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RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières

Rwanda’s new penal code is still tough on journalists

On the eve of a two-day summit of the International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF) at which Rwanda’s candidate seems set to take over as the OIF’s new leader, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemns Rwanda’s adoption of a new penal code that maintains very heavy penalties for journalists.

Journalists can still be jailed for publishing cartoons of the president (<https://qz.com/africa/1410418/rwanda-bans-cartoons-that-humiliate-government-officials/>) under the extremely oppressive penal code that was adopted on 27 September. “Humiliating” state officials or legislators in either spoken word, writing or cartoons is punishable for up to two years in prison or a fine of 490 euros, and the penalties are doubled if those targeted are “top-ranking authorities.”

The new penal code decriminalizes defaming private individuals but not insulting or defaming the president, which carries penalties ranging from five to seven years in prison and up to 6,860 euros in fines.

Those who produce TV reports will feel permanently threatened by article 156, under which editing photos or video without making it clear there has been editing is punishable by up to a year in prison.

“The maintenance of a very large number of press offences in the Rwandan penal code speaks to the regime’s desire to continue its predatory stance towards journalists,” said Arnaud Froger, the head of RSF’s Africa desk. *“As long as Rwanda continues to have extremely draconian media legislation and to treat the production of freely and independently reported information as a crime punishable by long prison sentences, it will be unable to speak about human rights in general and press freedom in particular.”*

Backed by France (<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/561832/politique/rwanda-la-france-officialise-son-soutien-a-la-candidature-de-louise-mushikiwabo-a-la-tete-de-loif/>) and the African Union (<https://africtelegaph.com/lunion-africaine-soutient-la-candidature-de-louise-mushikiwabo/>), Rwandan foreign minister Louise Mushikiwabo is nonetheless the favourite to replace Canada’s Michaëlle Jean as the OIF’s secretary-general at the two-day OIF summit that begins in Yerevan tomorrow.

RSF already expressed concern (<https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-worried-rwandan-candidate-head-oif>) about Mushikiwabo’s candidacy in July, noting that she represents a government that “tramples on the right to inform and persecutes journalists” and that eight journalists have been killed or have disappeared in Rwanda since 1996, while 35 have had to flee abroad.

The OIF awards the Francophone Prize for Innovation in the Media (<https://www.francophonie.org/CP-laureats-3e-prix-francophone-innovation-medias-48701.html>) every year with RSF and *Radio France Internationale*.

Rwanda has been near the bottom of RSF's World Press Freedom Index (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>) for years and is ranked 156th out of 180 countries in the 2018 Index.

ecoi.net summary:

Article on provisions in new penal code that preserve heavy penalties for defaming public figures

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