

Burundi | Protect defenders, don't criminalise them

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On 11 March 2021, the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi updated the Human Rights Council on the situation in the country. While recognising the efforts made by the government to strengthen democracy, it also highlighted that there is still a long way to go to end human rights violations and impunity in the country.



The Commission of Inquiry is still being refused access to the country and its work has been impeded on by the current sanitary crisis as well as the diminished resources of the UN. Nonetheless, during its update to the Council, the Commission commended the achievements of the government of Burundi which include the recent release of 4 IWACU journalists and the presidential pardon afforded to 5255 detainees on 5 March 2021. Despite these positive achievements, it also highlighted that such ad-hoc gestures are not enough on their own and structural changes are needed to guarantee fundamental freedoms in the country.

It called on Burundi to guarantee the freedom and security of defenders in the country. Indeed, it emphasised the lack of progress in this field, recalling that the second appeal trial of Germain Rukuki is yet to take place. It also exhorted Burundi to guarantee the right to freedom of association. The government is trying to increase its control over civil society organisations by imposing controls on the implementation of their projects, as well as the financial aspect when being funded by international donors. Moreover, the first visits to verify compliance to ethnic balances of international non-governmental organisations took place earlier this year.

In a [statement](#) delivered during the interactive dialogue, ISHR and the Forum pour la Conscience et le développement (FOCODE) equally shared their concerns about the proliferation of ethnic hate speech, the ethnic census of civil servants and employees of the private sector, including non-governmental organisations.

Moreover, the statement highlighted the instrumentalization of the judicial system in an attempt to further silence defenders working to promote human rights and democracy in the country. "We condemn the recent sentencing to life imprisonment of a dozen human rights defenders and journalists, as well as political opponents, following an unjust and secret procedure" said Denis Ndayishemeza from FOCODE.

The Commission concluded by emphasising that the situation in the country remains extremely complex and uncertain to consider that any real improvement of the human rights situation has been made.

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