

TEARING UP THE SOCIAL FABRIC

IMPACT OF RESTRICTIVE LAWS ON CIVIL
SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE AMERICAS

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Cover photo: A group of thirteen young girls and teenagers from the Amazon, known as “Warriors for the Amazon” (GxA), faces stigmatization and intimidation for defending the Ecuadorian Amazon against the gas flares that pollute their communities and contribute to the climate crisis.

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Executive summary

In recent years, several countries in the Americas have increasingly approved legislation aimed at restricting, controlling and, in some cases, dismantling civil society organizations (CSOs). Between 2024 and 2025, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Paraguay, Peru, El Salvador and Ecuador enacted or amended laws that, based on arguments of transparency, national security or administrative oversight, impose disproportionate controls on the work of CSOs and directly affect their ability to operate, access resources, support communities and defend human rights.

Amnesty International's analysis shows that these laws, known as "anti-NGO laws", share concerning patterns that put the rights to freedom of association, freedom of expression, privacy and the exercise of the right to defend human rights at serious risk. Implementation of such laws is taking place in a context of increasing concentration of power, authoritarian practices and hostility towards critical voices, which amplifies their impact and further restricts civic space in the region.

Regional trends identified

1. Stigmatizing narratives paving the way to legislation

In all the countries analysed, approval of these laws was accompanied by official rhetoric describing such organizations as “suspicious” actors, “internal enemies”, “unpatriotic” or “foreign interference”, among others. These narratives, propagated by the executive and legislative branches and sympathetic media outlets, created an environment of social distrust, fuelled smear campaigns and incentivized targeted attacks on social media. This hostile environment encouraged self-censorship, weakened community ties and had a chilling effect on critical individuals and organizations.

2. Lack of legitimate justification and participation

Laws were passed without public consultation or adequate technical and social debate. Though presented as instruments for transparency, regulation and protection of national security, they fail to guarantee such outcomes and instead impose disproportionate controls and restrictions on civil society organizations, hindering their operation. The speed with which legislation is approved, the lack of evidence of the alleged risks that would justify the enactment of such laws and the lack of an impact analysis suggest that the real purpose of these laws is to increase undue state control over organizations and limit their capacity for advocacy and reporting.

3. Vague and ambiguous provisions that fuel arbitrariness

The legal texts contain broad and unclear definitions of the organizations affected and the requirements and prohibitions imposed. Concepts such as “public order”, “political activity”, “social interest”, “denaturing objectives” or “hindering projects” allow the authorities discretion in the interpretation of the laws and selective enforcement against critical organizations. Ambiguity breaches the principle of legality and generates persistent legal insecurity.

4. Mandatory registration as a system for prior authorization

All laws impose new registration requirements, or modify existing registration, effectively turning them into prior authorization mechanisms, prohibited by international standards, which make the functioning of organizations conditional upon state approval. The absence of clear deadlines, arbitrary responses, unachievable requirements and administrative silence have resulted in organizations being excluded, leaving many unable to maintain their legal status or access banking services.

5. Draconian administrative requirements and burdens

Organizations are required to submit numerous financial and operational reports, annual plans, inventories and personal data relating to members, beneficiaries and donors, and provide prior notification on the use of funds. These obligations duplicate existing requirements, hinder day-to-day operations and divert organizations' work away from their core activities to benefit the communities they serve.

6. Direct and indirect control of financing

States have imposed restrictions that hinder access to international development funding and the procurement and use of resources in general, including through abusive taxation, stringent requirements for receiving funds, and prohibitions on allocating such funds to activities not declared in advance. In some countries, banks and international donors have conditioned their involvement on compliance with these laws, which increases pressure and leads to the withdrawal or scaling back of essential projects, especially those focusing on human rights, gender, the environment or Indigenous Peoples.

7. Risks to privacy and security

This legislation requires disclosure of detailed information on organization donors, beneficiaries and staff, with no real guarantees of data protection. These requirements may not only violate the right to privacy of the organization, its members and beneficiaries, but in repressive contexts may also place human rights defenders, LGBTI+ populations, victims of violence and Indigenous communities at risk and facilitate state surveillance and targeted persecution.

8. Sanctions that are disproportionate and contrary to international law

Arbitrary and punitive fines can reach extortionate amounts that exceed the operational capacity of most organizations. Criminal sanctions, seizure of assets, state intervention, freezing of bank accounts and expulsion of foreign nationals are also contemplated in some cases. These measures have a clear punitive effect and can be used to punish critical organizations or hinder their operation.

9. Dissolution, suspension and disqualification of organizations

Several countries provide for the cancellation of legal status for minor administrative breaches or for activities deemed “political”, “destabilizing” or “contrary to public order”. In Nicaragua, these provisions have resulted in the mass closure of thousands of organizations. In other countries, cases of suspension, intervention or freezing of accounts have been documented as a form of pressure.

10. Criminalization of members and defenders

The laws enable the application of broad criminal terminology, purportedly to combat terrorism, money laundering or cybercrime, but which in practice is used to investigate, harass or prosecute members of social organizations. The threat of criminal prosecution intensifies the climate of fear, discouraging the leadership and limiting the ability to speak out and denounce issues before national and international organizations .

Impacts on social fabric and civic space

The human rights defenders interviewed describe a profound deterioration in their ability to act, support communities, influence public policies and defend rights. Many face self-censorship, emotional exhaustion, migration or reduced activity. The combination of stigmatization, burdensome bureaucracy, excessive administrative burdens, loss of funding and risk of sanctions has resulted in a rapid erosion of the social fabric in the Americas.

This erosion affects more than just organizations: it affects community cohesion, the most vulnerable population groups and society's ability to demand accountability and resist authoritarian practices. As one of the interviewees from El Salvador put it, these measures "corrupt and degrade people" and undermine the values of solidarity and reciprocity that underpin societies that respect the rule of law.

Conclusions

The laws analysed do not meet international standards and constitute a direct attack on freedom of association and the right to defend human rights. Regardless of their formal justification, these instruments are intended to exert undue control over civil society, silence criticism, restrict citizens' oversight of the authorities' actions, erode public accountability and entrench authoritarian practices in the region.

Protecting the right to create civil society organizations and to fully exercise the right to freedom of association is, in essence, protecting the very fabric of human rights. States have an obligation to ensure a safe and enabling environment for their work. Without it, there can be no free and just societies.

Methodology

This report analyses the widespread increase in laws restrictive of civil society organizations in the Americas that have been enacted or amended over the last two years (2024 and 2025) in the following countries: Nicaragua, Venezuela, Paraguay, Peru, El Salvador and Ecuador. The report is not a comprehensive country by country study, but rather a regional analysis of some of the most alarming trends evident in such laws and the impact they have had on the ability of civil society organizations and human rights defenders to carry out their human rights work without fear of reprisals. The laws analysed are listed in the table below and the abbreviated name of each used subsequently throughout the report to aid readability.

Country	Law	Publication date	Date of regulations
Nicaragua	Law 1040 on the Regulation of Foreign Agents ¹ (Nicaragua Foreign Agents Law)	19 October 2020	29 January 2021 ²
	Law 1115, General Law for the Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations ³ (Nicaragua NPO Law)	6 April 2022	20 February 2023 ⁴
Venezuela	Law for the Control, Regularization, Operation and Financing of Non-Governmental and other Non-Profit Organizations ⁵ (Venezuela Law)	15 November 2024	No regulations
Paraguay	Law 7363 Establishing Control, Transparency and Accountability for Non-Profit Organizations ⁶ (Paraguay Law)	15 November 2024	23 October 2025 ⁷

1 Nicaragua, Law 1040 on the Regulation of Foreign Agents, *La Gaceta Official Gazette* of 19 October 2020, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/9e314815a08d4a6206257265005d21f9/3306286cd4e82c5f06258607005fdf6b>. This law was subsequently amended by Law 1212 of Amendments and Additions to Law 1115 (...) and Law 1040 (...), approved on 20 August 2024 and published in Official Gazette no. 155 of 22 August 2024, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/b92aaea87dac762406257265005d21f7/c42fb01f17be89cb06258b81005e256f>

2 Nicaragua, Regulations governing the Regulation, Supervision and Sanctioning of Foreign Agents, *La Gaceta Official Gazette* no. 20, 29 January 2021, [http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/\(\\$All\)/E62401422DAC1CC206258670006135E6?OpenDocument](http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/($All)/E62401422DAC1CC206258670006135E6?OpenDocument). These legal rules applicable to “foreign agents” were subsequently amended by Law 1212, approved on 20 August 2024 and published in *La Gaceta Official Gazette* no. 155 of 22 August 2024, amending Law 1040 and Law 1115, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/b92aaea87dac762406257265005d21f7/c42fb01f17be89cb06258b81005e256f>

3 Nicaragua, Law 1115, General Law for the Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations, Official Gazette of 18 January 2024, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/09cf45d6fc893868062572650059911e/bfed6e3afb3d8fbf06258ae10075cd64?OpenDocument>

4 Nicaragua, Regulations governing Law 1115, General Law for the Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations, *La Gaceta Official Gazette* no. 31, 20 February 2023, [http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/\(\\$All\)/0299A110835E32310625895D0062E21D?OpenDocument](http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/($All)/0299A110835E32310625895D0062E21D?OpenDocument)

5 Venezuela, Law for the Control, Regularization, Operation and Financing of Non-Governmental and other Non-Profit Organizations, Official Gazette no. 6.885, 15 November 2024, <https://avisavenezuela.org/wp-content/uploads/GACETA-6885.pdf>

6 Paraguay, Law 7363 Establishing Control, Transparency and Accountability for Non-Profit Organizations, 15 November 2024, <https://silpy.congreso.gov.py/web/ley/144993>

7 Paraguay, Decree 4806 regulating Law 7363/2024, which establishes Control, Transparency and Accountability for Non-Profit Organizations, 23 October 2025.

Peru	Law 32301 amending Law 27692 on the creation of the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation (APCI), with the purpose of strengthening the work of said institution and contributing to the transparency and supervision of resources received by the bodies in charge of managing non-reimbursable international technical cooperation, and other provisions ⁸ (Peru Law)	15 April 2025	15 September 2025 ⁹
El Salvador	Decree 308 of 2025 - Foreign Agents Law ¹⁰ (El Salvador Law)	23 May 2025	2 June 2025 ¹¹
Ecuador	Organic Law on Social Transparency ¹² (Ecuador Law)	28 August 2025	28 October 2025 ¹³

For this report, Amnesty International analysed both the laws and their regulations, as well as the insights and documents on the processes for their approval and implementation written by civil society organizations and international bodies. In addition, Amnesty International held meetings with a number of these civil society organizations and international bodies.

To gain a deeper understanding of the impacts of the adoption and implementation of this type of legislation, Amnesty International interviewed representatives of 15 civil society organizations from the countries analysed. All interviews were conducted between 17 December 2025 and 18 February 2026. In general, the organizations interviewed work to address a wide range of human rights issues: defence of the rule of law; documentation of violations and legal support to victims; environmental and territorial justice, particularly for Indigenous and peasant communities; women's and LGBTIQ+ people's rights; transparency and anti-corruption; as well as monitoring of state

8 Peru, Law 32301 amending Law 27692, 15 April 2025

9 Peru, Regulations governing Infringements and Sanctions (RIS) of the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation (APCI), and Regulations governing Law 27692 on the Creation of the APCI, Supreme Decree 033-2025-RE, https://cdn.www.gob.pe/uploads/document/file/8657124/7166167-decreto_supremo_n-033-2025-re-ris.pdf?v=1757953102; <https://www.gob.pe/institucion/apci/informes-publicaciones/7165709-reglamento-de-la-ley-n-27692-ley-de-creacion-de-la-apci>

10 El Salvador, Decree 308 of 2025 – Foreign Agents Law, <https://www.refworld.org/es/leg/legis/pleg/2025/es/150145>

11 El Salvador, General Regulations governing the Foreign Agents Law, Official Gazette, Volume no. 447, 2 June 2025, <https://goldservice.com.sv/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Decreto-N12-Reglamento-General-de-la-Ley-de-Agentes-Extranjeros-El-Salvador.pdf>

12 Ecuador, Organic Law on Social Transparency, Third Supplement no. 112 – Official Register, 28 August 2025, https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ec/es/system/files/ro_16.pdf

13 Ecuador, General Regulations governing the Organic Law on Social Transparency, Eighth Supplement no. 153 – Official Register, 28 October 2025, https://www.gob.ec/sites/default/files/regulations/2026-01/GOBIERNO-REGLAMENTO_GENERAL_A_LA_LEY_ORGANICA_DE_TRANSPARENCIA_SOCIAL.pdf

action, judicial independence and political violence. They also carry out national and international advocacy, strategic litigation, community work and actions to promote memory, truth and reparation, reflecting the breadth and diversity of the civic space affected by the new regulations.

This report contains country-specific sections that examine different aspects of the impact of this legislation, known as “anti-NGO laws”. The issues selected in each context reflect some of the elements that emerged more frequently or prominently in the testimonies collected, as well as in the documentation available at the time the report was finalized.¹⁴ However, these sections are not intended to provide a fully comprehensive picture of all the issues faced by organizations in each country, nor do they imply that the patterns or impacts described are unique to those contexts. On the contrary, several of the effects observed, including administrative restrictions, security risks, stigmatization and loss of operational capacity, occur to a greater or lesser extent throughout the region. Thus, the issues included in the report were selected based on analytical and narrative criteria and should not be interpreted as ranking cases in order of severity or as a rigid differentiation between the countries analysed.

The report also includes a brief description of the restrictive legal frameworks applicable to civil society organizations in Guatemala and Cuba. Although this refers to legislation enacted prior to the laws examined in greater detail in the country sections, this legislation also represented significant reversals in the right to freedom of association and anticipated trends now evident across the region. These two countries are therefore discussed briefly in order to provide a comparative perspective on regional trends and show that restrictions on civic space are not an isolated issue, but rather part of a broader process of erosion of rights.

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¹⁴ This report was finalized on 20 February 2026.



Relatives of the victims of the 2022–2023 anti-government protests, dressed in red and carrying portraits of their loved ones, take part in a memorial ceremony at Cerro San Cristóbal in Lima on July 27, 2025, on the eve of Peru's Independence Day Peru. On January 9, 2023, protesters from the Puno region joined the nation-protests that erupted in December 2022, and which resulted in the deaths of eighteen people during clashes with police in the mountain town of Juliaca.

Preliminary conclusions and recommendations

Regulations known as “anti-NGO laws” have been used in the Americas to restrict the rights to freedom of association, freedom of expression and the defence of human rights, based on arguments of transparency and national security. From its comparative analysis of laws enacted in Nicaragua, Venezuela, Paraguay, Peru, El Salvador and Ecuador, Amnesty International identified consistent patterns that reveal a **regional strategy aimed at restricting, controlling or neutralizing organized civil society.**

These patterns include: i) stigmatization of civil society organizations in law-making processes; ii) approval of laws without legitimate justification and without open debate or citizen participation; iii) vague and ambiguous provisions allowing discretionality in their application; iv) mandatory registration used as a means for prior approval; v) draconian requirements and burdens; vi) control through restrictions on and/or obstruction of external financing; vii) serious risks to the privacy and security of donors, beneficiaries and staff; viii) sanctions provisions that are contrary to international standards, ix) granting states the power to suspend, dissolve or disqualify organizations arbitrarily; and x) increasing undue criminalization of organization members and human rights defenders.

In light of the above, Amnesty International can safely argue that the laws analysed **do not comply with international obligations** on the rights to freedom of association, freedom of expression, privacy and the defence of human rights. Far from strengthening transparency and accountability, these regulations directly **contribute to the closure of civic space** and the rise of authoritarian practices in the region.

The persons interviewed for this report highlight that implementation of these laws **affects not only the operational capacity of organizations, but also the emotional well-being of their members, their physical safety and the continuity of their projects.** Moreover, they claim that the legislation is bringing about a **profound transformation of the social fabric:** fragmentation of communities, a breakdown of trust, isolation, withdrawal from public debate and loss of local leadership, essential for defending rights.

In several countries, prolonged harassment has led to the **exile or “insile”** (insilio in Spanish, referring to living within your country, but alienated from the regime in a form of enforced silence) of human rights defenders. This creates irreparable **leadership vacuums** and leaves entire communities unsupported, without services or tools to confront arbitrary state actions or abuses by private actors. These processes have a cumulative impact that greatly jeopardizes people’s ability to **understand, claim and exercise their rights** in the face of human rights violations.

Amnesty International would like to remind the authorities of the countries analysed that protecting the right to establish and maintain civil society organizations is protecting the very essence of human rights. They therefore have the obligation to ensure a safe and enabling environment in which organizations can work without fear of reprisals, and to take immediate steps to reverse the restrictions that put civic space at risk. To this end, Amnesty International makes the following recommendations:

a) To states in the Americas:

1. Cease stigmatizing rhetoric and public statements against civil society organizations, their members and donors.
2. Repeal and annul the laws analysed, as they are contrary to international and regional standards.
3. When enacting laws to regulate civil society organizations, they must comply with international human rights standards. In other words, such laws must seek to protect one or more of the legitimate interests established in international norms and standards be justified on reasonable grounds not based on assumptions; they must guarantee the right to freedom of association and by not imposing on organizations restrictions or requirements that do not comply with the principles of necessity and proportionality; they must not include vague and ambiguous provisions and must establish a system of sanctions that is compatible with international law.
4. Promote and facilitate access by civil society organizations to necessary resources, including both domestic and international funding, and refrain from imposing undue restrictions on such funding.

5. Refrain from and, where appropriate, cease the criminalization of civil society organizations and human rights defenders due to their work.

b) To the international Financial Action Task Force:

1. Continue to hold meetings with civil society organizations and international bodies to discuss the concerns of civil society organizations regarding implementation of its Recommendation 8. Similarly, continue talks with states in the region for the correct implementation of Recommendation 8, in respect of the right to freedom of association.
2. Strongly oppose the use of Recommendation 8 to enact laws restricting the right to freedom of association, and voice the concerns surrounding such legislation and why it does not comply with said Recommendation 8.

c) To donor and funding organizations, countries and individuals:

1. Continue to provide funding for projects implemented by human rights defenders and civil society organizations, understanding the realities and arbitrary restrictions that have been imposed on them since the enactment of “anti-NGO laws”.
2. Deploy all diplomatic tools at their disposal to promote respect for freedom of association and the reversal of measures that unduly restrict such freedom.

d) To universal and regional human rights mechanisms:

1. Continue to monitor and document the harmful effects of these laws and call on the international community to ensure that their legal frameworks align with their international obligations.



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TEARING UP THE SOCIAL FABRIC

IMPACT OF RESTRICTIVE LAWS ON CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE AMERICAS

In the Americas, state authorities have promoted and enacted a growing number of laws that restrict or control civil society organizations, reinforcing authoritarian practices that threaten freedom of association and curtail civic space.

This report documents trends in the enactment and implementation of “anti-NGO laws” in Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela. The effects of these laws include self-censorship, weakened citizen participation and oversight, and erosion of the social fabric as trust and community networks break down, while victims of human rights violations in particular are left unprotected.

The report provides recommendations for reversing this trend: repealing or amending provisions that are contrary to international human rights standards; guaranteeing access to resources for organizations; and ending the stigmatization and criminalization of civil society, among other measures aimed at protecting freedom of association and the social fabric that sustains the defence of human rights.

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