



# RE-IMAGINING THE STATE OF CIVIC SPACE IN TANZANIA

STRATEGIC POSITIONING OF HRDS  
AND CSOs IN THE POST 2025  
ELECTION CONTEXT

DECEMBER 2025 – FEBRUARY 2026



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(HRDS) AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS (CSOS) IN THE  
POST 2025 ELECTION CONTEXT**

DECEMBER 2025 – FEBRUARY 2026

DAR ES SALAAM, TANZANIA

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## **DISCLAIMER**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) including those working as human rights defenders (HRDs) in Tanzania, have continued to operate in an environment shaped by legal continuity and heightened sensitivity in practice since the general election of 29 October 2025. The political developments, enforcement practices, public communication, and digital activity now intersect more closely than in earlier periods, influencing how civic action is understood and responded to by authorities, the public, and other stakeholders.

It is established that, the civic space remains formally open, and engagement with state institutions continues through meetings, consultations, and official processes. However, the practical use of civic space could be affected by the timing of activities, the subject matter addressed, the level of public visibility, and how actions are interpreted, particularly in relation to elections, public order, governance, and accountability. The assessment informing this report was conducted between December 2025 and January 2026 as part of THRDC's routine work to review the operating context of CSOs and HRDs in Tanzania, drawing on document review and stakeholder consultations.

It is noted that, the period following the 2025 elections reflects continuity in the legal framework alongside changes in how existing laws could be applied during sensitive moments. The laws governing cyber activities, media, statistics, political parties, public order, and non-governmental organisations remain in force without substantive amendment. An enforcement actions observed during and after the post-election period indicate that these laws could be relied upon concurrently, rather than selectively, when public order concerns arise. The measures such as curfews, arrests linked to protest activity, and the nationwide internet shutdown commencing on 29 October 2025 demonstrate how existing legal powers would be capable of affecting coordination, communication, and civic work, including activities that are otherwise lawful.

The developments between 2015 and 2025 provide important context for understanding these dynamics. During that period, legislative and regulatory changes expanded state authority over public participation, information, and organisation. Although relations between state institutions and civil society appeared to ease between 2021 and early 2025, this shift occurred without changes to the underlying legal framework. The experience from the 2025 election period reinforced concerns raised during consultations that periods of administrative openness would not necessarily reduce risk, because enforcement discretion and interpretation continue to shape the practical boundaries of civic activity.

An engagement between CSOs and government institutions has continued through formal and informal channels. The engagement on technical, service-related, or administrative matters generally follows established patterns of cooperation. The engagement on accountability-related issues, including elections, public order, and governance, could attract closer

attention depending on context and timing. The consultations indicate that some organisations experienced increased scrutiny following such engagement, leading others to reassess how they approach participation, representation, messaging, and public visibility. As a result, engagement decisions are increasingly treated as institutional judgments rather than routine administrative actions. At the same time, differences in organisational positioning and coordination within the sector have contributed to fragmented engagement in some instances, affecting both clarity of representation and the overall weight of collective action.

The digital space has become a central arena for civic communication, documentation, mobilisation, and public discourse. Online platforms are widely used by civil society actors to share information and engage with national and international audiences. At the same time, digital activity could be interpreted as connected to offline conduct, with posts, shared content, and online associations contributing to cumulative exposure over time. The post-election internet shutdown demonstrated that access to digital communication would be restricted during sensitive periods, affecting lawful coordination, emergency response, documentation, and access to information. Uncertainty around how online content is assessed has led to uneven organisational responses, with some organisations reducing digital visibility and others continuing normal engagement without internal adjustment. This experience also highlighted the extent to which operational continuity, including financial processes and coordination with partners, may be affected when digital systems are disrupted.

The youth-led digital mobilisation has emerged as a visible form of civic expression, operating largely outside formal organisational structures. This mobilisation relies on informal networks, rapid dissemination of content, and limited internal coordination. Consultations and documented experiences indicate that digitally active youth could face questioning, arrest, or surveillance linked to online activity, sometimes without clear distinction between organisers and individuals expressing opinions. The CSOs could be perceived as aligned with such mobilisation due to shared narratives or past advocacy positions, even where no formal relationship exists, creating additional complexity in decisions on engagement and public positioning. In parallel, actors such as journalists working within digital and media spaces increasingly operate within similar conditions of exposure, particularly where their work relates to sensitive civic issues.

Across these developments, internal readiness has become an important factor shaping how organisations manage pressure. The differences in preparedness, protection capacity, internal communication, digital and legal awareness, and funding stability contribute to uneven exposure across the sector. The organisations with clearer internal arrangements appear better placed to respond consistently to arrests, legal action, digital incidents, and public scrutiny. The organisations relying on informal practices could face greater uncertainty and operational strain during sensitive periods. Internal readiness also has collective implications,

because actions taken by one organisation could affect others through association, perception, or shared narratives. At the same time, the absence of structured and coordinated protection systems across the sector, including access to legal, psychosocial, and referral support, continues to limit the ability to respond consistently to emerging risks.

Taken together, these observations indicate that risk would be shaped by the interaction of law, enforcement practice, political timing, digital behaviour, and organisational preparedness rather than by isolated actions alone. Then civic space remains present, but its use increasingly requires careful judgment, coordination, and restraint. An effective engagement, protection, and organisational sustainability under current conditions would depend on informed decision-making, internal clarity, and collective awareness. Looking ahead, these conditions are likely to persist, with enforcement practice, digital exposure, organisational preparedness, and resource stability continuing to shape how civic space is navigated in practice.

### **General considerations emerging from the analysis:**

- a) CSOs would benefit from treating internal readiness as a core organisational responsibility, with clear arrangements for decision-making, communication, and response established before periods of heightened sensitivity.
- b) Engagement with state institutions would require deliberate internal assessment of timing, representation, messaging, and public visibility, particularly on issues related to accountability and public order.
- c) Digital activity should be addressed as an organisational risk consideration, with internal guidance on online conduct, documentation, and communication practices.
- d) Protection efforts would need to extend beyond individual awareness to include organisational response capacity and access to legal and psychosocial support.
- e) Stronger coordination and shared learning among CSOs could reduce uneven exposure and help manage collective risk.
- f) Attention to funding stability would support organisational resilience and reduce pressure-driven decisions that increase exposure.

## CHAPTER ONE

# BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

## 1.1 Introduction and Rationale

The work of civil society organisations (CSOs), which include those operating as human rights defenders (HRDs), in Tanzania takes place within an environment that has changed in important ways since the general election of 29 October 2025. The political developments, enforcement practices, public discourse, and digital behaviour now interact more closely than before, shaping how civic action is understood and responded to. These conditions affect not only what CSOs and HRDs do, but also how their actions are interpreted by authorities, the public, and other stakeholders.

In the period following October 2025, civic space has remained formally open, but its practical use has become more sensitive. Ordinary activities such as meetings, public statements, documentation of violations, online communication, and engagement with institutions now attract different levels of attention depending on timing, subject matter, and visibility. As a result, risk is no longer confined to exceptional moments but can arise from routine work when it intersects with politically charged issues.

This context analysis responds to the need for a clear and shared understanding of these conditions. It brings together political, legal, institutional, and social factors that influence the operating environment of CSOs, with particular attention to human rights work. The assessment informing this analysis was conducted between December 2025 and January 2026 as part of THRDC's routine work to review the operating context of CSOs and HRDs in Tanzania, drawing on document review and stakeholder consultations. The focus is on patterns that have developed over time rather than on isolated incidents, and on how these patterns shape choices, exposure, and responsibility going forward.

## 1.2 Purpose and Objectives of the Analysis

The central purpose of this context analysis is to support informed judgment by CSOs (including HRDs) operating in a sensitive and changing environment. It seeks to clarify how recent developments affect engagement with state institutions, public communication, advocacy approaches and protection needs.

### **In particular, the analysis aims to:**

- a) Examine the political and civic situations affecting human rights work after October 2025.
- b) Identify how legal and administrative practices are applied in ways that influence civic action in practice.
- c) Assess how digital space has altered both civic pressure and risk, particularly for young people.
- d) Draw attention to emerging limits of engagement and advocacy, without assuming closure of space.
- e) Provide a grounded basis for strategic choices that balance principle, protection and sustainability.

The analysis is intended to inform decision-making rather than to prescribe fixed positions. It recognises that judgment, timing and context matter, and that responsible civic action requires constant adjustment rather than rigid approaches.

### **1.3 Scope and Delimitations**

This analysis focuses on the operating environment for CSOs and HRDs in Tanzania from late 2025 onward. It considers political developments, state–civil society relations, legal and regulatory practice, public discourse and digital behaviour that directly affect civic work.

The analysis does not attempt to document every incident or assess individual organisations. Its concern is with broader conditions and trends that shape collective experience and risk. While the events surrounding the October 2025 elections are central to the analysis, the emphasis remains forward-looking. The aim is to understand how current realities are likely to influence future engagement, protection and coordination.

Care has been taken to avoid details that could expose individuals or organisations to additional risk. The analysis is framed to inform understanding without amplifying vulnerability or tension.

### **1.4 Analytical Framework**

The analysis is guided by established human rights standards and by close attention to how these standards are applied in practice. It draws on international and regional human rights instruments to assess expectations relating to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as the protection of those who work to promote these rights.

At the national level, the analysis considers constitutional guarantees and relevant laws governing civic action, public order, media, digital communication and CSOs. Equal attention is given to how these laws are enforced and interpreted, especially during periods of political sensitivity.

Beyond legal norms, the analysis applies a practical lens that links context, risk and protection. This approach recognises that formal legality alone does not determine safety or space. Power relations, enforcement discretion, public perception and digital traceability all shape how civic action unfolds. Understanding these factors is essential for making responsible choices in a constrained environment.

### **1.5 Methodological Approach**

The analysis is based on qualitative review of laws, public statements, official communications, media reporting and civil society documentation relevant to the period after October 2025. It also draws on targeted discussions with individuals experienced in human rights work, selected for their practical insight rather than for representation.

Information from different sources was cross-checked to identify consistent patterns and areas of difference. Where accounts varied, attention was given to how events were interpreted and responded to rather than to assigning definitive conclusions. This reflects the fluid and contested nature of the current environment.

### **1.6 Limitations of the Analysis**

The analysis is shaped by the conditions under which it was conducted. Some information could not be explored in full due to sensitivity, safety concerns or limited access. In addition, the operating environment continues to evolve, and enforcement practices or political signals may change after the period covered here.

For these reasons, the analysis should be read as a guide to understanding prevailing conditions rather than as a fixed or exhaustive account. Its value lies in supporting careful judgment and ongoing awareness as circumstances continue to develop.

## CHAPTER TWO

# EXTERNAL OPERATING ENVIRONMENT, CIVIC SPACE AND LEGAL PRACTICE

### 2.1 Political and Civic Conditions Affecting CSOs and HRDs

From October 2025 onward, the operating environment for CSOs (including HRDs) has been marked by heightened political sensitivity and increased attention to civic activity by state institutions. The civic action remains lawful and institutional engagement continues to exist. At the same time, the broader context suggests that activities linked to elections, public order, governance, and accountability may attract closer scrutiny, which can influence how CSOs plan, communicate, and engage.

The period following 29 October 2025 indicates that civic space is shaped less by formal legal change and more by how existing powers are applied during politically sensitive moments. This creates conditions where lawful activities may carry differing levels of exposure depending on timing and subject matter.

#### Implications for organisational planning

- a) CSOs may need to assess political sensitivity alongside legal compliance when designing activities, particularly during periods linked to elections or public order.
- b) Decisions on public engagement may benefit from considering timing and visibility, not only the substance of the activity.
- c) Internal consultation before undertaking sensitive work can help reduce inconsistent approaches within organisations or coalitions.

### 2.2 Brief Context from 2015 to 2025

Between 2015 and 2025, the civic and political environment developed within a legal and regulatory framework that expanded state authority over public participation, information, and

organisation. Key laws affecting CSOs and HRDs during this period include the Cybercrimes Act of 2015, the Media Services Act of 2016, amendments to the Statistics Act, Cap. 351 R.E. 2019 introduced through the Written Laws (Miscellaneous Amendments) Act of 2018, and amendments to the Political Parties Act, Cap. 258 R.E. 2019 introduced through the Written Laws (Miscellaneous Amendments) Act of 2019.

The Written Laws (Miscellaneous Amendments) Act of 2019 also amended several sectoral laws governing non-governmental organisations, strengthening the authority of the Registrar of NGOs under the Non-Governmental Organisations Act, Cap. 56 R.E. 2019. These changes expanded powers related to registration, suspension, deregistration, reporting, and compliance, and were reinforced by the Non-Governmental Organisations Regulations of 2018, which introduced controls over programme approval, funding, reporting, and internal governance.

Between 2021 and early 2025, relations between state institutions and civil society appeared to become less confrontational in some areas, with engagement platforms reopening and public interaction increasing. These developments occurred without repeal or substantive amendment of the legal framework, meaning that the same laws and regulatory powers remained available for application when political conditions shifted in late 2025.

### **Operational lessons from earlier periods**

- a) Periods of improved engagement may be treated as administrative space rather than legal change.
- b) Organisations may benefit from maintaining awareness of regulatory powers even when enforcement appears relaxed.
- c) Regular internal review of obligations under the cited laws can help organisations avoid surprises when conditions shift.

## **2.3 Enforcement Practices During and After October 2025**

From October 2025 onward, enforcement practices affecting civic space appear to have intensified in relation to activities linked to elections and public order. Measures applied during this period included curfews in specific locations, arrests linked to protest activity, and a nationwide internet shutdown commencing on 29 October 2025. These measures were implemented using existing legal and administrative powers already in force, as outlined in Section 2.2.

The interruption of internet services may have limited communication, coordination, and information sharing among CSOs and HRDs. Activities such as election observation, voter education, documentation of incidents, and engagement with partners could therefore be delayed or constrained. Restrictions on movement and public gatherings may also have reduced the ability of CSOs to operate in certain locations during this period.

These developments did not alter the formal legal framework governing civic activity. Rather, they illustrate how existing powers can be applied concurrently, creating operating conditions that require heightened caution during politically sensitive periods.

### **Preparedness considerations**

- a) CSOs may consider developing backup communication arrangements to reduce disruption during digital interruptions.
- b) Planning field activities with flexibility may help organisations adjust to sudden movement or gathering restrictions.
- c) Programme timelines may need built-in margins to accommodate delays caused by administrative or security measures.

## **2.4 Discretion, Interpretation, and Civic Space**

From October 2025, discretion and interpretation appear to play a more pronounced role in shaping civic space. Similar activities may be viewed differently depending on subject matter, timing, and perceived political relevance. Work related to service delivery and technical cooperation may continue with fewer complications, while engagement on elections, accountability, public order, and governance could attract additional attention.

The compliance with registration, reporting, and approval requirements remains necessary, but may not by itself ensure predictability during sensitive periods. This creates a situation where legal permissibility and practical exposure do not always align, particularly when multiple regulatory and enforcement considerations intersect.

### **Implications for internal decision-making**

- a) Legal compliance may need to be complemented by contextual assessment before public engagement.
- b) Past experience should not be assumed to guarantee similar treatment in different political moments.
- c) Clear internal agreement on messaging and positioning can reduce unintended exposure.

## **2.5 Cumulative Nature of Risk for CSOs**

The risk for CSOs and HRDs during this period does not arise solely from individual actions. Exposure may develop cumulatively through the interaction of legal obligations, enforcement discretion, political timing, public visibility, and communication practices. Activities that are lawful in isolation could carry greater risk when combined with heightened sensitivity, digital disruption, or public order measures.

In response to these conditions, CSOs may adjust how they operate, including how they plan activities, manage visibility, communicate publicly, and engage institutions. Such adjustments reflect an effort to navigate prevailing conditions rather than an abandonment of civic work.

### **Risk management considerations**

- a) Reviewing activities collectively may provide a more accurate picture of exposure than assessing them one by one.
- b) Tracking how different actions interact over time can help organisations identify emerging risks.
- c) Sharing experiences within networks may help organisations learn from each other and avoid repeated challenges.

## **2.6 Implications for the Operating Environment**

The operating environment from October 2025 onward can be described as one of continuity in law combined with increased sensitivity in practice. The civic space remains present but may be less predictable, particularly for work connected to elections, accountability, and governance. Understanding these conditions provides essential context for examining engagement with state institutions and the limits that shape such engagement.

### **Considerations for forward planning**

- a) Engagement with state institutions may require deliberate judgment rather than routine participation.
- b) Aligning mandates, timing, and engagement methods can reduce unnecessary exposure.
- c) Strengthening internal processes can support consistent and well-considered decisions under changing conditions.

## **2.7 Economic Dimensions of Civic Space and Organisational Sustainability**

The conditions under which CSOs and HRDs operate are not shaped by legal and political factors alone. There is also a practical, economic side to how organisations function, which becomes more visible during periods of disruption. The events around and after October 2025 showed that restrictions on movement, communication, and public engagement do not only affect civic activity in principle; they also interfere with how organisations run their work on a day-to-day basis. Delays in programme implementation, difficulty in accessing or utilising funds, and rising operational costs became part of that reality.

The internet shutdown offers a clear example. It did not only limit communication; it also disrupted financial transactions, reporting timelines, and coordination with partners. For many organisations, this translated into immediate operational pressure, even where their activities remained lawful. In that sense, civic space is also experienced through the ability of organisations to function practically, not just through what is permitted in law.

Consultations further showed that many CSOs continue to rely heavily on external funding, with limited room to adjust when funding conditions change. At the same time, some donors have reduced or shifted their support, making planning less predictable. Organisations are therefore expected to operate carefully in a more sensitive environment while working with fewer and less certain resources.

Under these conditions, financial stability becomes closely tied to how well organisations can withstand pressure. Where resources are limited, it becomes harder to invest in protection systems, retain experienced staff, or respond effectively when challenges arise. Questions of sustainability, diversification, and cost management therefore sit alongside legal and political considerations as part of how civic space is experienced in practice.

### **Implications for forward planning**

- a) CSOs may need to factor in operational disruption when planning activities, including the possibility of delays in communication, fund disbursement, and coordination, particularly during sensitive periods.
- b) Financial planning may benefit from greater flexibility, with provisions that allow organisations to adjust timelines, reallocate resources where necessary, and absorb unexpected costs without interrupting core functions.
- c) Diversification of funding sources may reduce dependence on a single stream of support and provide a more stable basis for organisational continuity where external funding conditions change.
- d) Internal budgeting processes may need to consider not only programme costs but also investments in organisational resilience, including staff retention, protection measures, and basic operational safeguards.
- e) Strengthening relationships with partners, including local and non-traditional actors, may provide additional avenues for support and coordination when formal systems are disrupted.

## CHAPTER THREE

# ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENT AND FORMAL INSTITUTIONS

### 3.1 Engagement within the Current Operating Environment

The CSOs continue to engage government institutions through meetings, consultations, written submissions, and participation in officially convened forums. These channels remain available in law and in practice, and engagement continues to take place at national and sub-national levels across different sectors.

According to this analysis, and as reflected in consultations with CSOs and other stakeholders, engagement now occurs within an operating environment shaped by the legal and enforcement conditions outlined in Chapter Two. The continued application of public order, cyber, media, and political laws, together with discretionary enforcement practices, has influenced how civic activity is organised and interpreted. In this setting, engagement with state institutions is no longer viewed only as a procedural or administrative activity, but as an action that may carry wider implications depending on context.

An experience shared during consultations indicates that some engagement has been followed by questioning, scrutiny, or indirect pressure, even where the engagement itself was lawful and measured. This experience has informed how CSOs now approach engagement decisions, particularly in relation to timing, subject matter, and public visibility, without leading to disengagement from public institutions.

#### **Recommendations arising from this context**

- a) Engagement with government institutions should proceed only after internal agreement on purpose, scope, and expected outcomes.
- b) Engagement that touches on governance, public order, or elections should be considered at senior organisational level before participation.
- c) Representation in engagement should be clearly defined in advance to avoid inconsistent messaging or unintended commitments.

### **3.2 Engagement Differs According to the Issue Being Raised**

This analysis shows that engagement with government institutions does not carry the same implications across all issues. Engagement on technical matters, including service delivery, programme coordination, training, and administrative processes, continues to focus on implementation and operational cooperation, and is generally handled through established channels.

The engagement related to accountability involves issues such as elections, public order, the conduct of security agencies, and governance practices. As discussed in Chapter Two, these areas intersect with parts of the legal and regulatory environment where discretion and sensitivity are more pronounced. Consultations with CSOs indicate that engagement on such issues has, in some cases, been followed by closer attention to organisational activities, even where engagement was conducted within the law.

The difference arises from the nature of the issue rather than from the conduct of the CSO. Similar engagement methods, including meetings or public communication, may therefore have different implications depending on the subject matter being addressed.

#### **Recommendations on handling different types of engagement**

- a) Issues should be clearly identified as technical or accountability-related before engagement is initiated.
- b) Engagement on accountability matters should proceed only where internal agreement exists on messaging and representation.
- c) Public communication linked to accountability engagement should remain controlled to avoid mixed or contradictory positions.

### **3.3 Engagement, Interpretation, and Organisational Exposure**

According to this analysis, engagement is increasingly shaped by how it is interpreted rather than only by its stated objective. Meetings, public statements, and participation in official processes may be viewed in relation to political timing, prevailing civic conditions, and perceived intent, particularly when they concern sensitive subject areas.

The consultations with CSOs indicate that engagement has, in some instances, been followed by increased attention to organisational operations. This has included scrutiny related to compliance processes, leadership roles, or public communication. While such outcomes are not uniform, their occurrence in some cases has influenced how CSOs now assess engagement decisions. The engagement therefore forms part of a broader set of factors that affect organisational exposure and operating space, alongside legal compliance, programme focus, and public messaging.

## **Recommendations on managing exposure**

- a) Engagement decisions should consider possible interpretations beyond the immediate content of the interaction.
- b) Internal records of engagement decisions and follow-up actions should be maintained for consistency and accountability.
- c) Lessons from previous engagement should inform future decisions to reduce repeated exposure.

### **3.4 Collective Implications of Engagement Decisions**

As reflected in this analysis and consultations, engagement decisions taken by one CSO can have implications beyond that organisation. In coalition and network settings, engagement by a single CSO may be interpreted externally as reflecting a broader civil society position, even where no collective mandate exists.

The differences in engagement approaches among CSOs have led to uneven exposure. Some organisations have attracted increased attention following engagement, while others have remained less affected. This has complicated coordination and collective positioning, particularly where engagement is highly visible or relates to sensitive issues.

The engagement therefore carries collective implications that require careful handling, even where decisions are taken independently.

## **Recommendations for managing collective effects**

- a) Information-sharing among CSOs on sensitive engagement can reduce unintended collective exposure.
- b) Clear distinction should be maintained between individual organisational actions and collective positions.
- c) Basic coordination arrangements should be used to manage public representation on sensitive issues.

### **3.5 Engagement as an Institutional Decision**

Taken together, the operating environment described in Chapter Two and the engagement patterns examined in this chapter show that engagement with government institutions can no longer be treated as a routine administrative activity. According to this analysis, engagement increasingly requires deliberate institutional decision-making.

This involves assessing organisational mandate, the issue involved, the timing of engagement, the form of representation, and possible implications for organisational credibility and operating space. The consultations with CSOs indicate that restraint has, in some situations, been chosen where engagement was unlikely to achieve meaningful outcomes or where risks were considered disproportionate.

This reflects an adjustment in practice rather than withdrawal from civic space, with engagement remaining part of civic work but exercised with greater care.

### **Recommendations for institutional handling of engagement**

- a) Decisions on engagement related to elections, public order, or accountability should be taken at senior organisational level.
- b) Engagement with high public visibility should be cleared internally before any external communication is issued.
- c) Engagement practices should be reviewed periodically to reflect experience and changes in the operating environment.

### **3.6 Fragmentation and Collective Positioning within Civil Society**

An engagement with government institutions is not shaped by external conditions alone. It is also influenced by how the civil society sector positions itself internally. Discussions with stakeholders showed that organisations do not always approach issues in the same way. Differences in priorities, strategies, and reading of the current environment have led to varied positions across the sector.

In some instances, this has resulted in organisations engaging separately without a shared understanding of what is being pursued or how it is being communicated. Within coalitions, where coordination would be expected, lack of prior agreement has sometimes led to mixed messaging or uncertainty about who speaks on behalf of whom, especially on issues related to governance and accountability.

It was also observed that existing coordination platforms have not consistently provided clear direction during more sensitive periods. This has affected how civil society positions are presented and understood. Where positions appear divided or unclear, the space for meaningful influence tends to narrow, regardless of the strength of the issues being raised.

Fragmentation also affects exposure. When one organisation takes a position or engages on a sensitive issue, it may be seen as reflecting a broader civil society stance, even where no such agreement exists. In the absence of coordination, this can place individual organisations in a more exposed position while weakening the overall weight of collective engagement.

These dynamics suggest that how the sector organises itself internally has a direct bearing on both effectiveness and risk.

### **Considerations emerging from sector dynamics**

- a) Differences in organisational approaches may require more deliberate internal discussion within coalitions before engagement takes place, particularly on issues that carry wider public or political sensitivity.
- b) Clear understanding of whether engagement is undertaken at individual or collective level may help reduce confusion in representation and avoid unintended attribution of positions.
- c) Coordination platforms may need to focus less on formal convening and more on ensuring clarity of purpose, shared messaging, and follow-through during critical moments.
- d) Where unified positions are not possible, acknowledging differences openly may provide more clarity than informal or assumed alignment.
- e) Strengthening communication among organisations, even on a basic level, may help reduce unnecessary exposure and support more consistent handling of sensitive issues.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# DIGITAL SPACE, YOUTH ACTIVISM AND NARRATIVE DYNAMICS

### 4.1 Digital Platforms as Civic Space and Points of Control

The digital platforms have become central to communication, coordination, and information sharing for CSOs and HRDs. The public education, documentation of incidents, mobilisation, and engagement with national and international audiences increasingly rely on online channels. At the same time, digital platforms now function as points where civic activity intersects directly with regulation, surveillance, and enforcement.

As reflected in the operating conditions discussed earlier, online conduct is not treated as separate from offline activity. The posts, shared content, comments, and group affiliations can be interpreted in relation to public order, political sensitivity, or perceived mobilisation. The digital records persist over time and can be retrieved or combined with other information, which affects how exposure accumulates for individuals and organisations.

The consultations with CSOs indicate that uncertainty around how digital content is assessed has influenced organisational behaviour. Some organisations reduced their public digital presence, while others continued regular communication without adjusting internal practices. This uneven approach has contributed to differing levels of exposure across the sector, particularly where individual actions are associated with organisational platforms or networks.

The internet disruption experienced after the 2025 elections demonstrated that digital access itself can be restricted during sensitive periods. Beyond limiting unlawful activity, the disruption affected lawful communication, emergency coordination, documentation, and access to information. The experience reinforced the understanding that reliance on digital space carries operational and protection risks that require planning.

#### Implications for organisational practice

- a) CSO leadership should treat digital communication as a regulated public activity and require internal agreement on how organisational accounts and representatives communicate during politically sensitive periods, because individual online actions are easily associated with the organisation.

- b) CSOs should assume that publicly accessible digital content may be stored and reused by third parties over time, and therefore assess digital messaging with the same caution applied to public meetings or demonstrations.
- c) Each CSO should clearly assign responsibility for public digital communication to specific staff members in order to prevent unauthorised or inconsistent messaging.
- d) CSOs that document sensitive incidents digitally should put in place controlled storage and access arrangements to reduce the risk of misattribution, leakage, or unintended circulation.

## 4.2 Online Expression, Surveillance Practices and Legal Exposure

The existing legal frameworks governing cyber activities, public order, and expression continue to shape how online conduct is addressed. As noted earlier, these laws were actively relied upon during late 2025 without the introduction of new emergency legislation. This demonstrated that ordinary legal instruments can be applied to regulate digital expression during periods of heightened sensitivity.

The public warnings issued during the post-election period cautioned against certain forms of online activity. These warnings did not always draw clear distinctions between incitement, journalism, advocacy, or human rights reporting. The lack of precision increased uncertainty for CSOs and HRDs regarding permissible digital conduct, even where activities were undertaken in good faith and within organisational mandates.

Information gathered through consultations indicates that enforcement related to online activity often relies on cumulative indicators rather than single acts. The repeated engagement with sensitive topics, association with online groups, or amplification of contested narratives may, taken together, attract attention. This approach increases exposure for HRDs whose personal identities are visible online and whose digital history is easily traceable.

The implication is that legal exposure linked to digital activity is shaped by context and interpretation rather than by explicit prohibition alone. For CSOs, this creates a need for internal clarity and consistency, not because digital engagement is unlawful, but because its consequences are less predictable.

### Issues requiring internal clarification

- a) CSOs should recognise that online conduct by staff and members may be interpreted by authorities as connected to organisational activity, even where no formal mandate exists.
- b) Organisational leadership should assess cumulative digital behaviour, including repeated posting or association with sensitive online content, because enforcement attention may arise from patterns rather than isolated actions.

- c) CSOs should develop internal guidance that explains how existing laws are applied in practice to online activity, as reliance on formal legal protections alone does not reflect current enforcement realities.
- d) When digital incidents involve staff or members, organisational management should review possible wider implications for programmes, partnerships, and public positioning.

### **4.3 Youth-Led Digital Mobilisation and Shifting Civic Practice**

The youth-led digital mobilisation has become a visible feature of civic expression, particularly during periods of political tension. This mobilisation is characterised by informal networks, rapid dissemination of content, and limited reliance on established organisational structures. It operates largely outside formal CSO coordination and decision-making.

The period following the 2025 elections illustrated how online mobilisation can translate quickly into offline consequences. The consultations and documented cases indicate that digitally active youth faced questioning, arrests, and surveillance linked to online activity. In several instances, enforcement did not clearly distinguish between organisers, influential voices, and individuals expressing opinions.

This dynamic affects CSOs in multiple ways. Civil society organisations do not own or control youth-led digital mobilisation, yet they may be perceived as aligned with it due to shared narratives, past advocacy positions, or public association. At the same time, many digitally active young people lack access to legal support, psychosocial assistance, or protection arrangements that are more commonly available to recognised human rights defenders (HRDs). In this context, while CSOs do not own or direct these emerging youth-led digital movements, they retain a principled role in guiding and shaping them in ways that serve the public interest, without assuming ownership or control.

#### **Implications for organisational engagement with youth**

- a) CSOs should treat youth-led digital mobilisation primarily as a protection concern, rather than as an advocacy opportunity, because such mobilisation occurs outside organisational control and carries heightened exposure.
- b) Organisations that work with youth should provide basic legal awareness and digital safety information without assuming responsibility for coordination, messaging, or mobilisation.
- c) CSOs should avoid issuing public endorsements of online campaigns where they lack the ability to guide participants or provide legal and psychosocial support.
- d) Where feasible, CSOs should establish discreet referral arrangements for guidance, legal and psychosocial assistance for digitally exposed youth, in order to reduce harm without increasing visibility.

## 4.4 Narrative Formation, Misattribution and Escalation Risks

The digital platforms accelerate the formation and spread of narratives. Information circulates rapidly, often without verification, and can be reframed across platforms and audiences. Within the current operating environment, this increases the risk of misattribution, where statements or actions by individuals are linked to organisations or coalitions without formal connection.

A public discourse since late 2025 has been shaped by fragmented information flows and contested interpretations. Once a narrative escalates, opportunities for clarification are limited. This dynamic affects both external perception and internal cohesion within civil society networks. An uncoordinated responses, contradictory statements, or prolonged silence can all be interpreted in ways that carry consequences. The managing narratives therefore requires internal discipline and coordination, rather than reactive messaging.

### Implications for public communication

- a) CSOs should assess how public statements may be interpreted beyond their intended audience, particularly during periods of heightened sensitivity when narratives evolve rapidly.
- b) Organisational leadership should ensure internal agreement on key messages before public communication to avoid contradictory statements that may weaken credibility or increase exposure.
- c) Decisions to remain silent on certain issues should be treated as deliberate choices and discussed internally, rather than resulting from uncertainty or lack of coordination.
- d) CSOs should maintain rapid internal consultation arrangements so that public responses during fast-moving situations are coherent and controlled.

## 4.5 Implications for CSOs and HRDs

The interaction between digital space, youth mobilisation, and enforcement practices reshapes how risk emerges and accumulates. Exposure is no longer confined to formal activities or organisational decisions. Personal online conduct, informal association, and narrative proximity can all carry consequences.

For HRDs, this expands protection needs beyond physical security to include digital identity, online conduct, and psychological stress linked to surveillance and uncertainty. For CSOs, organisational resilience depends on internal clarity, coordination, and realistic assessment of digital risk across staff, members, and networks.

The analysis reinforces a key finding from earlier chapters: risk has become cumulative and collective. Digital activity accelerates this process by linking individuals, organisations, and narratives in ways that are difficult to control once escalation occurs.

Discussions also pointed to the position of journalists, particularly those working in digital and media spaces. Where their work involves documenting events, publishing information, or commenting on sensitive issues, they often face similar forms of attention and pressure as other human rights defenders. In practice, this places them within the same environment of exposure, with similar needs for protection, legal support, and institutional backing.

#### **4.6 Directions for Managing Digital Risk and Youth Engagement**

Several directions emerge from the issues discussed above. These reflect adjustments that appear necessary under current conditions rather than idealised best practice.

- a) CSOs should align internal digital conduct policies with observed enforcement practices rather than relying solely on formal legal provisions, as enforcement often reflects context and discretion.
- b) During sensitive periods, organisational leadership should centralise decisions on public digital engagement to reduce inconsistent messaging and unintended exposure.
- c) Youth engagement approaches should prioritise harm reduction, access to support, and risk awareness rather than visibility or mobilisation.
- d) CSOs should use monitoring of digital trends to inform protection planning, not as a trigger for reactive public statements.
- e) Organisational preparedness should account for the speed at which digital exposure can escalate and ensure coordination across legal, psychosocial, and communication functions

## CHAPTER FIVE

# INTERNAL READINESS AND PROTECTION CONSIDERATIONS FOR CSOs

### 5.1 Internal Readiness as a Determining Factor

An internal readiness has become a determining factor in how CSOs experience and manage pressure. As shown in earlier sections, exposure does not arise only from external enforcement actions or public scrutiny. It is also shaped by how an organisation prepares internally, clarifies responsibilities, and responds when operating conditions change quickly.

The consultations with CSOs indicate wide variation in preparedness across the sector. Some organisations have established internal arrangements that guide decision-making, communication, and response during sensitive periods. Other organisations rely on informal practices that function under normal conditions but become ineffective when pressure increases. These differences affect not only organisational continuity but also the safety and confidence of staff and members.

The internal readiness therefore operates as a practical condition that influences outcomes. Where readiness is weak, an organisation is more likely to react late, act inconsistently, or expose individuals to unnecessary risk.

#### Recommendations

- a) A CSO should treat internal readiness as a core organisational requirement by clearly defining roles, decision-making authority, and response responsibilities before periods of pressure arise, because clarity established in advance reduces confusion and delay.
- b) The organisational leadership should periodically review internal readiness arrangements to ensure that they remain workable under conditions of legal, political, or operational uncertainty.
- c) A sector-wide acknowledgment of differences in preparedness should be encouraged, because uneven readiness contributes directly to uneven exposure among CSOs.

## 5.2 Protection Capacity beyond Individual Awareness

The protection challenges faced by CSOs extend beyond individual awareness of risk. According to THRDC observation many CSOs lack security and risk management policies. They also involve the organization's ability to respond once threats materialize. Consultations indicate that many CSOs provide general guidance on personal safety, but fewer organizations have clear internal arrangements or policies for responding to security challenges such as arrests, legal summons, sustained threats, or digital compromise.

Where organizational response arrangements are unclear or not guided by comprehensive policies, an individual is often left to manage the situation alone or rely on informal support. This can delay access to assistance, increase stress, and lead to inconsistent organizational responses. In contrast, an organization with defined response roles is better positioned to support affected individuals and manage wider implications.

The protection readiness also affects credibility. Inconsistent or delayed responses can undermine confidence among staff, members, and partners, particularly during sensitive periods.

### Suggestions

- a) A CSO should establish internal response arrangements such as security and risk management policy that clearly specify who takes responsibility when staff or members face arrests, legal action, threats, or digital attacks, in order to avoid reliance on ad hoc decisions.
- b) An organisation should maintain referral arrangements for legal assistance and psychosocial support so that affected individuals can receive timely and appropriate help.
- c) A protection response should be institutional rather than informal, because reliance on personal initiative is not sustainable during prolonged or repeated pressure.

## 5.3 Internal Communication and Coordination under Pressure

An internal communication plays a critical role in managing exposure. As discussed earlier, public messaging, digital activity, and engagement decisions can have implications beyond their immediate intent. Without clear internal coordination, an organisation risks inconsistent responses and unintended signaling.

The analysis indicate that some CSOs lack agreed internal communication arrangements for sensitive periods. Information may circulate unevenly, decisions may be taken without shared understanding, and staff may rely on informal channels that are not secure. These conditions increase the likelihood of confusion and unnecessary exposure.

An internal coordination is therefore not merely an administrative issue. It directly affects organisational coherence and external perception.

## Recommendations

- a) A CSO should formalise internal communication arrangements that clarify how information is shared and who is authorised to speak publicly during sensitive periods.
- b) The organisational leadership should ensure that sensitive coordination does not rely on informal or unsecured digital channels, as such reliance increases the risk of leakage and misinterpretation.
- c) A regular internal discussion of communication expectations should be maintained so that staff and members understand their roles during periods of heightened scrutiny.

### 5.4 Digital and Legal Readiness as Interconnected Needs

The digital and legal readiness have become closely connected. As shown in Chapter Four, online activity can attract legal attention depending on context and interpretation. An internal readiness in this area affects whether an organisation is able to respond calmly or is caught unprepared.

The consultations suggest that legal awareness within CSOs often focuses on formal rights and procedures, while less attention is given to how the law is applied in practice. At the same time, digital practices may prioritise convenience over risk assessment. This gap increases vulnerability, particularly during sensitive periods.

## Recommendations

- a) A CSO should align internal legal awareness with observed enforcement practices, recognising that practical application of the law determines actual exposure.
- b) The digital conduct of staff and members should be discussed explicitly as an organisational risk issue, rather than treated solely as a personal matter.
- c) An incident involving online activity or legal action should prompt an internal review to assess implications for programmes, partnerships, and public positioning.

### 5.5 Funding Instability and Operational Pressure

The funding terms or conditions shape internal readiness in important ways. Consultations indicate that many CSOs operate under short-term or uncertain funding arrangements that limit flexibility and reduce the ability to absorb shocks.

An operational pressure increases when an organisation faces legal scrutiny, digital exposure, and funding constraints at the same time. In such situations, staff capacity may be stretched, internal controls weakened, and protection considerations deprioritized. The funding instability therefore affects not only programme delivery but also organizational resilience.

## **Suggestions**

- a) A CSO should incorporate funding risk into internal preparedness planning, recognizing that limited financial flexibility restricts response options during emergencies.
- b) Diversify sources of funding and explore non-traditional ways of resource mobilization such as engaging in investment and income generating activities.
- c) The organizational leadership should assess how funding pressures influence decisions on visibility and engagement, particularly where financial necessity may encourage higher-risk actions.
- d) An internal monitoring of operational strain should be maintained to ensure that protection and coordination functions are not compromised by workload or resource shortages.

## **5.6 Internal Readiness and Collective Exposure**

Internal readiness has collective implications for the wider civil society space. As discussed earlier, actions taken by one organisation can affect others through association, perception, or shared narratives.

Where preparedness is uneven, collective exposure increases. An organisation that is less prepared may act in ways that draw attention or escalate situations, affecting the operating space of others. A higher and more consistent level of readiness across the sector contributes to predictability and restraint.

## **Recommendations**

- a) CSOs should recognize that internal preparedness is a shared responsibility, because organizational actions can influence collective exposure.
- b) A greater consistency in readiness across CSOs would contribute to a more stable and predictable operating environment.
- c) A regular exchange among CSOs on preparedness challenges and lessons can help reduce uneven exposure and improve collective discipline.

## **5.7 Areas for Sector-Wide Adjustment**

Several adjustments emerge from the issues discussed above. These reflect practical lessons rather than ideal standards.

## **Suggestions**

- a) CSOs should treat internal readiness as an ongoing organisational function rather than a reactive response introduced only during crises.

- b) Clear internal arrangements for protection, communication, and decision-making should be strengthened across the sector to reduce reliance on improvisation.
- c) Digital and legal readiness should be addressed together, reflecting how online activity and legal exposure intersect in practice.
- d) A greater attention to funding-related strain is necessary to strengthen organisational resilience and reduce risk-driven decision-making.
- e) A sector-wide exchange on internal readiness can support more measured and coordinated responses under sensitive conditions.

## **5.8 Towards Effective Protection Systems for CSOs and HRDs**

Across the sector, protection has often developed through experience rather than through formal systems. Organisations tend to respond as situations arise, drawing on available contacts or internal arrangements. While this has worked in some cases, it has not been consistent, and outcomes vary depending on the capacity of each organisation.

Stakeholders pointed to the need for more deliberate arrangements that go beyond individual responses. This includes clearer access to legal support, established referral pathways, and availability of psychosocial services for those affected. These elements are not always in place, particularly for smaller organisations or individuals working outside formal structures.

Given the way risks now build over time, through a mix of legal, digital, and public factors, isolated responses may not be enough. More coordinated approaches, including shared systems and joint responses, would provide a more stable basis for managing exposure.

This is particularly relevant for younger actors engaging through digital platforms, who often operate without organisational backing and may not have access to any form of structured support when challenges arise.

## **5.9 Diversification of Financing and Strategic Partnerships**

The question of funding continues to shape how organisations operate. Many CSOs still depend on a limited number of funding sources, which makes it difficult to adjust when priorities change or support declines. Recent experiences suggest that this is becoming an increasing concern.

There is growing discussion around the need to explore other options, including working more closely with private sector actors, developing co-funding arrangements, engage in income generating activities, and strengthening locally driven resource mobilisation. These approaches are not straightforward, and they come with their own considerations, particularly around independence and alignment of interests.

Where engagement with the private sector is considered, it would need to be guided carefully to ensure that organisational values and mandates remain intact. At the same time, it presents an area that has not been fully explored and may offer practical opportunities if approached thoughtfully.

Looking at funding in this way places it within the broader question of organisational readiness. Financial flexibility can make a significant difference in how organisations respond to pressure and maintain continuity in their work.

### **5.10 Evidence, Data and Narrative Management**

In the current environment, how information is handled has become increasingly important. Organisations that are able to rely on clear documentation and verifiable information tend to engage more confidently, particularly on sensitive issues.

Where information is incomplete or inconsistently presented, it becomes easier for actions or messages to be misunderstood. This is especially relevant where interpretation plays a significant role in how civic activity is viewed.

Attention to how information is collected, stored, and communicated is therefore not only a technical matter. It affects how organisations are understood and how their work is received. Strengthening internal practices around evidence and documentation can support both credibility and protection.

### **5.11 Shifting Identity and Strategic Positioning of CSOs**

The current context has led many organisations to reflect, sometimes quietly, on how they position themselves. While their core roles have not changed, the way those roles are carried out has had to adjust.

As said earlier, some organisations, especially, HRDs, have become more cautious in how they engage, particularly on issues that attract attention. This includes taking more time for internal discussion, being selective about public positioning, and weighing the possible implications of engagement more carefully than before.

These adjustments are understandable in the circumstances, but they also raise broader questions about how organisations see their role, especially in relation to governance and accountability work.

Clarity on this point becomes important. Where organisations have a shared understanding of their position and approach, it becomes easier to make consistent decisions, even in a changing environment.

## CHAPTER SIX

# CONCLUSION AND GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 Conclusion

The operating environment for CSOs and HRDs has evolved in ways that place greater weight on judgment, preparedness, and internal discipline. Legal frameworks, enforcement practices, and discretionary application of existing laws continue to shape civic space, while digital platforms increasingly influence how exposure is generated and managed. Engagement with state institutions remains possible, but its implications now depend heavily on the subject matter, timing, and public interpretation.

Across the sector, internal readiness has emerged as a decisive factor in how organisations experience pressure and protect their staff, members, and partners. Differences in preparedness, coordination, and digital and legal awareness contribute to uneven exposure and collective vulnerability. The cumulative effect of these conditions underlines the importance of deliberate and well-considered action, particularly in a context where missteps may have consequences beyond individual organisations.

### 6.2 Strategic Lessons

Several lessons emerge from the analysis presented in the preceding chapters. These lessons are drawn from observed practice, consultations with CSOs and HRDs, and the interaction between external conditions and internal organisational responses.

- a) The existence of legal space alone does not determine risk, because enforcement practice, discretion, and interpretation shape how laws are applied in practice.
- b) Engagement with government institutions can carry implications beyond the immediate purpose of the interaction, depending on the issue addressed, the timing, and the level of public visibility.
- c) Digital activity has become a central area where civic action, enforcement practice, and narrative formation intersect, increasing the speed at which exposure may accumulate.

- d) Youth-led digital mobilisation operates largely outside formal organisational structures, creating protection challenges that cannot be addressed through conventional advocacy approaches.
- e) Internal preparedness within CSOs directly affects organisational resilience and also influences collective exposure across the sector.
- f) Uneven levels of readiness among CSOs contribute to unpredictability and increase risk for the civil society space as a whole.

### **6.3 General Recommendations**

The following recommendations are intended to guide CSOs operating under current conditions. They focus on institutional judgment, collective discipline, and long-term resilience rather than short-term responses.

- a) CSOs should treat internal readiness as a core organisational function, ensuring clarity in decision-making, communication, and response arrangements before pressure arises.
- b) Engagement with state institutions should be undertaken deliberately, with internal consideration of possible implications beyond the immediate objective of the engagement.
- c) Digital conduct should be recognised as an organisational risk issue, requiring internal guidance, coordination, and regular review.
- d) Protection arrangements should extend beyond individual awareness to include organisational response capacity and access to legal and psychosocial support.
- e) Collective coordination among CSOs should be strengthened to reduce uneven exposure and manage shared risks arising from association and public perception.
- f) Funding sustainability should be addressed as part of organisational resilience, with attention to how financial pressure influences visibility, engagement choices, and risk-taking.

### **6.4 Forward Outlook: Strategic Trajectories for Civic Space (2026–2030)**

Looking ahead, the operating environment for CSOs and HRDs is not expected to change abruptly. The legal framework is likely to remain largely in place, while the way it is applied will continue to shape how civic space is experienced in practice. What emerges from this analysis is not a single direction of change, but a set of conditions that are likely to persist and interact over time, requiring organisations to navigate them with care, awareness, and internal clarity.

## **Several forward-looking considerations can be drawn from the current context:**

- a) The practical boundaries of civic space are likely to continue being defined more by enforcement practice and interpretation than by formal legal reform, particularly during politically sensitive periods.
- b) Digital space will remain central to civic activity, while also carrying ongoing exposure linked to traceability, long-term availability of online content, and the connection between online expression and offline consequences.
- c) Youth-led civic mobilisation is likely to continue operating largely outside formal organisational structures, maintaining a visible presence while presenting challenges in terms of engagement, alignment, and protection.
- d) Differences in organisational preparedness are expected to become more pronounced, with internal systems, clarity of decision-making, and resource stability increasingly influencing how organisations experience and respond to pressure.
- e) The ability of organisations to function will remain closely linked to financial conditions, including funding predictability, diversification of resources, and capacity to absorb operational disruptions.
- f) Funding conditions may become increasingly uncertain, influenced not only by national dynamics but also by shifting global priorities and resource reallocation linked to ongoing international crises and conflicts. This may affect both the availability and predictability of support to CSOs, particularly in sectors such as human rights.
- g) Fragmentation within the civil society sector is likely to remain a factor shaping both engagement and exposure, particularly where coordination is limited and collective positions are not clearly defined.
- h) The effectiveness of engagement with public institutions will continue to depend not only on the issues raised, but also on timing, positioning, and how engagement is interpreted within the broader environment.
- i) The handling of information, including the use of data and documentation, will remain an important factor in how organisations are understood, particularly where narratives form quickly and may be difficult to clarify once established.
- j) Protection considerations are likely to extend beyond individual awareness, with increasing relevance of coordinated legal support, psychosocial response, and shared mechanisms across the sector.
- k) The position of journalists and other actors working in information spaces will continue to intersect with that of human rights defenders, particularly where their work relates to sensitive civic issues.

- l) The relationship between civic space, engagement, and organisational capacity reflects broader international experience, where these elements are closely connected and tend to reinforce one another in practice.
- m) Within this context, national coordination platforms, including THRDC, will continue to occupy a position that connects organisations, supports information flow, and contributes to how the sector responds to emerging challenges.
- n) Taken together, these elements point to an environment where continuity in structure is accompanied by variation in practice. How organisations interpret and respond to these conditions will remain central to how civic space is navigated in the period ahead.

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