

BURUNDI

EMERGENCY FOR PRESS FREEDOM

Call for global mobilization for the immediate release of two female journalists : Floriane Irangabiye and Sandra Muhoza

03 May 2024



On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, 19 Burundian civil society organizations unite their voices to denounce the continued persecution of journalists and the brazen violation of press freedom. Since the start of the political crisis in 2015 following the unconstitutional third term of President Pierre Nkurunziza, Burundi has been notable for the continued deterioration of the working conditions of journalists and the drastic restriction of civic space orchestrated by the CNDD-FDD regime in power.

This blocking of media and civic space materialized in the destruction of independent media such as RPA, Bonesha FM, Isanganiro, Rema FM and Radio Télévision Renaissance following the failed coup d'état of May 2015. Since then, around a hundred journalists were forced into exile, while seven of them were sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia following an unfair trial, which constitutes a serious violation of the right to a fair trial.

In addition, the signatory organizations regret that since October 13, 2015 the family of the journalist Christophe NKEZABAHIZI has been decimated following the illegal use of state forces and the justice system has done nothing to carry out serious and objective investigations in order to prosecute the perpetrators of this serious crime.

The attack on press freedom culminated with the forced disappearance of the journalist from the Iwacu group on July 22, 2016 in Bugarama. Since then, the regime has not revealed the truth about the fate of Jean Bigirimana. No investigation report has been published. Eight years after his disappearance, his family is still waiting for answers."

The media that were able to resume their activities were subjected to an oppressive self-censorship charter, preventing them from relaying any dissident opinion. Furthermore, the National Communication Council (CNC), supposed to guarantee the promotion of press freedom, has failed in its primary mission. Instead of defending this fundamental freedom, it has transformed itself into an instrument of repression in the service of the regime, suppressing dissenting voices and hindering all public debate. Clearly, the country is sliding towards one-party rule.

The cases of Floriane Irangabiye and Sandra Muhoza illustrate the systematic repression of journalists in Burundi. Floriane Irangabiye was sentenced to ten years in prison on a vague charge of "attack on the integrity of the national territory". Sandra Muhoza, for her part, was imprisoned simply for relaying a message on WhatsApp between colleagues. These examples demonstrate how the regime uses extremely heavy, vague and unjustified accusations to silence critical voices, including journalists.

While upon his arrival in 2020, the new President had raised many hopes, notably the rehabilitation of the media and the lifting of illegal and irregular convictions of journalists, we regret today the absence of any sign of appeasement and we fear the worsening of the crisis on the eve of the legislative elections scheduled for next year.

In view of all of the above, the organizations signatories to this declaration request:

To the Government of Burundi to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release journalists Floriane Irangabiye and Sandra Muhoza imprisoned on spurious accusations and without legal or other evidence.
- Act without delay with the opening of an independent and transparent investigation into the forced disappearance of the journalist Jean Bigirimana and the assassination of the family of the journalist Christophe Nkezabahizi in order to reveal the truth about what happened and to take legal action against the alleged perpetrators.
- Cease censorship and repression of the media, and abolish all laws and measures that hinder press freedom.
- Restore the independence and integrity of the National Communication Council so that it can truly carry out its mission and defend press freedom in a professional manner.
- Rehabilitate and compensate Radio Publique Africaine (RPA) and Radio Télévision Renaissance

To Burundi's partners:

- Demand tangible and verifiable progress from the Burundian authorities in terms of press freedom, including the release of journalists Floriane Irangabiye and Sandra Muhoza and the reopening of closed independent media.

Signed on 03 May 2024

The signatory organizations:

1. Action des Chrétiens pour l'abolition de la torture au Burundi (ACAT Burundi)
2. Association des Journalistes Burundais en Exil (AJBE)
3. Association burundaise pour la protection des droits de l'homme et des personnes détenues (APRODH)
4. Coalition Burundaise des Défenseurs des Droits Humains (CBDDH)
5. Coalition burundaise des défenseurs des droits de l'homme vivant dans les camps des réfugiés (CBDH/VICAR)
6. Coalition Burundaise pour la Cour Pénale Internationale (CB-CPI)
7. Coalition de la société civile pour le monitoring électoral (COSOME)

8. Collectif des Avocats pour la défense des Victimes de crimes de droit international commis au Burundi (CAVIB)
9. Ensemble pour le soutien des défenseurs des droits humains en danger (ESDDH)
10. Forum pour la Conscience et de Développement (FOCODE)
11. Forum pour le Renforcement de la société civile au Burundi (FORSC)
12. Light for all
13. Ligue ITEKA
14. Mouvement INAMAHORO
15. Mouvement des femmes et filles pour la paix et la sécurité au Burundi (MFFPS)
16. Réseau des Citoyens Probes (RCP)
17. SOS Torture Burundi
18. Tournons la Page Burundi
19. Union Burundaise des Journalistes (UBJ)