

Independent broadcasters harassed by Burundi government

According to reports by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), president of Burundi, Pierre Nkurunziza and his government are attempting to silence critical press coverage of his administration with incessant judicial harassment of two of the country's independent broadcasters.



Since sweeping the presidential and parliamentary elections unopposed in May 2010, Nkurunziza's second term has been criticised by international human rights organisations over human rights abuses, including the ten month imprisonment of journalist Jean-Claude Kavumbagu, and violent unrest threatening a fragile peace agreement signed after a 13-year civil war. This is according to news reports.

Governments respond to 'critical' coverage

In response to critical coverage by Radio Publique Africaine (RPA) and Radio Isanganiro, Nkurunziza administration prosecutors and the government-controlled national media regulator, the National Communications Council, have in recent weeks used court summons, imprisonment, and threats of closure to silence the broadcasters.

"The constant legal harassment by Burundian authorities is a clear attempt to extinguish any criticism aired by private broadcasters," said CPJ East Africa Consultant Tom Rhodes. "Authorities, including the National Communications Council must allow these stations to work in peace without using a politicized judiciary to silence them."

News editor and journalists summoned

State prosecutors in the capital, Bujumbura recently summoned news editor, Patrick Mitabaro of Radio Isanganiro for the second time since July, Isanganiro reporter Désiré Hatungimana told CPJ. Prosecutors accused Mitabaro of insulting the judiciary by airing comments by the imprisoned Burundi Bar Association president Isidore Rufyikiri suggesting the executive controlled the courts, according to local journalists. In a report issued in May 2011, the United Nations Independent Expert on the human rights situation in Burundi, Fatsah Ouguergouz, expressed serious concerns about "the lack of independence of the judiciary" in Burundi.

Mitabaro was summoned for another interrogation on a separate, unknown matter on Tuesday 2 August 2011, Hatungimana said. Back in May, state prosecutors had summoned Mitabaro and accused him of broadcasting information that jeopardized state security over an interview in which the former spokesman of an opposition party criticised a government proposal to reform political parties, according to news reports.

State prosecutors also questioned RPA editor Bob Rugurika, for the fourth time since July 18, over a broadcast raising questions about the integrity of Léonce Ndarubagiye, the official responsible for setting up Burundi's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, according to local journalists. RPA had cited a 1996 U.N. report that linked Ndarubagiye to a massacre of ethnic Tutsis. Immediately after the broadcast, on July 23, CNC President Pierre Bambasi released a public statement declaring the news broadcast to be an "incitement to ethnic hatred, and therefore capable of having negative effects on reconciliation and the security of the population," according to news reports.

Following this interrogation, a magistrate summoned Rugurika for another interrogation, on August 9, on an unknown, separate matter, the journalist told CPJ. During a previous July 18 interrogation, state prosecutors had accused him of broadcasting information "likely to incite civil disobedience" in connection with programs featuring opposition parties Front for Democracy in Burundi and Alliance of Democrats for Change, according to local journalists.

Journalists from RPA's station in the northern town of Ngozi have also been summoned. On Friday and Monday, a state prosecutor questioned bureau chief Léonce Niyongabo and reporter Yvette Murekesabe about a story implicating a member of state security in a rape, according to local journalists.

Prosecutors frustrate legal defense

In a move seen as an attempt to frustrate RPA's legal defense, authorities jailed the radio station's lawyer, François Nyamoya, on July 9, on spurious charges of witness tampering in a case in which he had successfully defended a suspect in the 2001 murder of World Health Organisation Burundi Representative Kassy Manlan, according to local journalists. The case has been closed since 2003, and Burundi's code of criminal procedure forbids prosecution on an offense if the case has been closed for more than three years, according to the same sources.

Burundi authorities have consistently harassed both RPA and Radio Isanganiro this year over their coverage. Authorities imposed a four-day suspension on a popular RPA talk show in April, and four RPA reporters; Zirampaye Raymond, Domithile Kiramvu, Bonfils Niyongere, and Philbert Musobozi, are battling criminal defamation charges filed by Evrard Giswaswa, the mayor of Bujumbura, over October 2010 reports of an alleged nightclub brawl involving him, according to local reports.

Source: [Committee to Protect Journalists](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>