

World Report 2024



Burundi

Events of 2023

Alain-Guillaume Bunyoni attends the funeral of Burundi President Pierre Nkurunziza, in Gitega, Burundi, on June 26, 2020. Bunyoni, the prime minister from June 2020 to September 2022, was arrested on April 21, 2023, for allegedly undermining state security and the proper functioning of the economy.

© 2020 Tchandrrou Nitanga/AFP via Getty

- [English](#)
- [Français](#)

Burundi's ruling party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie, CNDD-FDD) consolidated its control over institutions and continued to weaken and quash political opposition, routinely targeting those it accuses of being “enemies” of the country. At the same time, the [arrest](#) of former Prime Minister Gen. Alain Guillaume Bunyoni on April 21 exposed divisions and shifting dynamics within the ruling party.

The government failed to implement promised reforms, tackle the country's economic crisis, and address [financial mismanagement](#), [chronic shortages of fuel](#), and [spiraling prices](#). These failures, alongside the war in Ukraine and climate-related shocks, [have exacerbated food insecurity in Burundi](#).

The government's hostility toward independent civil society and media persisted. In May, a court of appeal decided to maintain the conviction of journalist Floriane Irangabiye, who was arbitrarily arrested on August 30, 2022, and is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence for criticizing the government.

Political Space

The relentless targeting of real and suspected opposition members in recent years—through extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, and torture—has contributed to the ruling party's de facto monopoly of the country's political space and economy.

Internal turmoil and divisions within the leadership of the National Congress for Freedom (Congrès National pour la Liberté, CNL) came to a head when the interior minister [suspended the activities](#) of the opposition party on June 2. In a further escalation, 10 ousted members of the CNL's political bureau, also members of parliament, issued a [public statement](#) on July 4 announcing that they were suspending Agathon Rwasa from the position of president of the CNL, accusing him of "serious failures." The inability of the CNL, the main opposition party in Burundi, to operate and campaign will affect the credibility of the 2025 legislative elections.

The authorities failed to hold accountable security forces and members of the ruling party's youth league, the Imbonerakure, for abuses perpetrated against real or suspected opponents. Instead, senior party officials, including the president and the CNDD-FDD secretary general, have [urged them to take action to defend the country](#) and promoted their role as a parallel security force, emboldening them to carry out abuses.

CNDD-FDD hardliner Gen. Alain Guillaume Bunyoni was arrested in April. Although he coordinated police action as minister of public security during the demonstrations and violent repression that followed the 2015 elections, judicial authorities have shied away from investigating his role in overseeing human rights abuses during this period. He was prosecuted for alleged offenses during his time as prime minister, including "undermining the internal security of the State" and "undermining the proper functioning of the national economy" and for "conflict of interest," "illegal possession of weapons," and "contempt of the Head of State." His close ally Désiré Uwamahoro was arrested on April 18. The Supreme Court [convicted](#) Bunyoni of state security and other offenses on December 8 and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Civil Society and the Media

On December 8, 2022, the Supreme Court of Burundi overturned the unjust five-year prison sentence handed down by the Ngozi Court of Appeal to lawyer Tony Germain Nkina and his client Apollinaire Hitimana. They were released on December 27, 2022.

On January 2, the Mukaza High Court in Bujumbura, the country's economic capital, [convicted](#) journalist Floriane Irangabiye of endangering the integrity of the national territory, sentenced her to 10 years in prison, and imposed a fine of 1 million Burundian francs (approximately US\$482) following a deeply flawed trial during which the prosecutor failed to provide credible evidence. Irangabiye's prosecution [violated her right to freedom of expression](#), as it was based on comments made during a radio show for Radio Igicaniro, an online platform in exile, in which she and other guests were critical of the Burundian government.

On May 2, the Court of Appeal of Mukaza [upheld](#) the conviction. Although the court found that Irangabiye's initial interrogation by the National Intelligence Service violated the criminal procedure code because it was conducted without a lawyer present and without informing her of her right to remain silent, it held that this did not nullify the procedure. Her lawyers have filed an appeal to the Supreme Court.

On February 14, [five human rights defenders were arrested](#) by national intelligence agents and accused of rebellion and of undermining internal state security and the functioning of public finances. The charges appeared to relate only to their relationship with an international organization abroad and the funding they received from this organization. Two of the defenders work for the Association of Women Lawyers in Burundi (Association des femmes juristes du Burundi, AFJB)

and three for the Association for Peace and the Promotion of Human Rights in Burundi (Association pour la paix et la promotion des droits de l'Homme, APDH).

Initially, all five were also charged with rebellion, but this charge was only maintained for three of them during the trial. The charge of “undermining the functioning of public finances” was eventually dropped for all five accused. All were [released on April 28](#): all five were acquitted of “undermining internal state security”; three were acquitted and two were convicted of rebellion, fined 50,000 Burundian francs (\$25), and handed a two-year suspended sentence.

In September, Human Rights Watch and the Burundi Human Rights Initiative [submitted](#) a report to the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions to request that it reviews the work of Burundi’s National Independent Human Rights Commission (Commission Nationale Indépendante des Droits de l’Homme, CNIDH) ahead of its scheduled review. Burundi’s commission has demonstrated a lack of independence, credibility, and effectiveness, including through its failure to publicly advocate for the release of detained human rights defenders and Irangabiye.

In October, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi [expressed concern](#) about the “shrinking civic space and a growing pressure on political parties, civil society organisations and the media” ahead of the 2025 legislative and municipal elections.

Refugee Rights

As of September 2023, there were [over 250,000](#) Burundian refugees living in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as of August, about 210,000 refugees had been [repatriated](#) to Burundi since 2017 under its “voluntary repatriation” programs. The repatriations primarily took place from Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, where refugees face worsening conditions and authorities encouraged refugees to repatriate, in some cases leading to coerced returns in violation of the principle of [non-refoulement](#). The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi [noted](#) the lack of essential elements of a voluntary repatriation process and urged the government to guarantee conditions for the credible return of refugees.

Girls’ Rights

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 19 percent of girls are [married](#) before age 18.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Burundi punishes consensual same-sex sexual relations between adults with up to two years in prison under article 567 of the penal code. Article 29 of the Constitution explicitly bans same-sex marriage.

In March, police [arrested](#) 24 delegates at a seminar on entrepreneurship and charged them with “homosexuality and incitement to debauchery and prostitution.” Their case is ongoing at time of writing.

Key International Actors

Burundian authorities continued to demonstrate their disregard for the international human rights system. In July, the Burundian delegation walked out of its review by the UN Human Rights Committee, a treaty body focusing on civil and political rights, apparently protesting the presence

of a duly accredited human rights defender. This followed a pattern of noncooperation with UN human rights bodies and mechanisms, including a continued refusal to cooperate with the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burundi.

The UN special rapporteur presented his report to the UN Human Rights Council in September, [concluding](#) that, despite some positive steps on the part of the Burundian government, there remain significant challenges, including the weakness of institutions and lack of oversight of intelligence services. The government of Burundi has repeatedly [rejected](#) the special rapporteur's requests for access to the country to carry out his work. In October, the Human Rights Council [extended](#) the special rapporteur's mandate for another year.

Members of the Human Rights Council are [required](#) to “uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights” and to fully cooperate with it and its mechanisms. Despite its rights record and refusal to cooperate with the international human rights system, Burundi was elected as a member of the council for 2024-2026 as the only candidate running on behalf of the African group.

During a visit in February, European Union [Special Representative for Human Rights](#) Eamon Gilmore stressed the need to reform the judiciary, raised individual cases of concern, and called on the authorities to facilitate country visits of the UN special rapporteur.