



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Burundi

29 January 2025



SOS - TORTURE / BURUNDI
"Celui qui sauve une vie sauve l'humanité toute entière"

This document has been produced by SOS-Torture Burundi

Context

Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Burundi operate in a context of [repressed civic space](#), characterised by significant restrictions on the implementation of civil and political rights such as the freedoms of expression, association and assembly guaranteed by the [2018 Constitution](#) of the Republic of Burundi. Human rights defenders, activists, journalists and members of the political opposition are victims of intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and unjust legal proceedings. In such a context of restrictive laws and increased control by the authorities, CSOs [struggle to](#) play their full role in promoting human rights and community development.

1. Respect for and protection of freedoms

Civil society actors in Burundi operate in a [repressed civic space](#) and [the deteriorating human rights situation](#) is affecting their activities. Freedom of expression remains limited. For example, Burundi [was ranked as not free](#) with a score of 14/100 in the 2024 Freedom House report and 108th in the 2024 Reporters Without Borders [report](#). A new [law governing the press](#) in Burundi was promulgated in July 2024, restricting the right of expression, in particular articles 76 to 80 relating to administrative and criminal sanctions against the media and journalists. In April 2024, journalist [Sandra Muhoza](#) was arbitrarily arrested and unjustly sentenced to one year and nine months in prison - 18 months for "*attacking the integrity of the national territory*" and three months for "*racial aversion*".

In addition, CSOs that criticise the government or work on sensitive issues such as human rights or governance are [regularly targeted](#). In February 2023, five [human rights defenders were arrested on](#) their way to a partners' meeting in Uganda and imprisoned. They were released after three months and forced into exile. These restrictions hamper the ability of organisations to organise and collaborate effectively. [Several organisations](#) have had to reduce their activities or operate from abroad. This limits their impact on the ground and weakens the associative network.

Public gatherings are subject to increased surveillance and civil society is afraid to organise them. Activities perceived as critical of the authorities are often [banned or repressed](#). For example, in March 2022, a [press conference](#) organised by two CSOs, OLUCOME¹ and PARCEM² was suspended without valid reason. Articles 5, 8, 13 and 25 of law [no. 1/28 of 05 December 2013 regulating demonstrations on the public highway and public meetings](#) in Burundi limit the right of civil society organisations and political parties to demonstrate, as they impose difficult conditions on organisers such as the timing for declaring a demonstration (article 8) and the sanctions imposed on organisers (articles 13 to 25). The demonstrations

¹ OLUCOME: Observatory for the Fight against Corruption and Economic Embezzlement

² PARCEM : Parole et Action pour le Réveil des Consciences et l'(Word and Action for Awakening Consciousness and)Evolution des Mentalités Changing Minds

organised in April 2015 by civil society organisations against President Nkurunziza Pierre's term in office were described as an [insurrectional movement](#). [Some leaders of these organisations were sentenced to life imprisonment](#). In the run-up to the 2025 elections, [increased pressure on CSOs and the media was reported](#), further reducing civic space.

2. A legal framework favourable to the work of civil society players

The [2018 Constitution](#) guarantees, in theory, fundamental freedoms, including the freedoms of association, expression and assembly. Law [n°1/ 02](#) of 27 January 2017 on the Organisational Framework for Non-Profit Associations allows for the registration of CSOs and provides them with a legal framework within which they can operate (chapter 2 art.14). However, it is marked by provisions which, although officially intended to regulate the activities of civil society organisations (CSOs), could limit their freedom of action. The Law on Associations imposes strict conditions for the registration and operation of CSOs. For example, in Article 6, the law provides for two regimes, namely the declaration regime (Articles 7 to 13), the approval regime (Articles 14 to 28) and the approval regime as an ASBL declared to be of public utility (Articles 29 to 38), as well as the constitution of collectives of associations and similar bodies.

Financial controls through [the legislation on the Organisational Framework for Non-Profit Organisations](#) have become more rigorous, with transparency requirements that can be used to restrict or intimidate CSOs critical of the authorities. In February 2023, [the organisations APDH³ and AFJB⁴ were accused of receiving funding from a foreign NGO and their leaders were arrested and imprisoned](#). Article 74 of the same law stipulates that financial resources of foreign origin must transit through the Central Bank and be accompanied by a document illustrating their origin and allocation.

The recently introduced laws ([the legislation on the Organic Framework for Non-Profit Associations](#) and [the law governing the press in Burundi](#)) [were adopted without any real public consultation](#). This reflects an environment where public debate is restricted, preventing civil society from participating fully in the development of policies that directly affect it.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding civil society actors in Burundi is a [constant challenge](#), influenced by both internal and external factors. While some opportunities remain thanks to international support, numerous obstacles, in particular the [Law regulating NGOs in Burundi](#) and the [Texts concerning taxation](#)

³ APDH: **Association for Peace and Human Rights**

⁴ AFJB : [Association Des Femmes Juristes du Burundi](#)

[and the conditions for foreign funding of CSOs](#), limit access to the resources necessary for the proper functioning of civil society organisations (CSOs).

Most Burundian CSOs depend on funding from international donors, such as aid agencies, international NGOs, etc. Internal resources from local contributions or government support are limited.

In 2024, [some donors](#) continued to support projects focused on national priorities, such as community development, the fight against poverty and the promotion of women's rights. However, access to these funds [often requires alignment with the strategic priorities](#) defined by the government, which can restrict the independence of CSOs.

Following the [political crisis of 2015](#), some Burundian civil society organisations were [deregistered or suspended](#) and continue to work outside the country, which is not easy to fund.

Increased administrative requirements, such as detailed financial reporting and justification of foreign funds, complicate access to funding, and new laws requiring alignment with government priorities hamper CSOs working on sensitive issues (human rights, governance, etc.).

CSOs perceived as critical of the government are [often monitored or accused of](#) serving foreign interests. This discourages some donors from becoming actively involved in Burundi.

In addition to external obstacles, organisational capacity remains weak (lack of technical capacity to meet donor requirements (project development, funding management, monitoring and evaluation)).

Changing donor priorities and global crises have led to a reduction in the resources available for Burundi in 2024, particularly for governance and advocacy projects.

4. Openness and responsiveness

Relations between civil society and the Burundian government are marked by complex interactions, oscillating between mistrust, close control and occasional collaboration.

Civil society organisations (CSOs), particularly those that are critical of the government or active in areas such as human rights, are often [perceived as threats](#). This leads to restrictions, increased surveillance and even closures or [suspensions](#). In August 2024, Amnesty International published [a report](#) showing that Burundian civil society organisations are still considered enemies of the nation.

In 2024, a number of local organisations [worked with the government](#) on health, education and food security projects. [CSOs perceived as](#) 'pro-government' or aligned with its priorities welcomed partnerships with the government, marginalising those tackling sensitive issues. Although relations between civil society and the Burundian government are still marked by tensions, they also offer [occasional opportunities for](#) collaboration, particularly in less controversial areas of development.

5. Political culture and public discourse on civil society

Burundian civil society occupies an important place in public discourse and political debate, but this representation remains strongly influenced by political dynamics and national priorities. Civil society organisations working on non-sensitive issues such as education, health or local development enjoy greater visibility, while those tackling issues such as human rights or governance face significant obstacles.

Civil society is often presented by government as [an actor that should support national priorities and contribute to stability and development](#). However, some CSOs, particularly those perceived as critical, are stigmatised as [being aligned with foreign interests](#).

[Pro-government CSOs such as Ntabariza SPF \(Solidarity with Prisoners and their Families\) and the Izere Ntiwihebure League](#) enjoy more positive public coverage, while those working on sensitive issues (like PARCEM) have limited access to public platforms to voice their concerns. The lively press conferences and other activities of these organisations are [covered by the public media](#).

In April 2023, the Government of Burundi organised [a National Forum on the Development of Burundi](#) at the Palais des Congrès in Kigobe, Bujumbura, which enabled a number of CSOs to contribute to strategic discussions.

CSOs led by women or working for gender equality have made progress, but they still face [cultural and structural challenges](#). Women remain under-represented in decision-making bodies and public debates.

However, the representation of Burundian civil society in public discourse and political debate is limited by legal restrictions, unequal access to media platforms, and structural challenges. Although progress has been made in terms of inclusion, particularly for women and young people, these efforts are not always reflected in public policies or decision-making spaces.

Challenges

1. Repression and restrictions on civil liberties:

- Restrictions on freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly continue.
- Increased monitoring of CSOs critical of the government, including restrictions on their activities and funding.

2. Sensitive political climate:

- Political tensions that could create a hostile environment for CSOs, particularly in relation to the forthcoming elections in June 2025.
- Stigmatisation of CSOs perceived to be close to the opposition or international players critical of the regime. This publication was funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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