



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment

Snapshot

Burundi

March 2026

Context

Period covered by the report: August 2025-March 2026

Between August 2025 and March 2026, Burundi's civic space experienced sustained deterioration across all six principles of an enabling environment for civil society. Despite constitutional guarantees of freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, the period was marked by intensified state repression. The 2025 legislative and local elections consolidated CNDD-FDD control with 96.5% of the vote, in [a context of intimidation, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances](#) and tightly restricted media reporting. UN experts similarly [reported rising cases](#) of torture, sexual violence, arbitrary detention and extrajudicial killings targeting civil society actors and political opponents, warning of widespread impunity and narrowing civic space.

The CIVICUS [Monitor highlighted](#) increased killings, disappearances and crackdowns on freedoms, including the disqualification of opposition election candidates and weaponisation of eligibility rules to limit political participation. Freedom House also reported continued repression, systemic intimidation and constraints on fundamental rights, reinforcing evidence of a closed and shrinking political landscape. The Ligue Iteka [Annual Report \(2025\)](#) recorded 662 serious incidents, including killings, torture, abductions and arbitrary arrests—mostly attributed to state-aligned actors, particularly the Imbonerakure militia and security forces. The ACAT-Burundi [Human Rights Situation Report \(2025\)](#) highlighted persistent unlawful detentions, extreme prison overcrowding and systemic judicial delays, underscoring the lack of accountability and limited access to justice.

Institutionally, the UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Burundi in October 2025 due to [ongoing violations](#) and government non-cooperation with UN mechanisms, reaffirming concerns that the state was neither open nor responsive to oversight. Although Burundi's electoral commission (CENI) [held consultations](#) with selected CSOs in early 2025, participation was largely restricted to government-aligned organisations, while independent groups continued to face suspension or deregistration, limiting meaningful engagement and weakening the broader civic culture.

Across the reporting period, these dynamics demonstrate a sustained decline in fundamental freedoms, a restrictive legal and regulatory framework, diminishing access to resources, a largely unresponsive state, a constrained civic culture, and an insecure digital environment—collectively undermining the enabling environment for civil society in Burundi.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Although the [Constitution of Burundi](#) (Articles 31–32) guarantees freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, the practical conditions for exercising these rights remain highly restrictive. Civil society actors, journalists and human rights defenders continue to be subjected to intimidation, judicial harassment and political pressure. The operating space for independent voices has gradually shrunk.

- 18 February 2026: *Jimbere Magazine* journalists Olivier Manirambona and Aline Niyonizigiye [were detained](#) in Ngagara while covering enforcement of a 21-year land-dispute ruling in

Ntahangwa; despite accreditation, they spent two nights in custody, [prompting outrage over Niyonizigiye's detention](#) as a nursing mother; both were provisionally released on 20 February, with legal proceedings ongoing, *Jimbere* denounced the arrests as arbitrary.

- 18 February 2026: Amani Papy Ndikumana (Papy Jamaica), AFP photographer Tchandrou Nitanga, and a production assistant [were detained](#) while covering EU Commissioner Hadja Lahbib's visit to the Ministry of External Relations; they were taken to the National Intelligence Service (SNR), questioned, and had their phones searched and confiscated before being released that evening, with authorities alleging "illegal filming".
- The Press Act grants the National Communications Council (CNC) [extensive powers](#) to issue warnings, suspensions or disciplinary sanctions.
- HRDs Dieudonné Bashirahishize, Arnel Niyongere, Vital Nshimirimana, and Lambert Nigarura continue to face legal and professional reprisals for their 2016 cooperation with the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) including threats and the seizure of their property, severely hampering their activities. In November 2025, CAT [formally recognised](#) these acts as reprisals and contrary to Burundi's obligations.
- November 2025: CAT condemned Burundi for acts of torture and inhuman treatment by the National Intelligence Service (SNR), highlighting failure to investigate or ensure redress.
- Private media outlets are [gradually being excluded](#) from parliamentary sessions and from the Kigobe Conference Centre at Bujumbura, as well as from news channels; live broadcasts of Assembly sessions are prohibited.
- August 2025: a decision was taken following the parliamentary elections to [restrict or ban private media coverage](#) of parliamentary activities.
- 14 August 2025: The CNC [suspended a planned collaborative programme](#) by several private radio stations (including Bonesha FM, Isanganiro, Rema FM, Shima, and Agaseke) on the fuel crisis, demanding prior content submission; media outlets rejected this as violating editorial independence guaranteed by the Press Act.

The facts reveal persistent political hostility towards civil society actors and the media. The period is marked by a trend of targeted repression of independent media, judicial harassment of journalists, and systematic reprisals against human rights defenders engaging with UN bodies. Constitutional guarantees are undermined by administrative, judicial and security pressures. The growing restrictions on parliamentary coverage and the prosecution of journalists reflect increased repression of critical voices, a shrinking civic space and a weakening of transparency in public institutions.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

The legal framework governing civil society in Burundi remains restrictive and highly centralised, giving the authorities broad discretionary powers regarding registration, operation and compliance. Administrative procedures are complex and lengthy, which hinders the growth of independent organisations.

- CSOs must obtain approval from several ministries, including the Ministry of Territorial Administration.

- [Law No. 1/02 \(27 January 2017\)](#) on national associations [and Law No. 1/01 \(23 January 2017\)](#) on foreign NGOs strengthen state oversight.
- NGOs must regularly submit activity reports and comply with strict administrative requirements.
- Following the 2015 crisis, several human rights organisations have been suspended, deregistered or forced into exile.
- Authorisation renewals are often lengthy and subject to close scrutiny.
- International NGOs are subject to increased financial scrutiny, including the mandatory deposit of a portion of their budget with the central bank.
- Certain activities require authorisation at local level; increased monitoring of CSO initiatives.

Overall, the regulatory framework grants the state considerable power over CSO operations, enabling it to exert political influence and apply the law selectively. Administrative and legal barriers act as a deterrent to independent organisations. Increased scrutiny of NGOs' finances, combined with onerous reporting requirements, restricts their operational autonomy and limits the emergence of new independent actors.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Access to financial resources remains extremely limited for Burundian civil society due to economic difficulties, heavy reliance on external funding and administrative barriers that complicate resource mobilisation. Human rights actors are subjected to intimidation, which further discourages donor engagement.

- Persistent administrative restrictions and intimidation targets CSOs, journalists and defenders.
- Economic constraints and dependence on donors compromise financial sustainability.
- Administrative procedures relating to the management of foreign funding impose additional constraints.
- Many local CSOs operate with limited resources, which reduces their capacity to carry out advocacy or documentation work.

The financial environment is fragile and highly sensitive to political pressures. Administrative obstacles and intimidation deter donors and undermine organisational stability. Limited financial independence restricts CSOs' ability to conduct sustained advocacy, develop long-term programmes or carry out independent monitoring, which contributes to the weakening of the civic sector as a whole.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Engagement between the state and civil society in Burundi is selective, limited and characterised by mistrust. The government engages primarily with aligned organisations, whilst independent actors face exclusion and suspicion.

- Dialogue is largely restricted to organisations perceived as pro-government.
- Independent CSOs, particularly in the fields of governance and human rights, face obstacles and are viewed as political threats.
- Human Rights Watch reports a deterioration in the political and civic space in 2025.

- Civil society is rarely consulted in the drafting of laws or public policies.

This selective engagement creates structural barriers to meaningful participation in governance. The exclusion of independent CSOs prevents political pluralism and undermines public accountability. The marginalisation of critical voices reduces trust and reinforces the perception that civic actors constitute a political threat rather than being seen as partners in democratic governance.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Public discourse on civil society in Burundi is marked by stigmatisation, with key actors often portrayed as threats to national stability. Official rhetoric contributes to creating a hostile environment that delegitimises independent organisations.

- A persistent [discourse](#) portrays critical CSOs as destabilising forces or as damaging to the country's image.
- 2025: President Ndayishimiye [publicly attacked](#) civil society leaders Pacifique Nininahazwe (speech in Rutana, October 2025) and Faustin Ndikumana, the [director of](#) PARCEM (speech in Matongo, November 2025) for their analyses of the country's governance and economic situation.
- Public statements by senior officials fuel mistrust and smear campaigns against independent CSOs.

Stigmatising rhetoric from senior authorities reinforces social hostility towards critical organisations and discourages citizens from engaging with civic actors. This weakens civic culture, reduces public trust in civil society and legitimises further restrictive measures against organisations involved in governance and human rights.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Civil society actors in Burundi operate in an increasingly insecure and highly restricted digital environment, marked by low internet penetration and extensive state regulation. The legal framework—including the Press Act, Criminal Code, and Cybercrime Act—imposes broad constraints on online expression, enabling prosecutions of journalists and users for digital content. Combined with weak data-protection safeguards and repeated state interference in online media, these conditions severely limit safe, open, and independent digital engagement.

- At the start of 2026: Internet penetration stood at 11.1%, with 1.60 million users, according to [DataReportal](#).
- 4 March 2026: Journalist Sandra Muhoza [was released on parole](#) with movement restrictions in Ngozi, following her 14 January 2026 four-year prison sentence; she had been detained since March 2024, when she was arrested for alleged “undermining national territorial integrity” and “inciting racial hatred” after sharing information in a private press group.
- 4 March 2026: Journalist Kenny Claude Nduwimana [was released](#) after being detained since October 2023 on fraud and defamation charges, which he rejects as retaliation for denouncing alleged public-land misappropriation.
- 23 December 2025: Two senior editors of [Iwacu](#), an online/digital outlet, — Abbas Mbazumutima and Léandre Sikuyavuga — [were questioned for nine hours](#) by the SNR without

written summons over an article on Burundi's military role in eastern DRC and the 4 December 2025 Washington agreement.

- Ongoing: The Press Act, Criminal Code, and Cybercrime Act impose stringent limits on online expression; journalists and online users continue to face harassment and prosecution over digital content. The 2022 Cybercrime Act criminalises the dissemination of 'false' or 'harmful' information— fluid terms prone to abuse by officials targeting civil society actors.
- Journalists and online users are subjected to harassment and legal proceedings over their digital content.
- Lack of effective data protection mechanisms; persistent digital insecurity.

The restrictive digital climate exposes civil society to heightened surveillance, legal risk, and self-censorship, weakening their ability to document abuses or disseminate timely information. Limited connectivity and recurring platform restrictions hinder public access to information, shrinking opportunities for participation and accountability. Overall, the digital environment reinforces an atmosphere of fear and vulnerability, constraining civic space and eroding democratic oversight.

Challenges and Opportunities

In the coming months, civil society actors in Burundi are likely to face continued legal and administrative pressure, given the restrictive application of the Press Act, Criminal Code and Cybercrime Act, as well as recent patterns of CNC suspensions and SNR interrogations. Low internet penetration and weak digital-security safeguards will continue to limit safe online engagement, while recurring arrests of journalists signal a high risk of further crackdowns. However, growing public attention to these violations and the gradual expansion of digital platforms create limited openings for advocacy on press freedom, improved digital-security practices and renewed dialogue on media independence. To improve the enabling environment for civil society actors, the following is recommended:

- Strengthen protections for fundamental rights and ensure fair, consistent application of laws.
- Facilitate access to funding, technology and secure infrastructure for civil society actors.
- Promote sustained, constructive dialogue between state institutions and civil society to rebuild trust and expand civic space.

Without progress on these fronts, civic organisations, journalists and human rights defenders will remain vulnerable to interference and operate within a highly restricted environment.

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