repeal of these laws that restrict the work of civil society, and link future bilateral and multilateral cooperation to measurable commitments on human rights and the preservation of civic space.
- **Strengthening multilateral coordination and accountability mechanisms.** International actors should invest in coordinated responses to civic space restrictions by working through the OAS and Inter-American human rights system, the UN Human Rights Council, and other multilateral bodies. Continued support for international accountability efforts, such as UN-backed investigative mechanisms, can also provide critical backing for civil society actors working to document abuses and promote justice.

CURTAILING CIVIC SPACE: TIGHTENING RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AMERICAS

ABOUT WOLA

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) is a leading research and advocacy organization advancing human rights in the Americas. We envision a future where public policies in the Americas protect human rights and recognize human dignity, and where justice overcomes violence.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Maureen Meyer is WOLA's Vice President for Programs. Corie Welch is WOLA's Assistant Director for Communications. Lily Sweeting, WOLA's Communications and Development Assistant, contributed to the design and formatting of this report.

