

## Rwanda: Participation and protection of civil society is crucial to development

17.03.2016

The Government of Rwanda must ensure the participation of civil society in its continued economic development and strengthening of the rule of law, says ISHR in a statement before the Human Rights Council as part of Rwanda's Universal Periodic Review.



(Geneva) - Despite its remarkable economic growth and efforts made in the protection of human rights, Rwanda presents a challenging environment for human rights defenders, particularly in the face of increased suppression of dissenting opinions.

ISHR formally brought the situation of human rights defenders in Rwanda to the attention of the Human Rights Council today with a [statement associated with Rwanda's Universal Periodic Review](#). In its statement, ISHR highlighted recommendations received by Rwanda to protect human rights defenders, as well as the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression; recommendations which reflect the need for Rwanda to do more to protect these individuals and these fundamental rights.

In presenting the statement, ISHR's Africa Human Rights Advocate and Ambassador Bari Bari Fellow, Rumbi Masango highlighted that journalists and political opposition face physical threats and attacks for criticising the Government. 'They also face legal intimidation through the use of overly broad laws, such as the Penal Code which includes penalties of up to life imprisonment for spreading 'false information with the intent to create a hostile international opinion,' said Ms Masango.

'While Rwanda should be congratulated on amending the 2009 Media Law and its commitment to ensure the Genocide Law is not misused to restrict rights, NGO laws continue to be used to interfere with and undermine the activities of independent human rights organisations. We urge the country to assess its legal framework and review laws to ensure conformity with international human rights standards,' said Clement Voulé, ISHR African Advocacy Director and Programme Manager.

In recent years Rwanda has been praised by the international community for its economic development. A process in respect of which, as highlighted by the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, civil society participation is vital.

'It is essential that the Government of Rwanda ensure the participation of civil society in its continued economic development and strengthening of the rule of law, in doing so creating a favourable environment for dialogue and ensuring the enjoyment of civil and political rights,' said Mr Voulé.

Ms Masango referred to the fact that additional crackdowns on fundamental freedoms commonly occur during election periods. 'It is integral that States which made recommendations calling on Rwanda to protect the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression follow up with Rwanda to ensure those recommendations are implemented, particularly in the context of the upcoming 2017 presidential election,' said Ms Masango.

During the discussion at the Human Rights Council Belgium expressed similar concerns to those outlined by ISHR, highlighting Rwanda's failure to accept recommendations to address the shrinking space for the media and journalists, as well as impediments imposed on freedoms of expression and civil and political rights.

Several other non-government organisations - such as Article 19, Human Rights Watch, Action Canada and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project - also raised concerns with the human rights situation in Rwanda during the discussion. These concerns included: Government campaigns to stifle free speech and expression; amendments to media laws and policies that, while an improvement, fail to meet international standards; and on-going failures by authorities to investigate reported incidents of reprisals with the result that harassment, detention and prosecution of journalists continues with many choosing to flee the

country.

ISHR has also submitted its own Briefing Paper on the situation of human rights defenders in the Rwandan UPR which can be viewed [here](#).

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